Retrospective Evaluations of UK Education by International Graduates: The Role of Social and Cultural Capital in Shaping University Experiences and Post-Graduation Outcomes

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD in Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how international students perceive and value their studies in the UK. It looks at whether and how international students gain economic, social, and cultural benefits, as described by Pierre Bourdieu, during and after their studies abroad.

The primary objective is to assess whether higher education institutions (HEI) provide international students with the means to build different types of capital to achieve long-term success. The research also examines the potential for fostering stronger relationships between students, HEIs, and the UK through deeper engagement, which could lead to increased collaboration in areas such as research, work initiatives, and alumni support, ultimately benefiting all parties involved. Constructivist and interpretivist approaches were applied, using a qualitative methodology. The data was generated through 91 survey responses and 20 semi-structured interviews with students who graduated from a master's program between 2015 and 2021 at a university in London. Surveys were conducted via Qualtrics, and interviews were held on Zoom, as participants were living in different countries. The data was coded and analysed using Atlas.ti.

My research revealed that international students, regardless of their country of origin, gender, socio-economic background, or age, share remarkably similar goals. They consistently prioritise increasing their skills and knowledge, securing relevant employment after graduation, building meaningful friendships and enjoying their time abroad. In terms of outcomes, most participants expressed satisfaction with their academic and financial achievements. However, students felt that they had few opportunities for social and cultural exposure during their postgraduate studies, which resulted in most participants retaining very limited friendships in the long term. This aligns with HEIs' emphasis on academic success and employability outcomes, which often overlook the broader aspects of student engagement that contributes to building social and cultural capital. HEIs seem to miss the obvious links among social, cultural, and economic capital, as evidenced by Bourdieu, failing to recognise how these forms of capital intersect to shape students' holistic development and future opportunities. An approach that aligns the long-term retention of skilled graduates with stable migratory policies could not only enhance the student experience but also strengthen the UK's position as a global leader in higher education.

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own and has not been submitted in whole or in part for any other degree or qualification at any other university or institution. The results and analyses contained within this thesis represent original research carried out by me under the supervision of Professor Carolyn Jackson in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1.   Personal Motivation

In 2017, I took on the role of programme director for a master's in finance at a university in London (from now on, "university A"), which involved interviewing all prospective candidates for admission. I quickly observed that nearly 80% of the applicants were international students. After they were admitted, I noticed that many, including those who had previously studied in the UK, faced difficulties adjusting to the university rigorous academic demands, struggling to adapt to a new social and cultural environment.

Despite the university's efforts to support these students, many did not either know or utilize the school available support services during their first semester, affecting their academic performance and overall experience. In addition, they seemed to socialise mostly with other international students, facing their same challenges, receiving limited support from domestic students which limited their capacity to quickly understand the culture of the host country. Given their significant contribution to the UK economy and witnessing how challenging it was for many of them to adapt and succeed, I became increasingly interested in understanding their motivations for studying in the UK, their experiences, and whether the UK higher education system truly maximized their potential and outcomes.

When I explored the existing literature, most of it focused on the financial benefits for the host country, such as tuition revenue, with some attention given to the outcomes for international students who remain to work in the host country (Apply Board, 2023; HESA, 2024). However, there was limited research exploring non-financial outcomes, such as social and cultural impacts, for all international students but more so for those who return to their home countries after graduation. This includes examining the long-term impact of the social connections they built during their time at university, which can influence their professional networks, personal relationships, and cross-cultural understanding in meaningful ways (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Grootaert et al, 2004; Graefe, 2020).

The motivation for this research thesis is straightforward: There seems to be significant potential for improving how Higher Education Institutions (from now on, HEIs) and immigration laws in the UK engage with international students. This thesis aims to understand students' expectations and valuation of their studies with the objective to help HEIs foster long-term connections among students, and with the university, unlocking the benefits outlined in the next subchapter.

1.2.   Why is this research topic relevant?

International students offer substantial benefits to other students, higher education institutions (HEIs), the UK, and the global community. They provide a reliable and sustainable source of capital, enriching society in many ways.

Economically, they contribute billions to the UK economy each year. They generate direct income through tuition fees and living expenses, supporting local businesses, and creating jobs (ApplyBoard, 2023). But their impact goes beyond immediate financial contributions; those that remain in the UK after graduation, fill critical skill gaps in industries such as engineering

and healthcare or start companies that contribute to the creation of employment as well as to the increase of consumption, investments, and government income (INTO University Partnerships, 2022). Culturally and socially, they view reality through different lenses based on their background and previous experiences, and enrich the skills needed to thrive in a globalized world. These students often become ambassadors for the UK in their home countries, promoting positive diplomatic relations and enhancing the UK's global standing (Sharma & Jung 1985; Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010; Hsu, 2011). They help build long-term relationships between the UK and other countries, leading to collaborative projects and policy initiatives that address global challenges. In terms of research and innovation, international students contribute fresh ideas and different approaches to problem-solving, which can lead to ground-breaking discoveries and innovations. More than 50% of all UK publications come from international collaborations (Universities UK, 2022).

Being able to continue attracting international students into UK universities has become even more relevant in 2024 due to recent policy changes. Effective January 1st, 2024, new regulations prohibit most graduate students from bringing their relatives to the UK, allowing only those enrolled in specific postgraduate research programs to do so. Other challenges include the requirements to switch from a UK student visa to a skilled worker visa with students now being required to complete their studies before securing a job offer. These requirements have become harder from January 1st, 2025, when international students will be required to prove they can support themselves showing that they have at least £13,348 in a bank account to support 9 months of study (GOV.UK, n.d.). This policy shift has led to a notable decline in international student enrolments. Applications for study visas in August 2024, traditionally the peak month, were 17% lower compared to August 2023. Additionally, data indicates that postgraduate entrants in January 2024 decreased by approximately one-third compared to the previous year (BBC News, 2024; College Dunia, 2024; The Guardian, 2024).

1.3. Background and Context

1.3.1. What is the field of study?

The broader field that explores the experiences and outcomes of international students is known as "International Education and Student Mobility." This field includes research on the academic, social, and cultural experiences of international students, the motivations and challenges associated with studying abroad (educational migration), their social and cultural adaptation, and their post-graduation outcomes, including economic impact, career trajectories, social mobility, and personal and professional development (Francis, 1993; Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010; Kahanec & Králiková, 2011; Levent, 2016). To write this thesis, I reviewed research papers from different disciplines including sociology, migration studies, economics, education, and cultural studies (Lee, 1966; Gribble, 2008; Qian and Smyth, 2011; Myburg, Niehaus and Poggenpoel, 2002; OECD, 2022; Jiang, 2020; London Economics, 2023).

1.3.2. The context

My research sits at the intersection of two key areas: how international students navigate the UK's educational landscape and the broader impact of their studies abroad on their economic, social, and cultural lives. To contextualize the experience of international students within the UK educational system, I concentrated on five critical factors: globalization in higher education, the regulatory environment, economic, social, and cultural contributions, postgraduate relationships, and the student experience and perceptions. These factors are

essential to understand the implications of international education and develop practices and policies that enhance these students' experiences and outcomes. **Table 1.1** explains my perception of these 5 factors which is based on my own experience after working in higher education for over 10 years, students' opinions gathered in the survey and interviews part of this thesis and literature I have read over the years and in preparation of this thesis.

Factor	Relevancy	My perception
1. Globalization in higher education	The growing mobility of students and the UK's well-established reputation for higher education have attracted a significant number of international students for a long period of time. This trend has been on the rise until 2023, leading UK HEIs to become increasingly dependent on the revenue generated by these students (HEPI, 2023)	Drawing from my experience teaching international students, HEIs frequently overlook the unique realities and diverse backgrounds of these learners. This is reflected in the literature, which shows that many HEIs adopt a "one-size-fits-all" approach, expecting international students to adapt to their new environment quickly and succeed, without accounting for the cultural differences and social challenges they face (Rizvi et al., 2022; Leonard, Pelletier and Morley, 2003).
2. Regulatory environment	Changing UK immigration policies, including visa regulations, has a direct impact on international students' decisions to study in the UK given many want to remain in the country to work and bring their families. Recent changes in the migratory laws for international students affect their capacity to bring their families and find work after graduation, which led to a reduction in the number of enrolments in 2024 (GOV.UK, n.d.)	In my experience, many international students cannot find paid employment in the timeframe provided by their student visa, being forced to leave the country after graduation. Macroeconomic factors such as Brexit and Covid as well as changes in the UK migratory policy for these students have had a negative impact in students' capacity to remain in the UK. This was evidenced in the survey and interviews results.

3. Economic, social and Cultural Capital	Most studies focus on the economic impact of international students, often overlooking the social and cultural contributions these students make to the host country and the outcomes of these interactions (Das and Jensen, 2008; HESA, 2024). Research on social and cultural capital tends to focus on the challenges these students find during their studies, but it frequently misses how they perceive their own social and cultural capital, as well as the development of these forms of capital after graduation (Grootaert et al, 2004; Merenluoto, 2009; NAEYC, 2023)	Based on experience I noticed that most international students focus primarily on their economic outcomes, mainly willing to progress financially, often overlooking how their ability to adapt to a new social and cultural environment affects their academic performance, and ultimately, their employment and economic prospects. In my view, HEIs focus on students' academic success during their time in the UK and on immediate employment for those that stay in the country is very myopic. Both, students and universities, place insufficient emphasis on the social and cultural aspects of their studies, both during their time in the UK and after graduation.
4. Post-graduation relations	There is extensive research highlighting the long-term benefits of alumni networks, as well as the advantages for universities that keep graduates engaged years after they finish their studies (Bass, n.d.). This engagement is often fostered through social and cultural events, where alumni return to the university and interact with current students, promoting professional development and cross-cultural relationships (CASE, 2019).	Most international students remain connected with just a few peers from their studies in the UK, missing out on building a broader network. Additionally, many never return to the university or reconnect with faculty and staff post-graduation. This was evidenced in the survey and interviews results.
5. Student experience and perception	Most HEIs provide support services for international students, such as academic advising, career counselling, and mental health resources. While these play a critical role in shaping students' experiences and outcomes; students don't seem to understand them well and utilise them (World Economic Forum, 2022).	International students usually need additional time to adjust to life and academics in the UK, often not identifying that they need help, and missing out on the university available support. I believe universities should encourage early interaction between international and domestic students and provide pro-active social and cultural support services from the day these

		students arrive to the UK instead of waiting for them to seek help.

Table 1.1: Factors that shaped this thesis context.

1.4.   Research questions

The research questions in this thesis were designed to amplify the voices of students, focusing on their perceptions, feelings, and values regarding their educational experience in the UK. The study examines whether gender and socio-economic background influence students' sentiments and their perceived value of their education. The research framework is grounded in Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of economic, social, and cultural capital. A detailed analysis of these research questions will be provided in Chapter 4 (Methodology).

Research Questions:

1: How do differences in gender and socio-economic background affect how international students perceive their studies abroad before studies?

2: How do differences in gender and socio-economic background affect the outcomes of studying abroad including:
   2.1.: The development of social and cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu.
   2.2: Employability after students' return to their home country from the UK

3: How do students' perceptions on their studies in the UK evolve based on the time elapsed since graduation?

4: How could the differences in students' perceptions and outcomes be explained in terms of provision of education for international students in the UK?

1.5.   Theoretical framework and Research Design

My theoretical framework integrates Bourdieu's concepts of capital with an interpretivist approach.

1.5.1.   Theoretical Framework

I examined various theories on the types of capital recognized by the research community, drawing on the work of authors such as Becker (1964), Portes (1998), Reay (2004), Grootaert et al. (2004), and Graefe (2020). These scholars emphasized the significance of social and cultural capital in community development, poverty alleviation, and reducing inequalities. For instance, Graefe (2020) demonstrated how individuals with stronger social networks were better equipped to navigate the challenges of COVID-19, leveraging their social communities for support, communication, and resources. This concept is equally relevant in education, as Coleman (1988) and Jeynes (2017) demonstrated how social capital facilitates knowledge and skills being developed among students, leading to academic success. However, much of past research and recent studies on capital is rooted in Bourdieu's (1986) pioneering work, which

acknowledges the existence and interconnection of economic, social, and cultural capital, therefore I have chosen Bourdieu's work as the foundation of my framework.

I focused on gender and social class due to their influence on shaping the motivations, experiences, and outcomes of international students, particularly those originating from non-Western contexts. From a gendered perspective, my research was informed by personal interactions with female international students whose motivations for studying abroad often diverged from the dominant neoliberal discourse of economic advancement and employability (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2013). These alternative motivations, particularly evident among students from Japan and various African countries, included aspirations for personal growth, compliance with familial expectations, accumulation of cultural capital, or a temporary relief from patriarchal and socially restrictive environments (Tokunaga, 2016; Leung, 2017). Such observations led me to question the extent to which these students accrued non-economic forms of capital that may not yield immediate material returns but were nonetheless valuable within specific social fields, both at home and in the host country (Bourdieu, 1986; Marginson, 2008).

In terms of socio-economic background, my interest came from the critique within the literature that higher education, particularly international education, is an elitist and Western-centric domain, predominantly accessible to those from high socio-economic status (Ding et al., 2021). Initially, I assumed that the increasing availability of scholarships, especially those sponsored by developing countries with the intent of upskilling their citizens and bringing them back home, might have contributed to a more socio-economically diverse international student population. However, research indicates that elite institutions continue to be dominated by higher socio-economic status students (Boliver, 2011; Ding et al., 2021) with access to international education remaining limited to a privileged few. I wanted to know if is true that higher education is limited to a few, and whether education could serve as a true vehicle of social mobility or if it merely reinforces existing class structures on a global scale.

1.5.2. Research Design

My research is grounded in a constructivist epistemology, reflecting my belief that knowledge is shaped by the unique cultural, social, and experiential backgrounds of individuals. This perspective acknowledges that knowledge is dynamic and evolves based on each person's context, views, and realities. To capture these diverse perspectives, I adopted an interpretivist approach, focusing on the meaning and interpretation of participants perceptions and realities (Goldkuhl, 2012; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). This thesis employs a qualitative methodology, emphasizing the importance of understanding each person's perceptions through direct engagement with participants. To gain insight into their thoughts and experiences, I utilized a combined approach of surveys and interviews. The surveys allowed me to collect general perspectives from a broader audience, while the interviews offered a deeper understanding of each student's unique experiences.

1.6. Contribution to Knowledge

There is a substantial body of literature on international students, covering topics from their reasons for choosing the UK for their studies, to the economic outcomes of this education (HESA, 2024; Universities UK, 2024). Numerous papers also examine the connections between economic, social, and cultural capital, including the benefits these forms of capital bring to academic success and economic advantages (Coleman, 1988; Merenluoto, 2009;

Jeynes, 2017). However, most of these studies focus on students' perspectives during their studies, with less attention given to their views after graduation, especially when several years have passed since then. Additionally, many studies tend to emphasize the benefits of social and cultural capital without deeply exploring students' self-reflection on their own social and cultural outcomes.

My study contributes to the existing knowledge in two significant ways. First, it explores how students compared their expectations of studying abroad with their actual experiences. Second, it incorporates students' reflections on their own social and cultural capital, offering insights into how they perceive the importance of these forms of capital in hindsight, what they believe they did well and what opportunities they might have missed during their university years. This study provides a unique contribution by presenting students' perspectives on the value of their education from economic, social, and cultural standpoints, many years after graduation, from a more mature and self-reflective viewpoint. My research is particularly valuable for UK universities seeking to enhance their offerings for international students, as it provides deep insights into the long-term impact of higher education on students' lives. By identifying gaps between international students' expectations and their actual experiences, universities can make informed improvements to curriculum development, career services, and student support programmes to better address their needs. This research also highlights opportunities for fostering valuable social networks and cultural understanding, both critical for students' future success. Moreover, the findings can inform government migratory policies aimed at retaining talent from the pool of international students. By leveraging this research, UK universities can create a more holistic and supportive environment that aligns with the long-term aspirations of international students, making their institutions more attractive and competitive globally. This, in turn, supports the development of sustainable networks of knowledge and contributes to the UK's broader goal of retaining highly skilled talent for future growth.

1.7.   Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured into nine chapters. Chapter 1 serves as the introduction, outlining the motivation behind choosing this topic, providing the context, and establishing the framework. Chapter 2 presents the literature review, examining the significance of international students with a particular focus on the UK. Chapter 3 investigates into the philosophical foundations of this research, explaining the rationale for using Bourdieu's framework and adopting a constructivist theory to develop new insights based on the research findings. Chapter 4 details the methodology applied in this study, including the research design, sample characteristics, and data generation and analysis methods. Chapter 5 explores the identity of international students, including their countries of origin, backgrounds, gender, and socio-economic status. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 analyse the outcomes from the survey and interviews. Finally, Chapter 9 addresses each of the research questions, highlights my contributions to knowledge, and suggests potential areas for future research.

Chapter 2: Global Education Dynamics: International Students in the UK

2.1. Global Education Dynamics

International students are defined as individuals that move to an international country for educational purposes; they are also called "degree-mobile students". More specifically, these students cross an international border to study in a country, which is different to their country of origin. UNESCO (2022) defines the main characteristics of international students as: "holding a non-resident visa (could be a student visa) and study for a tertiary degree with a length of stay in between one and seven years". The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the OECD provide reliable data on the number of international students per country. As an example, the UIS considers only non-resident students, but the OECD disaggregates students into non-citizen and non-resident, which is a different classification.

The OECD (2022) report indicates that the global number of international students in 2020 was circa 6.3 million, representing a 31.7% rise from the number recorded in 2000. One third of international students came from China and India, with other primary countries of origin including Germany, the USA, and Vietnam. Almost half of these students pursued their studies in the following seven nations: Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, the United Kingdom (from now on, UK) and the United States of America (from now on USA).[1] The main fields of study were related to engineering, statistics, and mathematics (STEM) and less so education or health (OECD, 2022). It is important to mention that most international students enrol in PhD and master programmes (versus bachelor's degrees) as these students are usually more mature and financially independent, they are as well the most affected by the new migratory laws in the UK, not being able to bring their families or work until their degree is completed (GOV.UK, n.d.). Another significant statistic is that many international students opt for English-speaking countries, with the USA, the UK, and Australia collectively hosting 45% of the global international student population (OECD, 2022).

Economic Impact

The economic impact of international students extends far beyond tuition fees, influencing various industries and creating employment opportunities. The influx of international students creates a demand for goods and services, boosts local businesses, contributes to housing, retail, and transportation sectors stimulating economic growth and entrepreneurship (Bennell, 2019; HEPI, 2023). International student's contribution to the global economy was $370 billion in 2020 with the UK, USA, and Canada generating $86.4 billion collectively (ApplyBoard, 2023; Into, 2023). This financial impact goes beyond just paying for tuition and living expenses, as international students contribute billions through the establishment of their own businesses. In the USA, international students contributed $143 billion in start-ups, representing over 25% of billion-dollar companies like SpaceX and Moderna (NFAP, 2018; ApplyBoard, 2023 with one million international students in US colleges supporting over 335,000 jobs in 2021/22, (ApplyBoard, 2023). Similarly, in the UK, 90% of all billion-pound businesses, such as Shazam and Funding Circle, have at least one immigrant founder, with 57% of British university startups being founded by international graduates. Immigrants in the UK are three times more likely to start a business than native-born citizens (Russell, 2025).

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[1] Data from the Russian Federation's in 2020 are absent despite being the fourth-largest host in 2019.

<u>Social and Cultural Impact</u>

International students' presence promotes cultural exchange, creating inclusive and diverse educational communities and contributing to a more open and accepting society. These students enrich the cultural fabric of host countries by introducing new traditions, languages, and customs, enhancing intercultural dialogue and broadening the learning experience for both international and domestic students. They also act as ambassadors for their home countries, breaking stereotypes and fostering understanding and acceptance among peers, faculty, and local communities (Sharma & Jung, 1985; Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010; Hsu, 2011; Cao et al., 2014).

2.2. International students in the UK

HESA (2024) reported the UK had 758,860 international students in academic year 2022/23, with 87% coming from non-EU and 13% from EU countries. EU student numbers fell by 20.5% in 2022/23, while non-EU students increased by 19.5%, driven by significant enrolments from India, Nigeria, and Pakistan. **Figure 2.1.** shows the trend in the number of students enrolled in UK higher education programmes across different study categories from 2013/14 to 2022/23. It seems that postgraduate enrolments grew much faster than undergraduates, with strong gains in non-EU markets, particularly Nigeria and South Asia. India surpassed China as the UK's top source for both new and total student enrolments, while EU numbers continued to decline.
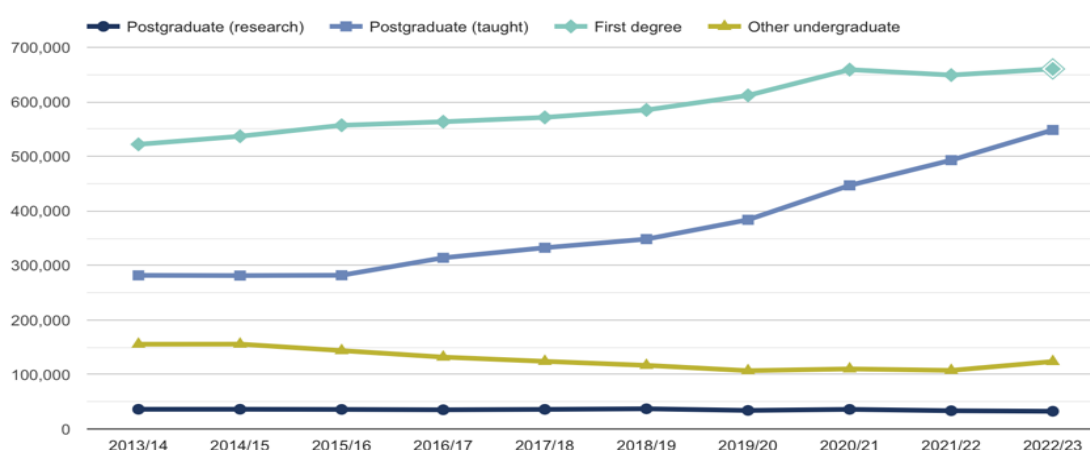
Figure 2.1: Higher education student entrant enrolments by level of study from 2013/14 to 2022/23 (HESA)

More recent data shows that international student numbers in the UK grew until early 2024, when a lagging Brexit effect and stricter migration laws caused a decline (Universities UK, n.d.). By March 2024, sponsored study visas had fallen to 586,099, a 13.8% drop from the previous year. **Figure 2.2.** shows that EU student enrolments have declined significantly, largely due to Brexit. Many continuing students were offered jobs under pre-Brexit rules with better finance and visa terms, but as they complete their courses, many of these offers were cancelled forcing them to return to their home countries, also impacting enrolment numbers. **Figure 2.2.** also indicates that Nigeria and Pakistan had over 50% annual growth in new students, with India close behind at 49%. In contrast, China experienced much slower growth, with a 2.8% rise in new students and 1.7% including continuing students (HESA, 2024). China's slow growth may be due to a lagering effect of COVID-19, which affected the economic stability of many Chinese families, limiting opportunities for studying abroad. It is

important to note that, although the growth rate of international students from China has slowed, this country still represents the largest share of international students in this thesis.

	Total students		New students only	
	2022/23	Change vs 2021/22	2022/23	Change vs 2021/22
EU Students	95,505	-20.5%	28,905	-7.9%
- Undergraduates	66,330	-23.3%	13,535	-8.7%
- Postgraduates	29,175	-13.5%	15,375	-7.2%
Non-EU International Students	663,355	+19.5%	430,265	+24.5%
- Undergraduates	236,750	+9.5%	108,380	+13.7%
- Postgraduates	426,605	+25.9%	321,880	+28.7%
Total International Students	758,860	+12.4%	459,170	+21.8%

	Total students		New students only	
	2022/23	Change vs 2021/22	2022/23	Change vs 2021/22
India	173,190	+39.1%	126,580	+48.9%
China	154,260	+1.7%	102,795	+2.8%
Nigeria	72,355	+66.3%	53,790	+66.7%
Pakistan	34,690	+50.5%	24,950	+51.0%
United States	22,540	-1.9%	12,075	-10.8%
Hong Kong	17,905	+1.7%	7,735	-5.1%
Bangladesh	14,945	+17.7%	10,480	+14.3%
Malaysia	13,005	+7.2%	6,295	+11.2%
Saudi Arabia	9,045	+3.4%	[Not available]	
United Arab Emirates	8,350	+3.3%	[Not available]	

Figure 2.2: Enrolment numbers classified by country of origin in 2022/23 from HESA (2024)

2.2.1. Migratory policy, language of instruction and HEI's reputation in the UK.

Based on my observations working with international students, three of the main factors affecting the number of international students in the UK are the migratory policy in the UK, the language of Instruction and the reputation of UK universities.

<u>Migratory policy</u>

Since 2020, the UK has seen significant changes in its migratory framework for international students, beginning with the transition from the Tier 4 visa to the Student Route under a new points-based immigration system. This change simplified visa applications and introduced greater flexibility, particularly through the Graduate Route, which launched in 2021. The

Graduate Route allows international students to stay in the UK for two years post-study (three years for PhD graduates) to work or look for work, without requiring sponsorship. This made the UK more attractive to global talent, particularly from high-growth markets like India, Nigeria, and South Asia (The Migration Advisory Committee, 2018; Bolton, Lewis and Gower, 2023). Starting January 1, 2024, the UK tightened immigration rules for international students, limiting dependents to those in PhD or postgraduate research programs (College Dunia, 2024). Additionally, from January 2, 2025, students were required to prove higher financial capability, needing to have at least £1,483 per month, for 9 months, to study in London and £1,136 elsewhere, reflecting increased living costs (iSchoolConnect, 2024). These changes may deter international applicants, especially from key markets leading to reduced enrolments and revenue for universities, challenging their global competitiveness. To adapt, universities may need to diversify recruitment and enhance support for international students.

Language of instruction

A key contributing factor to the attraction of these students is the widespread use of the English language. English is the most widely spoken language globally, with approximately 1.5 billion speakers, including both native and non-native speakers (Ethnologue, 2024). Students choose universities that offer programmes in languages they understand; this is evidenced in the number of international students that choose English-language countries to study, with the UK, the USA and Australia collective histing 45% of all international students (OECD, 2022).

UK Universities reputation

UK universities have developed a global reputation for high academic standards and cutting-edge research. According to the QS World University Rankings 2024, fifteen UK universities are listed in the top 100 (Top Universities, 2024). Similarly, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2024 feature eleven UK universities in the top 100 (The Tab, 2024). This recognition further solidifies the appeal of UK universities to prospective international students seeking a world-class education and valuable learning experience.

2.2.2. Economic Impact of international students in the UK

Figure 2.3 summarises the economic impact that international students have in the UK in three categories 1) net benefits, representing the net income after accounting for the cost of public services, 2) the effects on the establishment of start-ups and 3) employment. After considering the impact on public services, the overall net economic benefits far exceed the costs, resulting in a total net benefit of £37.4bn to the UK economy (Universities UK, 2023). The positive impact of international students is not a temporary phenomenon; reported data indicates a remarkable 58% increase in the net economic impact since 2015/16, rise that can be linked to a 68% increase in the number of students from non-EU countries (HEPI, 2023). In addition, international students play a pivotal role in the UK's startup ecosystem. Notably, 57% of startups founded at UK universities include at least one international student as a founder, despite international students comprising only 19.6% of the total student population (Sifted, 2019; Study International, 2019; Russell, 2025). This disproportionate representation evidences the entrepreneurial drive that these students contribute, fostering innovation and economic growth within the UK. Their involvement not only enriches the startup landscape but also enhances the UK's position as a global technology hub.
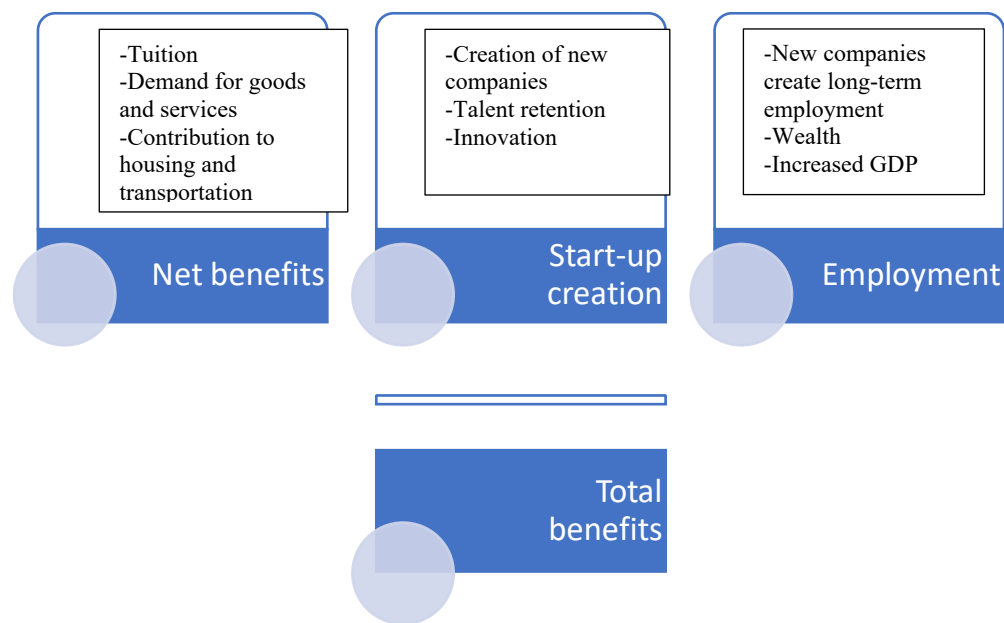
Figure 2.3: Economic impact of international students in the UK

2.2.3. Social and Cultural Impact of international students in the UK

The impact of international students to their host countries extends beyond the academic sphere, encompassing a wide range of social, cultural, and personal experiences. In the UK, these students foster multiculturalism and enhance cultural exchange. Their presence in universities introduces diverse perspectives, enriching classroom discussions and encouraging global awareness among domestic students (Universities UK, 2022). Additionally, international students bring their traditions, languages, and cultural practices, which contribute to the vibrancy of local communities and create opportunities for cross-cultural interactions (Culligan, Incze and Robinson, 2023). Events such as international festivals and student-led initiatives promote inclusivity and help build bridges between different cultural groups (Smith & Brown, 2019). These interactions not only support the cultural development of the host community but also help international students integrate and adapt to their new environment, fostering mutual understanding and tolerance (Jones, 2018).

2.3. Why do students choose the UK to study?

One of the models used to explain how international students make their decisions on where to study is the "push-pull" model (Lee, 1966). Initially developed to explain migratory movements, it has been adopted to explain the factors that drive international students' decisions on the location of study. Pull factors originate in the host country and serve to encourage international students to consider their country to study; they include the strength and safety of the country and the reputation of its universities. On the other hand, push factors encompass limited study options or low reputation of higher education institutions in the home country, as well as a lack of opportunities whether to pursue a specific degree or work opportunities after graduation (McMahon, 1992; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2008). **Table 2.2** indicates the main factors that international students consider to studying abroad. Friends and family recommendations, the perceived quality of higher education in the host country,

university rankings, potentially positive learning experiences, and the language of instruction are key factors. The proximity of the host country also plays a vital role in this decision-making process (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011; Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014).

Push factors	Pull factors
Economic Opportunities: Lack of economic opportunities, unemployment, and low wages in the home country may push individuals to seek better prospects elsewhere.	Better Economic Opportunities: The promise of higher wages, better job prospects, and improved economic conditions in the destination country can attract migrants.
Political Instability: Political unrest, persecution, or instability can be a significant push factor.	Political Stability: Countries with stable political environments and protection of human rights may be attractive to those seeking refuge
Environmental Factors: Climate change or recurrent natural disasters.	Educational Opportunities: Access to high quality education and training facilities can be a pull factor for migrants.
Conflict and Violence: War, conflict, or high levels of violence in the home country can lead to migration.	Social and Cultural Attraction: A potential diverse and inclusive society, cultural amenities, or social connections may attract individuals to a new location.
Table 2.2: Pull and Push factors that impact international students' decisions on where to study.	

All the factors mentioned in the literature are relevant to studying in the UK, but familiarity with the English language, the perceived status of higher education and the possibility of finding paid employment in the UK after graduation, seem to have greater influence in choosing the UK for their studies. Major cities such as London, Glasgow, Manchester, or Liverpool are considered safe destinations and are well-known for their international student community, offering a diverse and inclusive environment and attractive work opportunities after graduation (Goldbart et al, 2005; Naidoo, 2007; Hemsley-Brown, 2012). In the specific case of China, the factors influencing the decisions of Chinese students include their aspiration for higher quality education and the desire to enhance language skills. Numerous UK universities are acknowledged and highly esteemed in China by individuals and employers who generally believe that spending several years studying and working in the UK enhances career prospects (Counsell, 2011).

2.4. Positives and negatives from the host country perspective

There is substantial evidence supporting the educational benefits international students bring through their interactions with domestic students. These include fostering new ideas, personal development, enhanced international knowledge, greater cultural awareness, and improved critical thinking and the ability to question beliefs (Gribble, 2008; Perry, 2016; Lane and Murphrey, 2020). They have become crucial in "enhancing mutual understanding, broadening perspectives, and fostering appreciation of differences across cultures" (Finn, & Darmody, 2022). In addition to enriching campus and community life, they also bring academic prestige and financial benefits to host institutions. **Figure 2.4** highlights the broad benefits of hosting

international students, encompassing economic, cultural, and social advantages. For instance, welcoming international students enhances the prestige of UK universities and drives the internationalization of curricula, preparing students for global careers. Additionally, it fosters research collaborations with scholars worldwide and promotes cultural awareness while enriching social life on campuses (Sawir, 2013).
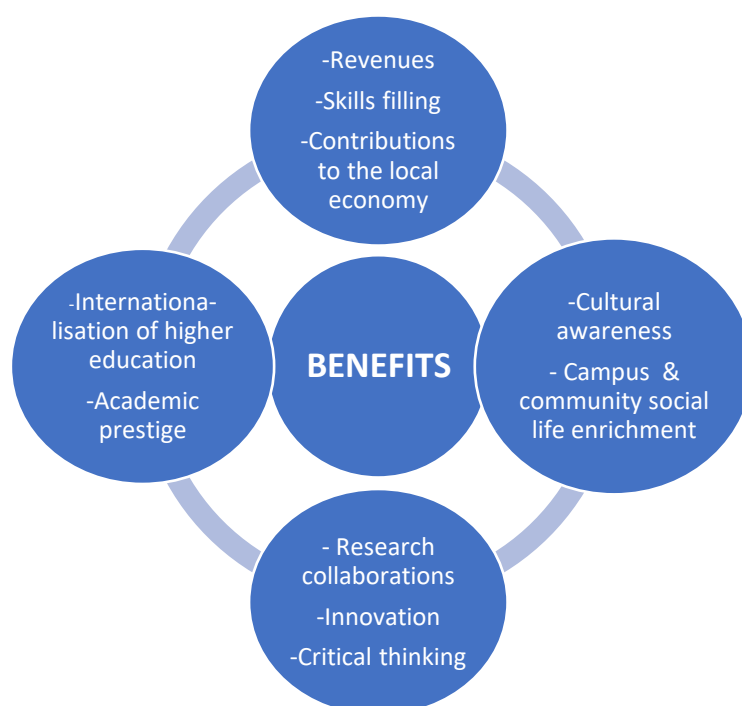
Figure 2.4: Benefits of having international students from the host country perspective (created by this thesis author)

During the time of their degrees, international and domestic students immerse themselves in the local, culture, habits, and social life of the host country. Those that remain in the UK after graduation, usually "fill skill shortages, being locally trained, while expanding the demand for goods and services and adding to gross national production" (Sawir, 2013). It is more common for students to remain in the UK if the conditions in their home country are less favourable or when there are cultural and social limitations preventing them from living or working in their home country with the same available resources as in the host country. As an example, Japanese women studying in the UK are expected to return to a traditional society and life, get married and only work in the industry or professional area of their studies for a limited time pre-marriage. For these women, staying in the host country to live and work has a different meaning, equalling freedom (Habu, 2000; Gribble, 2008).

From 2020 and until 2023, international students transitioning from student to work visas within a year surged from 4% to 19%. Notably, 11% of non-EU students from 2022 moved to the Skilled Worker Route, a significant rise from less than 1% in 2016–2019. (Migration Observatory, 2024). Nevertheless, the stricter immigration laws introduced in January 2024

seem to have reduced transitions from student to work visas, but no data is yet available to confirm their impact.

2.4.1. Challenges in the internationalisation process

International students are an integral part of the internationalisation process within higher education. This process aims to equip the community for effective engagement in an increasingly interconnected global environment (Francis, 1993; Ho, and Klemenčič, 2022). However, challenges remain, including language barriers, adaptation to Western learning styles, and the need to modify teaching materials to accommodate diverse student needs (Łyda et al., 2016; Gribble, 2008). Tight (2021) emphasized the rise of global citizenship and the increasing dominance of English as the "lingua franca" in this process.

The argument against international students being viewed as an asset to their host countries stems from the worry that they could displace local students in higher education institutions and the job market. Critics argue that the growing population of international students could restrict opportunities for domestic students, affecting their chances of university admission and employment prospects post-graduation (Bennell, 2019). There are apprehensions regarding the economic consequences of hosting international students in destination countries with some arguing that the financial gains from international students are countered by the burden they impose on public resources such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. This viewpoint brings up inquiries about the financial compromises linked to accommodating a substantial population of international students (Williams, 1984).

2.5. Positives and negatives from the country-of-origin perspective (home country)

Most countries would agree that having international students returning home leads to a gain of highly educated workforce. Returning students bring new ideas, cultural awareness, different ways to do things personal growth, international knowledge, and critical thinking (Gribble, 2008; Lane & Murphrey, 2020).

After over a decade of teaching international students in the UK, I observed that most international students would prefer to stay in the host country for a period to gain work experience and immerse themselves in the local culture before returning to their home country. However, the individual circumstances of international students play a significant role in this decision. For instance, many Chinese students aspire to return to China to take over their family business or get married soon after graduation, but they also wish to work in the UK for a limited period to gain exposure and experience in a western market before their return (Counsell, 2011). Data suggests that this may be changing as more Chinese students choose to return home for career development, driven by China's economic opportunities and supportive policies for returnees (Mok, Zhang, and Bao, 2022). Statista (2021) indicated that approximately 31% of these students planned to return to China immediately after graduation, which is a larger number than in previous years.

This situation may differ for European students in the UK, who are in closer proximity to their home countries. European students' choice to stay in the host country or return home is generally influenced by professional opportunities rather than immigration policies (Mosneaga and Winther, 2013), especially before Brexit, when EU students could legally work in the UK using their home passports. A study by Behle (2020) found that international graduates from EU countries consider career prospects, work experience, and the potential for professional

development when deciding whether to stay in the UK or return home. This said, when international students remain in the UK, home countries may benefit from circular or temporary migration in the form of "financial remittances, technology transfer, entrepreneurial partnerships, and the development of personal networks and diplomatic ties" (Gribble, 2008).

Disadvantages of study abroad are primarily associated with how the emigration of highly educated individuals can deplete an already scarce resource for the home country and the effect on the home country brain drain. This is particularly true when the living and working conditions in the home country are not appealing for these students, leading them to remain in the host country after graduation and causing a long-term flight of talent. Literature focuses on identifying this movement and on retention policies to attract locals studying abroad back into their home country. While some papers focus on the lack of data to monitor this movement and quantify the lost benefits from returning talent (Atal & DallOglio, 1987), others attempt to provide solutions to this exodus of talent. As an example, Kuznetsov (2010) proposed a solution to allow nationals living abroad (including those remaining in the host country after graduation) to contribute to projects in the home country remotely. He called this "Brain circulation" which meant enabling skilled diasporas to participate in projects in their home country remotely, without having to reallocate. While "brain drain" is often discussed, much of the focus is on the movement of talent rather than on the implications for the countries experiencing this outflow; there is limited research on the consequences of talent loss to home countries, particularly in terms of its impact on economic, social, and cultural capital. Quantifying this loss remains a challenge due to the complex interplay of factors, such as the economic contributions of emigrants, the social networks they leave behind, and the diminished cultural exchange. A recent report by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (2024) recognised the lack of data on talent migration for countries of origin, highlighting the need for policies that ensure mutual benefits for both origin and destination countries.

From the literature, talent drainage affects developing and developed countries equally. As an example, Spain has witnessed the largest emigration of talent searching for work opportunities in recent years. This is referred to as the "youth exodus" that started in 2007 with the financial crisis and is still happening today. This talent exodus was motivated by lack of work-related opportunities for young individuals looking for better opportunities in Europe, especially in the UK as most Spaniards have a good command of English language, which facilitates emigration (Selva & Recordà, 2018). A summary of the benefits and challenges of having international students from the country-of-origin perspective show in **Figure 2.5.**

POSITIVES

-Gain of highly educated workforce

-New ideas

-Cultural awareness

-Personal growth

-International knowledge

-Critical thinking

-Positive long-term impact on GDP

-Long-term flight of talent

- Missed economic, social and cultural gains

-Political tensions

- Limitatinos in the capacity to measure a loss of talent

NEGATIVES

Figure 2.5: Benefits and challenges of international students from the country-of-origin perspective

2.6. Positives and negatives from the student perspective

I have observed that the experiences of international students while studying abroad are greatly influenced by their individual personalities, family background and pre-study expectations. In my view, students who have had previous international experiences, whether completing a previous degree abroad or being more accustomed to traveling during their younger years, tend to display a higher level of adaptability and satisfaction with their experiences in the host country. On the other hand, students who are studying abroad and separated from their family and friends for the first time might be more prone to homesickness, disorientation, and feelings of unhappiness. This was demonstrated in the findings of Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002), who observed that students with prior international exposure, such as previous degrees earned abroad or extensive travel, exhibited greater adaptability to new cultural and academic environments; this adaptability was attributed to their development of effective coping strategies and a deeper understanding of cross-cultural interactions. Similarly, Murphy-Lejeune (2002) noted that students with international experience were better equipped to seize opportunities in new cultural settings, displaying higher levels of motivation and adaptability compared to those without such backgrounds.

For students, the primary advantages of studying abroad includes personal development, the acquisition of transferable knowledge and skills, increased cultural awareness, and both academic and economic success (Lane & Murphrey, 2020; Singh & Jack, 2018). These benefits are typically categorized into three areas: economic, educational, and social/cultural (Singh & Jack, 2018). They include fostering a sense of belonging, enhancing cultural awareness and adaptability, engaging in diverse social interactions, building meaningful connections, and gaining academic knowledge beyond conventional classroom learning. These experiences help students develop cultural competencies and expand their professional networks.

Despite this positive picture, the three main areas of concern these students have include 1) language barriers or the perception of not having a good command of English language and 2) lack of engagement with UK-domiciled students and 3) racism and xenophobia.

Language barriers

The longer I teach international students, the more apparent it becomes how Asian students, especially those from mainland China, express dissatisfaction with the high numbers of fellow Asian students in their classrooms in the UK. Paradoxically, they tend to gravitate towards socializing with individuals from their own country of origin and show reluctance to engage with people from diverse cultures. This is particularly evident in their tendency to spend time with other Chinese students, both in and out of the classroom, conversing primarily in their native language. These students often struggle with culture shock and language barriers, which leads them to avoid working with students from other nationalities. This hesitation is largely influenced by their own perception of their language abilities, which they underestimate, and their confidence in communicating in English. Language barriers pose the primary challenge for international students. This barrier not only impacts classroom communication, but also their ability to form new connections, engage in the local culture, socialize, network, and ultimately, feel accepted and integrated (Erling et al., 2015). Motivated by the goal of attracting international students to meet quotas and increase revenue, universities admit students with limited proficiency in the language of instruction, in this case, English, which in turn affects the success of these students (BBC News, 2023) performance (Amsberry, 2008; Huang, 2008; Pysarchyk & Yamshynska, 2015; Nwokeji et al, 2016).

Lack of engagement with UK-domiciled students

Isolation is the second more meaningful challenge that international students experience though it mainly pertains to their interactions with domestic students, as they tend to group together with other international students, forming supportive communities to assist one another throughout their studies abroad (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). This is particularly apparent when the student culture significantly differs from that of the host country. As an example, students from Arab countries, East Asia, or Africa often experience a sense of alienation upon their initial arrival in the UK and must exert additional effort to connect with local students (Huang, 2008; Medved, et al, 2013).

In this context, universities seem to overlook the integration of international students, leaving this challenging task to the students themselves during a particularly difficult period as they adapt to a new culture, academic system, and the distance from their home country. Pritchard & Skinner (2002) conducted an experiment in which international students at their university were assigned six existential tasks to carry out with local students or people from the area. These tasks encompassed food, cultural identity, gender roles, and friendship. Predictably, the students participating in this experiment formed lasting friendships and enjoyed their cross-cultural interactions. Considering how straightforward this interaction appears to be, it is imperative that UK universities offer solutions to enhance international and domestic students' motivation to find common ground and make their experience more enjoyable.

Racism and xenophobia

Jackson and Sundaram (2018) highlighted the ways in which racism and xenophobia manifest within UK universities, emphasizing that discriminatory attitudes extend beyond sexism and

'lad culture' to include racial and cultural prejudices. Racism related to faith, religion, and nationality is well-documented in higher education settings in both the UK and the USA (Law, Phillips & Turney, 2004; Pilkington, 2011). In the USA, Jiang (2020) discussed the ideology of "whiteness and culture" and "white supremacy" within universities, which racialized international students of colour and created barriers to diversity and integration. Similarly, Brown and Jones (2013) found that forty-nine international students attending a London university reported experiencing verbal abuse related to their faith or religion.

Cultural stereotypes and biases can lead to unequal treatment in group projects, with international students frequently being marginalized (Devine & Lawrence, 2020). Outside the classroom, many face challenges such as discriminatory housing practices and hostile interactions in public spaces, which undermine their sense of belonging and safety (UKCISA, 2021). Such experiences not only affect their emotional well-being but also hinder their ability to integrate into the local community, further isolating them in a foreign environment. Regardless of location, the consequence of these attacks included reluctancy to recommend studies abroad to friends and family and the return to the host country as a tourist.

2.7. Conclusions and Future Considerations

2.7.1. Literature findings

The literature highlights the significance of international students for both host and home countries, extending beyond economic benefits to social, cultural, and academic contributions. These students enhance the educational experience by introducing diverse perspectives, fostering cross-cultural understanding, and driving innovation and research, which strengthens the host country's global knowledge economy. For students, studying abroad cultivates a global outlook and adaptability, equipping them to contribute effectively to their home countries as cultural ambassadors. Returning students bring back innovative ideas, cutting-edge research, and valuable networks, stimulating economic development and intellectual growth. Their experiences often result in lasting international collaborations, strengthening diplomatic ties and partnerships across sectors. Nonetheless, challenges persist, including cultural isolation, discrimination, and competition for resources in host countries, as well as brain drain for home countries if students do not return. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive efforts from academic institutions, communities, and policymakers.

2.7.2. Students' expectations and realities on their studies abroad?

Many students pursue advanced education with the expectation of gaining knowledge and skills to thrive in a global, multicultural environment. Their expectations are significantly shaped by their pre-existing realities, particularly influenced by their social and cultural backgrounds. For instance, students from politically unstable regions with limited job opportunities may expect to stay in the host country after graduation for better prospects. Conversely, students intending to manage family businesses often seek to acquire expertise abroad to bring home. While expectations vary based on individual goals, they are consistently influenced by the students' unique personal circumstances and backgrounds. The reality is that most international students' express satisfaction with UK universities' academic offerings and economic benefits, not paying enough attention to networking opportunities and to building social and cultural capital. The support provided for adapting to life in the host country seems to be inadequate with students facing challenges such as language barriers or lack of resources to adapt to unfamiliar

education systems. Isolation and academic struggles can further complicate their experiences, as universities typically expect students to navigate these issues independently. Their success often depends on their resilience and ability to build connections in a new environment, highlighting a gap between expectations and realities.

Universities in the UK play a pivotal role in supporting international students, offering various services to help them navigate academic, cultural, and personal challenges. These services enhance students' experiences and facilitate their adjustment to a new environment. Key offerings include orientation programs to familiarize students with campus life and cultural differences, academic support through counselling services for mental health and personal challenges. These combined efforts aim to ensure a smoother transition for these students and expect to enrich their academic journey although, despite efforts to create a supportive environment, many international students feel overwhelmed upon arrival as they navigate accommodation, adapt to a new culture, meet people, and prepare for academics. They often underestimate the challenges or remain unaware of available support services. Students with prior international experience typically adjust more easily than first-time travellers; however, existing research and my own observations indicate that international students often rely on friends and family back home for help, who may not fully understand the challenges or support options available in the host country, limiting their use of university services (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009).

2.7.3. Where is the gap in the literature?

There is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the social and cultural capital of international students and how to measure its impact. While economic benefits are commonly analysed, methods for evaluating social and cultural capital remain underexplored. Existing studies largely focus on employability and economic outcomes, especially for those who remain in the UK after graduation. Little attention is given to how social and cultural capital influences students' decisions to study abroad, their experiences during their studies, or whether they acquire additional capital abroad. Furthermore, there is a lack of longitudinal studies examining the economic, social, and cultural realities of international students over time, particularly for those who leave the UK after graduation.

To address this gap, I have applied Bourdieu's (1986) framework, which links economic, social, and cultural capital. Bourdieu ideas allow for a comprehensive analysis of the resource's students possess and acquire during their academic journey, encompassing the economic benefits, networks (social capital), and cultural competencies they develop. This approach offers a pathway to explore the multidimensional impact of studying abroad, particularly the interplay of these capitals in shaping students' long-term outcomes.

Chapter 3: Philosophical Foundations: Applying Bourdieu's Theory of Capital to Explore Economic, Social, and Cultural Dimensions

3.1. Theoretical Underpinning

I have considered a range of social theories to identify the most suitable framework for this thesis, choosing to apply Bourdieu's theories of capital to highlight how students' economic, social and cultural backgrounds shaped their expectations and experiences during their time abroad, from a reflective standpoint, as data was obtained from surveys and interviews conducted with students' years after their graduation. In this process, I draw connections to other theories such as the Human Capital, Acculturation, and Push-Pull theories. As an example, I explored Becker's (1964) and Tan's (2014) Human Capital Theory related to how investments in education and skills enhances an individual's earning potential, however, this theory primarily addresses the supply side of labour, without focusing on social and cultural forms of capital. In the case of Berry's (2010) Acculturation Theory, it examines how individuals adapt to new cultural environments through strategies such as assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization; however, it is limited to the pre- and during-study phases, with little emphasis on post-study outcomes. Lastly, the Push-Pull Theory is relevant for understanding why international students choose to study in the UK, though it mainly applies to the pre-study phase of the student experience.

3.2. A Bourdieusian Framework

3.2.1. Bourdieu forms of capital

While economic capital is traditionally linked to wealth and financial assets, Bourdieu expanded the concept to include social and cultural dimensions. His theories on social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital provide an important framework for this research, particularly his emphasis on the role of education in transmitting social and cultural resources. This thesis focuses on how studying abroad influences economic, social, and cultural capital, aligning with Bourdieu's view of education as a catalyst for social mobility, relationships, and opportunities.

Social Capital

Bourdieu attributed social capital to the "unique capacity to exert power to each individual" evidencing that family socio-economic backgrounds provide seed capital for children to develop further social and cultural capital through inherent capacities and learnt habits. Families provide their children with social and other forms of capital (i.e., cultural) from a young age and an inherent capacity to network and create value from these connections (Bourdieu, 1986). His concept of social capital goes beyond the mere size of one's social network, emphasizing the quality and usefulness of social connections. This implies that social capital is not merely about having a vast number of connections, but rather about having access to influential and valuable connections that can contribute to an individual's advancement in society. This subtle understanding provides insight into the socio-economic dynamics at play within different social strata and how individuals navigate and leverage their social networks to improve their life circumstances. In Bourdieu words: "social capital belongs to the individual and enables a person to exert power on other individuals or the group that manage resources".

Bourdieu's perspective sheds light on the complexity of social capital, particularly in its association with class and power dynamics supporting the idea that social capital is not equally distributed and that those from privileged backgrounds often have access to more resource-rich social networks, thereby reinforcing their advantage in the competition for scarce resources. He recognises the existence of a broader set of structural relations and their link with an individual's gender, class, and ethnic background. His implications on social capital offer a deeper understanding of how social connections contribute to individual and collective advantages prompting further examination of the role of social capital in perpetuating or challenging social inequalities.

Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital provides insight into the ways in which individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds are shaped by their exposure to culture. He defined cultural capital as the "familiarity with the legitimate culture within a society" calling it high culture (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu outlined three forms of cultural capital: objective, embodied, and institutionalized, which provide a framework for understanding how cultural capital is acquired and transmitted. For instance, traditional cultural elements like books, art, and music are classified as "objective" sources; language and personal tastes represent embodied sources; and education, credentials, or qualifications are regarded as institutionalised cultural capital. His work evidence that cultural capital is not only about possessing high levels of knowledge or expertise in specific cultural domains, but also about the ability to navigate within and derive value from cultural experiences. By introducing children to various cultural forms and practices, families can transfer cultural capital across generations, thereby perpetuating a cultural and social advantage.

More recent research has expanded the concept of cultural capital to include a broader range of skills and competencies. While still rooted in Bourdieu's foundational ideas, this new understanding of cultural capital acknowledges the importance of skills such as empathy, the ability to exchange ideas in sub-areas of culture such as art or literature, and technical proficiencies in the contemporary landscape such as understanding IT. These expanded definitions recognise that cultural capital encompasses not only traditional forms of high culture, but also contemporary skills and knowledge that are relevant to today's society (Bennett et al, 2009; Holden, 2006). This evolution of the concept of cultural capital reflects the changing nature of cultural and social dynamics in the 21st century; as the boundaries of cultural engagement continue to expand, so does the scope of cultural capital, encompassing a wide array of competencies and proficiencies that are essential for social and professional success.

Economic capital

In the context of Bourdieu's theory, economic capital pertains to the material and financial resources that individuals or groups can use. This encompasses income, wealth, property, and other tangible assets. Possession of economic capital influences an individual's social standing, access to opportunities, and overall life prospects. However, Bourdieu's contribution extends beyond a simplistic view of economic capital merely as a quantitative measure of wealth. Within his framework, all forms of capital are interconnected. He discusses the transformation of social capital into economic capital and vice versa. For instance, economic capital involves not just owning money or assets but also utilizing these resources to navigate and position

oneself within social structures. It is intricately linked with cultural and social dimensions, providing a more holistic comprehension of social stratification.

Bourdieu introduced the concept of "habitus," denoting the internalized set of dispositions, tastes, and preferences shaped by an individual's social context. Habitus plays a crucial role in understanding how economic capital translates into social practices and positions. For example, one's economic capital may shape children education, lifestyle, and social interactions, ultimately influencing their overall social identity (Bourdieu, 1986). He perceives different forms of capital as mutually constitutive. "Economic capital enables the investment of time and resources in developing children's cultural capital, associated with future educational and occupational success, thereby contributing to the accumulation of economic capital" (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Socioeconomic success is linked to increased social capital, broadening one's social network, enhancing influence, and fostering opportunities for further augmentation of other capital stocks (Bourdieu, 1997).

Symbolic capital

Symbolic capital is a concept that includes the recognition and prestige attached to economic, social, and cultural capital. It represents the inherent value associated with these forms of capital when they are acknowledged and validated within a given social context. For Bourdieu, symbolic capital is the manifestation of the power and influence derived from economic and cultural resources. The concept of symbolic capital highlights the significance of social recognition and validation in shaping an individual's position and advantages within a specific field. It emphasizes the idea that the symbolic worth of economic and cultural capital plays a pivotal role in defining an individual's standing and potential for profit within a particular societal framework (Bourdieu, 1987).

3.2.2. Bourdieu Framework within the context of international students

Drawing from Bourdieu's framework, the concept of social and cultural capital takes on particular significance in the context of international students' decision to study abroad and in their experiences. The possession of cultural knowledge and language skills becomes a form of currency that can greatly impact a student's ability to adapt and integrate into a new cultural and academic environment. As I explored into the dynamic relationship between students' intent to study abroad and their actual participation in study abroad programs, it becomes clear that factors such as social, cultural, and economic capital acquired prior to college play a pivotal role. Students raised in a high socio-economic environment where education, culture, international exposure, and mobility are valued, often tend to exhibit similar patterns to those experienced at home, with a positive outlook on studying abroad and an intention to make the most of the experience (Trilokekar & Rasmi, 2011; Lörz, Netz and Quast, 2016; Netz et al. 2021). **Figure 3.6** identifies the two factors that have more influence in the decision-making process regarding studying abroad, family's perceptions and past experiences related to international education and considerations based on gender dynamics. For example, if a parent has studied abroad or aspired to but couldn't, there is often greater family pressure to send their children abroad, driven by a belief in the value of studying abroad or an unfulfilled goal. Families in which the mother has a college education tend to place a strong emphasis on the education of their children, particularly their daughters. A study by Weis, Trommsdorff, and Heikamp (2023) found that maternal education positively correlates with children's school achievement, with mothers' self-transcendence values and parenting practices playing a mediating role and serving as a role model actively encouraging academic achievement.

Family dynamics

- Parental education and aspirations
- Parental occupation/employment
- Household income
- Family background including cultural and social values

Gender dynamics

- Maternal educational attainment
- Family pressure
- Gender norms
- Social background

Figure 3.6: Influence of family and gender dynamics in students' decisions to study abroad

3.2.2.1. Family Dynamics

Social and cultural capital deeply embedded in the family can significantly influence students' readiness to study abroad. Students coming from such backgrounds may have a predisposition towards valuing international exposure due to familial experiences, such as having parents or grandparents who studied abroad that placed a high value on education. Additionally, the influence of professional parents working in multinational companies, previous travel experiences, and an appreciation for literature, art, or music within their families, further enriches their cultural and social capital, contributing to their readiness to study abroad. This readiness is often characterized through embracing diversity and a proactive approach to utilizing the resources available to them while studying abroad. These influences shape the decision-making process to choose a location for their studies and sets the stage for their unique experiences abroad. As such, it becomes increasingly evident that the social and cultural capital a student brings to their international education journey plays a pivotal role in shaping their attitudes and approach to studying abroad (Lee, 1966; Bourdieu, 1986).

The influence of parental aspirations for their children's international education can be particularly influenced by family background and the impact of cultural values. As an example, in China the decision to study abroad is linked to family and society dynamics and highly influenced by Confucian ideals. Zhou & Jordan (2019) evidenced that "households where mothers have senior secondary school or college education, and fathers are working in professional occupations are likely to spend more on education for their children". More so, "having a college-educated father and a mother who is a professional enhances the probabilities for children being sent overseas for education". In terms of the decision-making process, factors such as household income, parental education, and occupation play a significant role in determining the expenditure on domestic and overseas education (Zhou & Jordan, 2019; Qian & Smyth, 2011; Bodycott & Lai, 2012).

In addition to parental influence, the student's own cultural capital and social background can also significantly impact their decision-making process. The desire to experience different

cultures and the acquisition of native English fluency have become influential factors driving students in mainland China towards international education experiences. This shift signifies a departure from the traditional emphasis solely on scholastic capital and underscores the growing importance of cultural and social capital in shaping the aspirations and decisions of students (Zhou & Jordan, 2019).

3.2.2.2. Gender Dynamics

A range of studies have explored the gender gap in study abroad decisions with more women than men studying abroad. Maternal education attainment, family pressure and their social background are some of the factors influencing this disparity. van Mol (2022) examined study abroad participation in the Netherlands and found a significant overrepresentation of female students suggesting that maternal educational attainment plays a crucial role in this gender disparity, with mothers potentially motivating their daughters to study abroad to achieve intergenerational social mobility. Similarly, Di Pietro (2022) conducted a cross-country analysis in Europe, revealing that the gender gap in study abroad participation persists over time, with women consistently more likely to engage in programmes abroad.

Men and women approach study abroad decisions differently, influenced by unique preferences and perspectives. Female students often follow gendered social reproduction strategies, drawing inspiration from their parents' educational levels, a pattern less common among male students (Hurst, 2019; Salisbury et al., 2010; van Mol, 2021). In developing countries, women's aspirations for gender equality and mobility may further drive their motivation to study abroad. As an example, the availability of scholarships specifically aimed at empowering women from developing regions reflects a recognition of this trend. Programmes such as the Schlumberger Foundation's Faculty for the Future Fellowship support women from developing economies in pursuing advanced studies internationally, aiming to promote gender equality in education and research (ScholarshipTab, n.d.). Considering these multifaceted influences, it becomes increasingly evident that studying abroad is not only a product of individual choice but is deeply intertwined with familial, societal, and cultural dynamics.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1. Introduction

The primary aim of this thesis is to critically evaluate whether British universities deliver substantial value to international students, justifying the significant time and financial investment these students make in pursuing their education in the UK. This assessment is crucial not only for understanding the impact on students' prospects but also for recognising the value universities generate from their graduates long after their studies are completed. Additionally, it intends to offer practical recommendations to HEI's and policymakers on how to enhance the value and overall experience for international students. To achieve this objective, I have adopted a qualitative approach, and two philosophies, interpretivist and constructivist, applied simultaneously as they both share the assumption that reality is socially constructed and subjective. I will adopt an interpretivism approach to understand how participants interpret their own experiences and a constructivism approach to construct meaning within their social context approach (Hancock, Windridge and Ockleford, 2007). This thesis analytical framework will encompass three dimensions: students socio-economic background, gender, and the time elapsed since graduation.

4.1.1. Research Questions

I structured the research questions to enable a systematic categorization and analysis of outcomes. The passage of time is incorporated into these questions, with the first focusing on students' perceptions before their studies and the second evaluating their experiences afterward.

The first research question aims to understand students' perceptions and expectations before starting a master's degree in the UK. It explores the diversity in students' arrival times, ranging from those who arrived just a few weeks before their postgraduate studies to those who had lived in the UK for several years as undergraduates. Special attention will be given to socio-economic backgrounds and gender to assess any potential influence on students' expectations.

Research Question 1*: How do differences in gender and socio-economic background affect how international students perceive their studies abroad before studies?*

Research question two searches directly into Bourdieu's economic, social and cultural capital framework. I wanted to understand how students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and genders cultivate these forms of capital after embarking on their studies. The investigation examines whether studying in the UK has influenced their capacity to form connections with others, forge friendships with individuals from different countries, establish personal and professional networks, and develop an appreciation for the national culture through engagement with London's cultural offerings. This question also explores into the concept of employability post-graduation as an indicator of economic capital. It includes inquiries about their employment expectations, such as the time needed to find paid employment post-graduation, preferences related to their ideal type of role, and the geographical location of prospective job opportunities.

Research question 2: How do differences in gender and socio-economic background affect the outcomes of studying abroad including:
RQ 2.1.: The development of social and cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu.
R.Q.2.2: Employability after students' return to their home country from the UK.

Research question 3 centres on the duration elapsed from graduation on students' studies in the UK until the survey's administration. The inclusion of this question serves the dual purpose of understanding whether students can leverage their social and cultural capital to enhance their lives over time post-graduation and if certain circumstances might impede or delay the attainment of benefits such as Brexit or COVID19. I investigated how students' perceptions of their postgraduate education in the UK evolved over time, either idealising it or maintaining a consistent viewpoint regardless of the passage of time.

Research Question 3: How do students' perceptions on their studies in the UK evolve based on the time elapsed since graduation?

The fourth and final research question seeks to serve as a conclusion on the current strategies employed by universities and the migratory laws to attract international students. This question not only aims to discover ongoing efforts but also seeks feedback from international students on what they value and appreciate most, as well as areas where improvements are needed related to their studies in the UK. It explores where universities and policy makers should focus to further enhance the experiences and outcomes of international students.

Research Question 4: How could the differences in students' perceptions and outcomes be explained in terms of provision of education for international students in the UK?

Table 4.3 maps each research question with its purpose in this thesis.

Research Questions	Research Question Objective
1: How do differences in gender and socio-economic background affect how international students perceive their studies abroad before studies?	Investigate how factors such as country of origin, cultural background, habits, and gender influence students' decision-making process and anticipation of their upcoming studies abroad.
2: How do differences in gender and socio-economic background affect the outcomes of studying abroad including: 2.1.: The development of social and cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu. 2.2: Employability after students' return to their home country from the UK.	Determine whether studying in the UK has yielded tangible results in social, cultural, and economic spheres, such as establishing a network of contacts that could facilitate the pursuit of relevant employment opportunities.
3: How do students' perceptions on their studies in the UK evolve based on the time elapsed since graduation?	Assess how students' perceptions have changed over time and whether the passage of time has influenced the capital they gained compared to

	more recent graduates. Additionally, evaluate the role time has played in their overall advantage.
4: How could the differences in students' perceptions and outcomes be explained in terms of provision of education for international students in the UK?	Explore how the discoveries in this thesis could inform alterations in the services provided by UK universities to international students, aimed at enhancing their overall satisfaction derived from their experience. The final objective would be to increase the enrolment of international students in UK universities.

Table 4.3: Research questions Mapping with Research Objectives

4.2. Research Design, Approach and Philosophy

Adopting a qualitative methodology seemed to be well-suited for capturing social experiences given that I wanted to recognize the unique perspectives of participants, shaped by their values, experiences, and beliefs (Awasthy, 2019). I determined that employing both surveys and interviews would be the optimal approach; while surveys would enable me to reach a broader pool of participants, interviews would afford the opportunity to search deeper into certain responses, providing a richer understanding of students' thoughts. By using both surveys and interviews, I could compare participants' responses to ensure consistency across the data.

4.2.1. The sample selection

The sample consists of 672 international students who graduated from the Master's in Management program at university A, between 2014 and 2021. All the students who participated in this research had previously attended a module I taught, which ran annually for ten weeks. The final two years of teaching, 2020 and 2021, were delivered online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the most notable advantages of this existing relationship was the students' willingness to take part in the study and dedicate plenty of time to take the survey and interview despite the time that had passed since they had completed their degrees. Many seemed pleased to reconnect, which likely contributed to a higher response rate than might otherwise have been achieved. During interviews, the familiarity helped to create a more relaxed and conversational atmosphere, encouraging participants to speak openly and reflectively about their experiences. Students were more comfortable sharing personal insights, particularly around emotional, social, and interpersonal aspects of their time studying abroad. In my view, this openness added considerable depth and richness to the data, offering perspectives that may not have been as easily accessed by a researcher without a prior connection to the group.

Nevertheless, this familiarity also brought some limitations. A small number of participants appeared hesitant or reserved when discussing more sensitive topics such as family income, economic background, or the role that money played in their educational choices and outcomes. This reluctance may have come from residual perceptions of the teacher–student hierarchy or a desire to present themselves in a particular way. To acknowledge and mitigate the potential influence of social desirability bias, I assured participants of the study's confidentiality and

anonymity. I also adapted questions related to income to help participants feel at ease, ensuring that all interviews were open and non-judgmental. This said, I believe that the pre-existing relationship proved to be beneficial, enhancing participation and encouraging richer responses, despite some limitations related to sensitivity around socio-economic issues being acknowledged.

More than half of these students originated from diverse international backgrounds, representing an average of 34 countries per academic year. Having had personal interactions with all these students, I had gained insight into the challenges some of them faced, including language barriers, social integration issues, acclimation to the English academic system, and feelings of homesickness. Recognising the wealth of experiences that they bring; I saw them as valuable participants in exploring how their distinct characteristics influenced their educational journey before and after their studies.

The survey was created using Qualtrics and distributed via email to the 672 individuals. A total of 91 responses were received, accounting for 13.54% of the total recipients. Among these respondents, 49 completed all questions, while 42 did not. Among the non-completers, 7 answered half of the questions, 12 answered only the first 3 questions and 7 participants did not answer any questions after consenting. Noticing many participants didn't finish, I found the median time for 49 completers was 17.61 minutes, while non-completers spent 12.37 minutes. Reflecting on the high number of participants that didn't complete the survey, I realised the need to keep student surveys shorter, ideally under 5 minutes, to boost engagement.

4.2.2. The design of the survey

To capture the perspectives of participants regarding their studies in the UK at different points in time, I created 51 questions structured in four parts. I started the survey with the consent question in Appendix 1. Those participants that didn't accept the consent were directed to a thank you message and not allowed into the survey below links the areas of study within the survey with the question numbers and the research question they aim to answer. **Table 4.4** includes the mapping of survey and research questions to the research objectives**; part one** included 8 questions concerning students' anticipations regarding the impact of their studies on aspects such as making connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds, establishing social and professional networks, enhancing their understanding of diversity, and the potential elevation of their social status. Questions related to cultural capital included their expectations of visiting museums, attending musicals, or being exposed to debates, books, and cultural events more often than in their home country. Additionally, this segment included questions about their economic expectations, such as securing a relevant job after graduation in the UK or abroad. **Part two** consisted of 18 questions focusing on students' post-graduation experiences. These questions explored whether students opted to stay in or depart from the UK after completing their studies, whether they obtained employment, the relevance of their job to their field of study, the length of time taken to secure employment, and various social, and cultural outcomes. This section examined the immediate social, cultural, and economic impacts following graduation and at the time the survey was administered, considering the differing circumstances for students graduating before and after the COVID years.

Part three involved 5 questions searching for students' perspectives on how the university could have contributed to better outcomes in terms of employability, financial standing, and social and cultural capital. Questions in this section pertained to the university tailoring services

for international students, such as having a careers department focused on companies sponsoring international students or organising seminars and events targeted at them. In **part four**, 17 questions were designed to collect demographic information aimed at understanding students' socio-economic backgrounds and gender. This section gathered data about gender, religion, or ethnicity, as well as the educational background of the participants' families, their employment history, cultural and social activities, and income. In this part, I included inquiries pertaining to participants' preferences within the fields of social and cultural activities, both in their childhood and presently as adults. This deliberate inclusion aimed to understand whether students were raised in environments that prioritised social and cultural capital, and whether they were exposed to such influences from a young age. Research indicates that individuals who are exposed to social and cultural values during childhood often exhibit similar tendencies as adults, whereas those who did not have such exposure during childhood may require additional effort to develop an appreciation for these values later in life (Ziv and Elizarov, 2019; NAEYC, 2023).

Questions 8, 50 and 51 were not included in the parts mentioned above. Question 8 assesses the time elapsed since graduation. I classified these separately to explore whether both expectations and realities are influenced by the macro-economic situation during the year of graduation and the time elapsed since then. Following interviews with several participants, it became apparent to me that those who pursued remote studies during the COVID years had markedly distinct expectations, experiences, and realities compared to those who studied on the university campus, in London, without any disruptions to their studies and personal life's. In questions 50 and 51, students were asked to voluntarily provide their email addresses if they consented to being contacted by the researcher for a future interview with 34 of the surveyed students expressing agreement to partake in an interview (37.36% of the 91 responses).

Part	Area of study	Survey Questions	Aimed to answer Research Question
1	Expectations pre-studies	Q1-7, 10.	1
2	Realities post studies: From participants perspective after graduation Realities post studies: From participants perspective at the time of the survey	Q11-15,17-18,21-23 Q16,19-20,24-27, 49	2
3	Provision of UK Universities to improve value for international students?	Q28-32	4

| 4 | Demographics | Q9,33-48 | All questions |
| Across-parts | Time elapsed since graduation | Q8 | 3 |

Table 4.4: Mapping of survey and research questions to the research objectives

Table 4.5 shows the distribution of survey participants by academic year. A higher number of participants came from the most recent cohorts, likely because recent graduates tend to remain more engaged with the university compared to those who graduated years ago. Additionally, the more recent cohorts were larger in size, so while the absolute number of participants increased, the participation percentage remained consistent relative to cohort size. While I lack grade data to confirm if those responding were the ones that accomplished a higher grade in my module, my perception is that those who enjoyed the module or engaged more with me as their lecturer were more willing to participate. Survey questions are in Appendix 2

Academic Year	Students sent the survey	Students taking the survey	Percentage of students completing the survey
2020/2021	194	24	12.3%
2019/2020	111	15	13.5%
2018/2019	104	12	11.5%
2017/2018	98	11	11.2%
2016/2017	79	3	3.8%
2015/2016	41	1	2.4%
2014/2015	45	1	2.2%
TOTAL	672	67[2]	10%

Table 4.5: Distribution of students participating on the survey classified by graduation year

4.2.3. The design of the interview

Out of 91 survey respondents, 34 expressed their agreement to take part in such interviews and 20 interviewed with me. A gap of approximately one year and 9 months existed between the administration of the survey, conducted between September 2021 and February 2022, and my subsequent email invitations for interviews, which were dispatched in November 2023. Mindful of this temporal distance and recognising the investment in time made during the survey completion, I wanted to ensure I was respectful with their time, attempting to design the interview in a way that didn't feel like a burden to participants. This approach extended to considerations of interview duration and question format. All interviews were recorded via zoom and both, the participant and I, had the camera on during the entire process.

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[2] 67 students answered this question.

Since all participants had been my student, either in-person or online, I anticipated that the initial moments of the interview would involve catching up. To foster a relaxed atmosphere, I began each interview informally by inquiring about their well-being and sought permission to record our conversation, adhering to the ethics requirements of Lancaster University which mandated retention of records for ten years. Commencing the interviews with a simple query regarding their graduation year, I invited them to share their personal narratives and the motivations behind pursuing a master's degree in the UK. This approach aimed to encourage comfort and openness, avoiding using a question-by-question format. Most students responded positively to this approach, leading to discussions about their pre-existing residency abroad or in the UK before embarking on their master's degree. Surprisingly, while I had assumed all students relocated specifically for their master's program, many had already been undergraduate students in the UK for three to four years prior. Subsequent conversation topics explored factors influencing their choice of the UK over alternative English-speaking destinations such as Australia or the USA.

As I conducted additional interviews, I observed that many participants exhibited discomfort when asked about compensation and their family's socio-economic background, including their parents' educational and occupational responsibilities. In response, I opted to rephrase certain questions in a more approachable manner. For instance, I asked if they felt satisfied with their compensation, whether they had noticed any improvements over time, and if they felt a sense of accomplishment in their work, rather than soliciting specific monetary figures. In addressing questions about family socio-economic status, I shared my own experience of being the first in my family to attend university, inviting them to relate if they were in a similar situation. This adjustment aimed to alleviate participants that may have felt uncomfortable disclosing that their parents had not pursued higher education. By offering a relatable perspective grounded in my own background, which is indeed true, I found that this approach provided a greater sense of comfort and openness among those participants that were the first ones in their families to attend university.

To compare interview and survey data, I structured the interviews into four parts, mirroring the survey. The first covered participants' decision to study in the UK and their expectations before arriving in London. The second explored their academic, social, and cultural experiences during their studies. The third focused on post-graduation, including plans to stay in the UK or move elsewhere, alongside professional, economic, and social integration. The final part invited participants to summarise their study-abroad experience in one word, reflect on whether they would repeat the journey, and assess the value their studies added to their lives. Reflecting on the interviews, participants appeared relaxed and happy, enjoying the opportunity to recall their university days, which all remembered as a positive chapter in their lives. Many used the discussion to reconnect with their time abroad and reflect on how their studies had shaped them over time. something many of them hadn't consciously done before. The length of interviews varied, influenced by the participant's personality (more social individuals were eager to share with interviews being longer) and current circumstances, as some conducted the interviews during work breaks with limited time.

4.2.4. Research Approach and Philosophy

All the data presented in this thesis was generated directly from participants through individual surveys and interviews. The notion that individuals' perceptions and realities are distinct and subjective aligns with my belief in the existence of multiple socially constructed realities. As a result, the guiding philosophy for this study is *interpretivism*. The dynamic nature of this

process allowed me to conduct subjective comparative analysis by interpreting participants' perceptions and realities.

4.3. Data Generation and Analysis Methods

Before the interviews, participants were assured that all data would be handled confidentially, being identified with pseudonyms. All interviews were conducted and recorded via zoom, with a duration ranging from 45 to 70 minutes. The variation in interview length primarily stemmed from the interviewee's individual characteristics, a few of them willingly shared their thoughts, providing elaborate insights, while others opted for more concise responses to my questions needing less time to answer all questions. To ensure data quality standards, a thorough process was implemented, involving the cleaning, coding, and transformation of data using Qualtrics and ATLAS.ti to code the survey and interview results respectively.

4.3.1. The coding process.

I used Creswell's (2014) matrix-type process to code survey and interview data through three stages. In the first stage, open coding, I organised the data into six primary categories: pre-study perceptions, realities during and post-studies, current realities, demographics, and socio-economic status. Sub-categories like employability and social/cultural capital added further depth, creating a solid foundation for data analysis. In the second stage, axial coding, I examined relationships between these categories, such as linking expectations and realities about social capital for male and female students, uncovering gender-based similarities and differences. The final stage, selective coding, involved identifying overarching patterns. As an example, one of the findings was that female students had lower expectations in economic, social, and cultural capital than male students, which influenced their behaviours and outcomes. This systematic approach enabled me to extract key insights and meaningful trends.

The coding process was the most challenging part of this research. Despite watching Qualtrics tutorials, I repeatedly coded and deleted codes until I was satisfied. I created six main categories and 26 sub-categories, classifying responses by time (before, during, right after graduation, and now), by demographics and socio-economic background. Within these, I attempted to identify economic, social, and cultural capital patterns. As an example, in the before studies main category, I would gather data on the economic, social, and cultural expectations of participants before commencing their master's degree. This approach helped organize the data to answer the research questions. **Appendix 3** shows screenshots of the codes in Qualtrics.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

4.4.1. The survey

Prior to the distribution of the survey among participants, all related documents (application and consent forms) were reviewed and approved by the University of Lancaster in 2021. Adhering to the university guidelines, a consent question was incorporated into the survey (Appendix 1), explaining its purpose, and allowing participants the option to conclude it immediately before any questions were addressed. The survey was crafted to ensure anonymity, with no collection of personal data that could identify participants, except for questions 50 and 51. In these questions, students were asked to voluntarily provide their email addresses only if they consented to being contacted by the researcher for a future interview.

4.4.2. The interviews

Before commencing each interview, I communicated the types of questions that would be asked and informed participants that they could decline to answer specific questions or/and terminate the interview at any point. Consent was sought for recording the interview to facilitate later result transcription and as supporting evidence. Participants were also apprised that their interviews would be retained in my files for ten years post-PhD approval, but all published data would be strictly confidential, with no names disclosed. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, and the recordings were securely stored on my personal computer, protected by a login password. Given the precautions taken and the nature of the research questions, I can confirm that the identity of all participants is secure and protected.

Reflecting on the survey and interviews, no ethical concerns arose during the process. Participants appeared comfortable and satisfied with the questions, engaging willingly and openly. Their positive responses and willingness to share insights indicate that the survey and interview design respected their boundaries and upheld ethical standards throughout.

4.5. Validity and Reliability

To scrutinise the data and ensure the robustness and trustworthiness of this study, I assessed its credibility, transferability, confirmability, consistency, and sensitivity to context. To establish *credibility,* I confirmed participants answers during the interview process to ensure that my interpretation aligned accurately with their experiences. To facilitate the *transferability* of findings to different contexts, I have provided comprehensive descriptions of the participants, context, and the entire process in the analysis chapters. To ensure *confirmability*, I have engaged in self-reflection on my role as researcher throughout the process, addressing any potential biases or preconceptions and ensuring that all findings are shaped only by participants responses. *Consistency* was maintained by employing the same set of questions for all participants in both surveys and interviews, as well as adhering to a uniform process for coding, understanding, and interpreting all generated data using the statistical software ATLAS.ti. Lastly, considering the *sensitivity of context* in this study, I have generated all data with careful attention to each student's context considering cultural, historical, or situational factors that could influence findings.

4.6. Research Limitations

The factors that limit qualitative research are also the ones that make it a superior method to understand individuals' social realities. Looking optimistically, my ten-year experience as an associate professor and personal tutor at university A offers a wealth of insight into international students' experiences during their academic journey. However, it's important to acknowledge this could also be viewed as a limitation given potential biases and preconceptions. Reflecting on this limitation, I have applied continuous self-reflection to maintain objectivity and accurately represent participants' views without being influenced by my own biases or preconceptions.

Another constraint might originate from the size of the sample and the time needed for data generation and analysis, which can pose challenges for categorising and generalising data, as well as for transferring findings. In addition, the process of collecting, coding, and analysing

data through surveys and interviews typically tends to be very time consuming. However, viewing this from a more positive angle, my investment of time in engaging with participants and analysing the data enriches its nature, rendering more insightful and valuable results for social research.

In this research, contextual specificity might pose a limitation, as studying abroad often requires families to possess specific resources such as economic means as well as cultural and social beliefs, such as a commitment to investing in education. Consequently, the findings may be highly dependent on a specific demographic group; this could hinder the transferability of the results to other groups from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This lack of diversity on the socio-economic backgrounds of the sample may highlight the necessity of providing financial assistance to international students who exhibit exceptional academic potential but lack the resources to study abroad.

Additional limitations may arise from the absence of verbal cues in natural settings given all data is solely generated through online surveys and interviews. It could be argued that conducting interviews via Zoom, as opposed to in-person interactions, may influence how respondents react to questions and formulate their responses. However, I believe that this limitation may only be partial, as interviews were conducted via Zoom with both the interviewer and interviewee visible, allowing for observation of the interviewee's reactions throughout the interview.

Last, the limited use of quantitative methods in this research may pose challenges to the validity and reliability of findings. Nonetheless, as elaborated in subsection 4.5. (Validity and Reliability), I conducted several tests to ensure the validity and reliability of our findings.

4.7. Methodology Timeframe

I sought permission from university A to conduct research for this thesis, specifically to survey graduates from the master's in management programme. The director of research indicated that the graduates' data including full name, degree graduation date, study pathway (i.e. Finance) could be obtained from booklets prepared for the graduation ceremonies, and that I could use this data freely as it was already public. I used these booklets from years 2014/15 to 2021/22 to find the information of those students graduating from a master's in management degree, finance pathway. I was particularly interested in the students graduating from the finance pathway as I knew them personally after teaching them a module as part of their degree. The survey was developed and tested during the summer of 2021, with distribution commencing in the second half of this year. To pilot the survey, I distributed it to a small group (5) of recent graduates and asked for their feedback on the clarity of the questions, as well as their suggestions on whether any questions should be added or removed. After conducting the pilot survey, I revised questions related to income and employment based on participant feedback, as they were perceived as too direct and made respondents uncomfortable. Following these adjustments, I had to distribute the survey link multiple times to reach the current response rate of 91 participants.

The timeline detailing the data gathering and analysis process is provided in **Table 4.6**. Personal circumstances led me to engage in two full-time positions from October 2021 until the summer of 2023, resulting in a significant reduction in my available time for data analysis, interview preparation and execution. To effectively manage this workload, an official six-month hiatus was requested in January 2023. Upon resuming thesis work in July 2023, efforts

were directed towards formulating interview questions, conducting interviews, and analysing both survey and interview data through coding and categorisation.

Creation and pilot testing of survey	April-August 2021
Distribution of survey	September 2021-February 2022
Two full time positions held	October 2021-June 2023
Analysis of survey	March-December 2022
Official pause of studies	January-June 2023
Creation of interview questions	July-August 2023
Reaching out to participants	September 2023-March 2024
Interviews	November 2023 -March 2024
Analysis	March-August 2024

Table 4.6: Methodology Timeframe

4.8 Reflection

I strongly believe that employing a qualitative methodology was the most suitable approach for this research to capture the differences in students' educational experience while in the UK. Regarding validity and reliability and given the absence of quantitative analysis, I realised after the first interview, that I had to ask the same questions in different ways to confirm that my understanding of participants answers was correct.

Reflecting on the interviews, I noticed that participants were more inclined to discuss achievements qualitatively, such as promotions or feelings of accomplishment, rather than sharing specifics about financial returns. Similarly, when discussing their families, participants appeared uncomfortable providing details about their parents' employment beyond mentioning their occupations. In future research, I will try to obtain the necessary data without including questions that might be perceived as overly sensitive. Last, coordinating the survey and interview questions to ensure they collectively addressed the research questions was challenging. The interviews were designed to fill gaps and provide deeper insights into areas not clearly answered in the surveys. Combining data from these two sources required careful alignment and was a complex process.

Chapter 5: International students in the UK

5.1. Introduction

The last data available, at the time of writing this chapter, corresponds to academic year 2022/23 when 758,860 international students were enrolled in UK programmes (HESA, 2024). Their contributions are not solely economic; they also introduce new traditions, languages, and customs to the host country, promoting intercultural dialogue, fostering tolerance, and enriching the global learning environment (Sharma & Jung, 1985; Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010; Hsu, 2011). The importance of international students to the UK has been steadily growing, proving to be a lasting source of resources for the UK (HESA, 2024). Recent trends show that the UK continues to be a leading destination for international students, particularly at the postgraduate level, often forming most of the student body. The Complete University Guide reported in 2023 that 52.6% of full-time students enrolled in first degrees in the UK in 2021/2022 were international. However, stricter immigration policies have begun to impact these numbers, leading to a decline in new international enrolments. This shift is particularly noticeable in students from countries affected by tighter visa requirements and post-study work restrictions, raising concerns about the UK's ability to sustain its appeal as a global hub for higher education (Collegedunia, 2024).

5.1.1. What is the Aim of this Chapter?

The broad objective of this chapter is to understand who these students are, their main characteristics and if their gender or socio-economic background influenced their decision to study in the UK.

Why is This Relevant?

Given the value that international students provide to the UK countries, its universities and policymakers (related to migratory policies) should pay more attention to how these students adapt to living in the UK, their capacity to build networks, and their performance during and after their studies. Understanding how they perceive and value their studies and implementing necessary changes to support them could equip them with tools to create strong networks, perform better academically, integrate into society, and develop a sense of belonging in the UK. This, in turn, would lead to greater capital for both students and the UK in the long term, as these ties are lifelong and often passed down to their children (Bourdieu, 1986).

This chapter is subdivided into the following sub-themes: Who are these students? What influenced their decision to study in the UK versus other countries? What were their expectations before commencing and their academic realities during their studies? As this is a longitudinal study with participants who graduated between 2014 and 2021, chapters 6, 7, and 8 will focus on understanding their values regarding economic, social, and cultural capital respectively, and if/how they believe that studying abroad contributed to the accumulation of these types of capital over time.

5.2. Who are these students?

I invited 672 individuals to participate in a survey and an interview as part of this thesis. All of them had graduated from a master's in management program at university A between 2014 and

2021. To provide context, university A is situated in central London and offers a diverse range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes that attract both domestic and international students. The university is renowned for attracting a substantial number of international students and has consistently ranked among the top 12 universities in the QS Global Rankings over the past decade (QS World University Rankings, 2025).

Regarding participation, I had anticipated better engagement since I personally taught all of them but the fact that many had graduated years ago, being disengaged with the university at the time of contact, led to only 91 participants responding to the survey (13.54%). Out of these, I was able to conduct 20 interviews. In my view, the fact that the last 2 years of teaching were entirely online due to the COVID19 pandemic also impacted how participants felt towards the university and their lack of engagement. In addition, after conducting the interviews, I realised that most participants had not been in touch with the university since graduation, which explains the low response rate from those graduating years ago.

5.2.1. Demographics

The survey and interview participants were similarly composed with 60% identifying as male and 40% as female. This gender breakdown was not representative of the cohort given that I consistently had more women than men in the classroom. This statement is not only supported by my observations over the years but also by the narrowing gender pay gap among management program graduates since 2019 (Financial Times, 2023) that suggests more women possess advanced management education. **Figure 5.7** illustrates the average salaries for management graduates by gender; the participants in this Financial Times (2023) study graduated from business schools in the USA, the UK, France, Spain, Italy, Hong Kong and China. The graph indicates that men salaries declined while those for women increased, narrowing the pay gap from 17% to 9% three years after graduation. In the survey, no participants identified themselves as non-binary, even though they were provided with the option to specify a gender outside the categories of male and female. Gender was not directly inquired about during the interviews; instead, participants were classified as male or female based on their perceived appearance. This approach was not ideal, as it relied on subjective judgments rather than self-identification. A better method would have been to ask participants to self-report their gender, ensuring accuracy and respect for individual identities
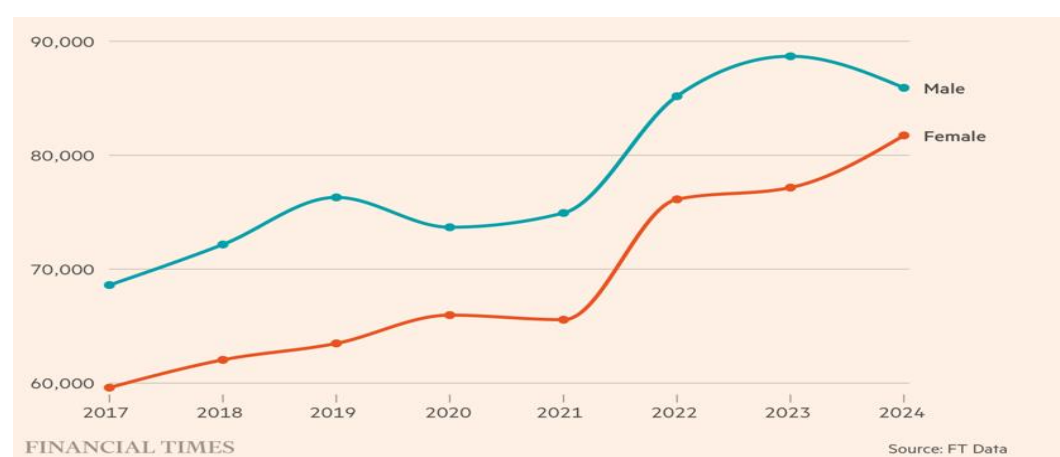
Figure 5.7: Average salaries in US$ three years after their programme completion.

Given the programme did not require prior work experience, most participants were under 25, with 90% of the sample being younger than 30. Only one participant had a spouse and children, while the rest were not married. Due to their young age and lack of employment, the majority lived with their parents before studying in the UK as evidenced in the interviews. Data supports that the decision to study abroad was a collective family choice, with their family's socio-economic background, habits, and values playing a role in the decision to study abroad; this will be further analysed in the socio-economic part of this chapter. **Figure 5.8** includes demographic data from the survey with 65% of participants being born in Europe and China, 29% currently living in the UK and 24% in China. In terms of religion and ethnicity, 40% were Catholic, 41% White and 35% Chinese respectively.
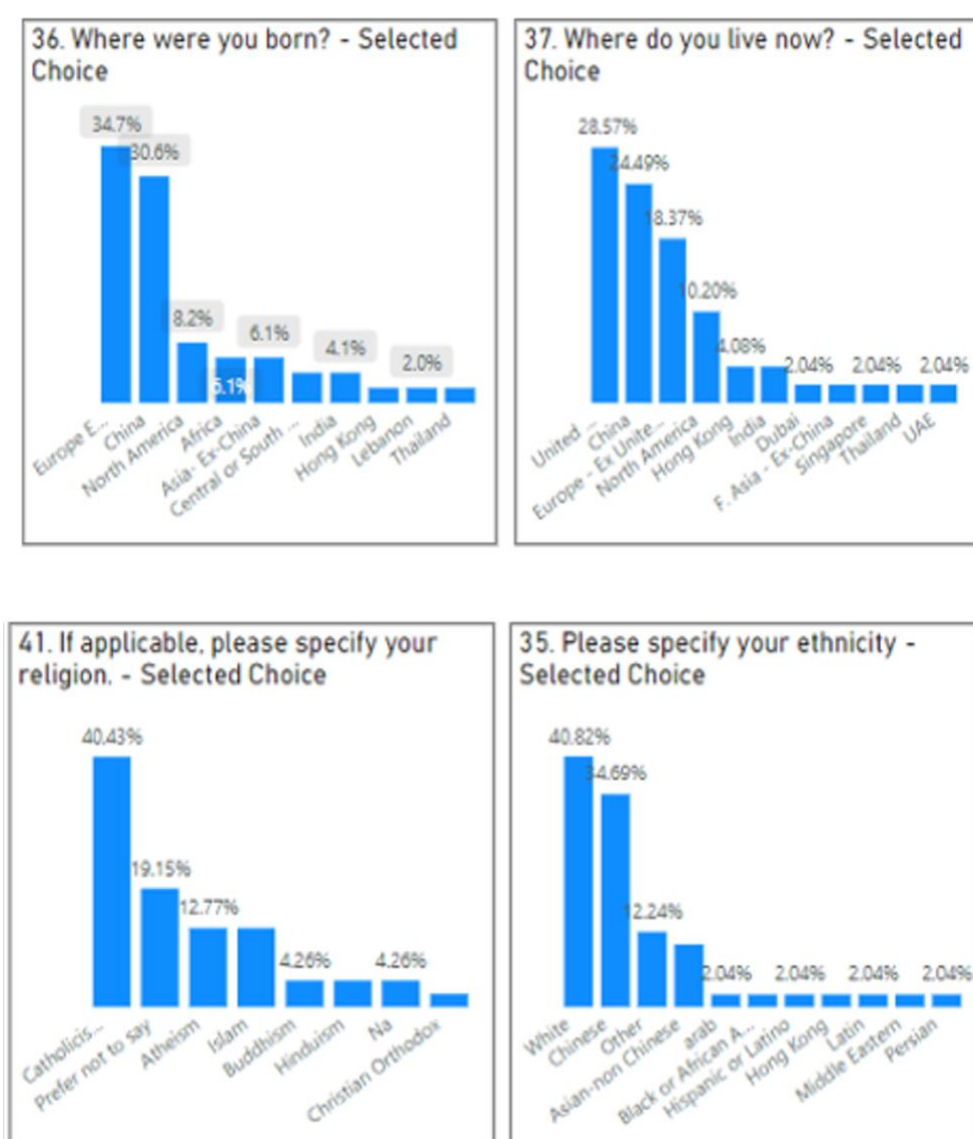
Figure 5.8: Demographics of the sample (N=49 participants that answered survey questions 33, 34, 35, 36, 37 and 41)

5.2.2. Students' mobility

Understanding where these students were born and grew up is important for this research as it may reveal information about their background, habits, the reasons why they decided to study in England in the first place and their expectations. Their current location is also relevant, and this tells us if they stayed in the UK after graduation or not, and what were the main reasons that prompted them to stay or leave the country. All participants in this thesis were enrolled as international students, suggesting their families were not residing in the UK before their studies with them reallocating to the UK to pursue education. This was confirmed during interviews, 65% of the participants came from European and Chinese backgrounds. The high number of European students makes sense as the UK has a higher concentration of highly reputable universities compared to other European countries, it is geographically closer and easier to apply to than universities in the USA or Australia. In addition, this thesis spans from 2014 to 2021, and the UK officially fully exited the EU single market and customs union on December 31, 2020, meaning that most European participants began their degrees pre-Brexit, benefiting from reduced tuition fees (European Commission, n.d.). Regarding Chinese students, the literature confirms the reasons why Chinese families prefer the UK to other countries as a study destination include safety, costs, reputation, quality of institutions, enhanced career prospects in their home country (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2008; Counsell, 2011). During the interviews, Chinese students confirmed that graduates from highly ranked UK universities are very much valued by employers in China, who appreciate their international experience and the rigour and quality of UK higher education. Furthermore, when asked why they chose to study in the UK instead of the US, several interviewees cited the UK as being safer, having a better environment, and experiencing less political confrontation with China. As an example, Li, a female participant from China indicated that when her parents let her make the decision on the destination country for her postgraduate studies, she thought the UK was a safer environment than the USA: "*I thought it was less of a drug environment. There are no guns in the UK, I felt it was a safer environment.*"

Table 5.7 presents the birthplace and current residence of 51 survey participants. The data shows a clear increase in the number of participants staying in the UK after graduation. Out of 33% of European students studying in the UK, only 18% returned home. None of the students born in Africa, Central and South America returned home. This data aligns well with the push factors discussed in this thesis. Participants coming from countries with limited employment opportunities or in conflict were more motivated to stay in the UK after graduation (McMahon, 1992; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2008).

	Participants born in the country	Participants living in the home country at the time of the survey
United Kingdom	4%	**31%**
Europe excluding UK	33%	**18%**
China	29%	23%
Asia excluding China	6%	2%
North America	8%	10%
Central and South America	4%	**0%**
Africa	6%	**0%**
India	4%	4%

Australia	0%	0%
Other	6%	12%
Total	100%	100%

Table 5.7: Participants country of birth vs current country of residence

Interviews confirmed that many participants aimed to stay in the UK after graduation, actively hunting for jobs from the start of their studies and, that transitioning to a work visa and securing employment were critical for staying in the UK. Migratory laws, including the Graduate Route (available until the end of 2023), played a key role in enabling this with many participants being able to secure jobs before graduation. Marco, a male Italian participant secured two job offers before graduation choosing to work for Bloomberg, citing better opportunities in London than in Italy. Nadia, a female participant from Egypt also found a job right before graduation but faced slow career progression due to visa restrictions, which made changing employers difficult. She told me that despite the slow progression due to migratory constrains, she appreciated being able to work in the UK, where opportunities for women were more stable than in Egypt.

Table 5.8 summarizes the gender, graduation year, age at graduation, time elapsed since graduation, country of birth, and current location of the 20 participants I interviewed. Pseudonyms were created based on gender and country of origin. For example, Louis, born in France, moved to the UK for undergraduate studies, found a job after graduation where he lives now; James, with African roots moved with his family to the UK for his undergraduate studies, he mentioned that the entire family became British citizens in the past years. Xiao's parents, originally from China, became UK residents during her studies. Before the migratory changes in 2024, international students could bring their families, which facilitated the decision to send family members to study in the UK, this said, interviews revealed that most international students arrived alone, mostly after age 17 to start an undergraduate or a master's degrees. **Table 5.8** reveals that most were under 30 years old at graduation, with 45% remaining in the UK after their studies (in bold).

Interviewee Pseudonym	Gender	Graduation year	Age at graduation	Age at the time of the interview	Time elapsed since graduation	Country of birth	Current location
Maria	Female	2015	24	33	9	Mexico	Mexico
Phillipe	Male	2015	21	30	9	Monaco	Monaco
Ethan	Male	2017	24	30	6	USA	USA
Marco	Male	2017	26	33	**7**	**Italy**	**UK**
Sebastian	Male	2018	23	28	5	Germany	Germany
Nadia	Female	2018	24	29	**5**	**Egypt**	**UK**
Aleksandar	Male	2018	30	35	5	Serbia	Serbia
Hans	Male	2019	23	27	**4**	**Germany**	**UK**
Lukas	Male	2019	25	30	5	Germany	Luxemburg
Jan	Male	2020	22	25	3	Chez Republic	Suisse
Louis	Male	2020	22	25	**3**	**France**	**UK**
Priya	Female	2020	23	26	3	India	India
Aisha	Female	2020	22	25	3	United Arab Emirates	United Arab Emirates
James	Male	2020	30	33	**3**	**Nigeria**	**UK**
Li	Female	2020	23	26	3	China	China
Diego	Male	2020	32	35	**3**	**Chile**	**UK**
Ama	Female	2021	24	26	**2**	**Ghana**	**UK**
Wei	Male	2021	23	25	**2**	**China**	**UK**
Mei	Female	2021	26	28	2	China	China
Xiao	Female	2021	25	27	**2**	**China**	**UK**

Table 5.8: Interviewees demographics

5.2.3. Previous studies

At the beginning of this research, I assumed that most participant had arrived in the UK from their home countries to start their master's programme at university A, typically at the age of 21 or older. The interviews revealed that at least 30% of international students arrived at the UK at a much younger age, whether to study an undergraduate degree at the age of 17 or even completing their final years of school locally to pass the A+ level exams and secure entry into an undergraduate degree programme. Wei, a male student from China, arrived at the UK for the first time in 2017 to study an undergraduate degree at the University of Glasgow. The same applies to Louis and Marco (male students from France and Italy respectively) who arrived at Westminster University for their undergraduate studies and stayed to complete a master's degree afterwards. James (male, Africa), Xiao (female, China) and Hans (male, Germany), studied their undergraduate degrees at Leicester, Lancaster and Cardiff Universities respectively. All these students arrived at the UK at age 17, or younger, and studied their undergraduate and a master's degree in the UK.

One factor that contributed to participants arriving younger at the UK, highlighted during the interviews, was the admissions process. Studying high school or an undergraduate in the UK and applying to their masters' studies from a local university, made it easier for them to gain admission to highly ranked institutions as their academic and English language levels were better compared to those that had studied in another language. This was highlighted by Perkins and Neumayer (2021); their study indicates that domestic qualifications often receive preferential consideration in UK universities, making it easier for such students to meet the entry requirements. This data is relevant for this thesis as it impacts the integration process of international students. Those coming to the UK younger were fully accustomed to the English academic system by the time they started their master's degree integrating with other students faster, acting almost as domestic students as evidenced in the interviews.

"Most people study their undergraduate degree in the UK, and they join a master's degree at a different rhythm. Coming from Latin America, I didn't feel confident with my language skills at first being quiet at the beginning and no speaking in classes." Diego (male, Chile).

5.2.4. Socio-Economic Background

After many years teaching international students, I have observed that the decision to study abroad is collaborative. While many have autonomy in educational preferences and rely on online resources, such as social media, and peer recommendations to choose their studies abroad (QS, 2021; Journal of Studies in International Education, 2021), the majority depend on their family's beliefs and financial support, with families heavily influencing their educational choices, especially in parts of the Middle East, Asia and Africa (ICEF Monitor, 2020; Education USA, 2021). Families that believe in education abroad usually have a desire for their children to gain international experience, and the financial means to support their studies.

Defining socio-economic background was not an easy task as the literature offers different definitions, but most of them include parameters such as the educational level, employment type, income level and/or habits of the people involved (Rogošić and Baranović, 2016; Rodríguez Hernández, Cascallar, and Kyndt, 2020). Based on this, I attempted to gain insight into participants' socio-economic backgrounds by examining their parents and siblings' educational level, employment, and income.

5.2.4.1.   A strong belief in the value of education.

Survey and interview results regarding family's educational level were straightforward: most parents had studied at university with many of them having accomplished more than one degree (bachelors, master and on occasions, a PhD) and others having studied abroad. To provide context, 74% of the fathers and 57% of the mothers of this thesis participants had obtained at least a bachelors' degree with 29% (15) of fathers and 18% (9) of mothers also holding a master's degree. Mathematics, economics, law, engineering, and agricultural studies were some of the degrees parents and event grandparents hold. Only three interviewees acknowledged being the first generation in their family to attend university.

"My dad holds a PhD in Economics in Armenia" – Jan (male, Chez Republic)

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"Both my mother and father studied at university. Dad studied electrical engineer at the University of Cairo." – Nadia (female, Egypt)

"Both of my parents attended university as well as my grandparents. Dad studied law, mum economics and law near Monaco. My mother was Italian, and she moved to Monaco to study abroad." – Phillipe (male, Monaco).

All interviewees' siblings, without exception, were currently studying towards being accepted in a university or had already completed at least a bachelor's degree. These findings correspond closely with the survey outcomes, underscoring a common feature among participants: they all have families with strong emphasis on education and a privileged socio-economic status enabling parents throughout generations to support their children's education abroad. Ama (female, Ghana) has 6 siblings, all studying at university or school, the later aim to pursue a bachelor's degree when the time comes. Priya's (female, India) sister studied medicine and is now completing her residency and Nadia's (female, Egypt) sister graduated in Italy and is now working as a doctor in the UK. Aisha (female, UAE) indicated that her younger sister was completing her undergraduate studies in Dubai and planned to study a master's degree abroad. This aligns with existing research on "genetic nurture" which indicates that siblings' educational achievements are influenced by both shared genetic predispositions and environmental factors within families, reinforcing the observed trend of common educational aspirations (NBER, 2021).

5.2.4.2.   A desire to gain international experience.

Most participants in this thesis were younger than 30 and had no work experience when they began their studies in the UK; their worldview and decision-making were clearly shaped by their family's habits, views, and expectations. All interviewees confirmed that discussions about studying abroad and gaining international experience were common in their families, with parents encouraging them to pursue higher education overseas. Many frequently travelled on vacation or had parents who travelled for business, making conversations about other countries and cultures a regular occurrence. They expressed a strong interest in learning from other cultures and viewed international experience as essential. This reflects Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, where educational aspirations and mobility are shaped by inherited dispositions and family socialization (Bourdieu, 1986). Participants' early exposure to international experiences and parental emphasis on studying abroad illustrate how cultural capital is transferred across generations, influencing their perceptions of opportunity and shaping their educational choices.

The interviews made it clear that most participants considered the educational level in their home countries to be inferior to studying in London, which they viewed as broader, more global, and of a higher standard. For many of these students, the "plan" was to study in the UK and then return home after graduation to seek paid employment or work in the family business. This was especially true in more traditional cultures (i.e. China, Latin America, Arab countries) where children were expected to continue the family business and take care of their aging parents. This expectation was also evident among female students, whose parents often insisted that they return home after graduation, reflecting a desire to keep them close. Participants from Europe were more determined to stay in the UK after graduation, as interviews revealed they believed that working conditions and opportunities were better in the UK than in their home countries.

'My dad told me that I could do a master's degree wherever I wanted. I was looking for schools in London and found "university A" online. The plan was to study and work abroad, gain knowledge and return home to manage the family business" – Ama (female, Ghana).

"Education in the UK is very good compared to Chile. I also had a personal preference to be in Europe rather than in the US." – Diego (male, Chile)

"I attended a British school in Dubai. My mother is traditional and didn't want me to be abroad, but my father pushed for it to open my views on the world. Due to my family situation I wanted to be closer to home and studied my bachelor's degree in an American University in Dubai, travelling to the UK for my master's degree." – Nadia (female, Egypt).

5.2.4.3.   Financial means to support studies abroad.

Survey data provided insights into the professions that parents pursued based on their fields of study, including roles such as engineers, economists, lawyers, and doctors. The interviews yielded further information regarding the occupations of parents and siblings. However, many interviewees expressed discomfort discussing their parents' occupations, offering general comments such as "he works in his own business" without elaborating further. During the interviews, participants identified the occupations of active parents as entrepreneurs, medical doctors, bankers, consultants, secondary school founders, and schoolteachers. Aisha (female, UAE) indicated that her father owned Iranian "all you can eat" buffets near shopping malls for 25 years and that her intention was to study abroad and return home to help him manage the business.

Aligned with the parents' occupations, the average reported family income is notably high. Specifically, 43% of fathers and 20% of mothers disclosed earning an annual income exceeding £70,000 each, double the UK's median annual salary of £34,963 in 2023 (Office for National Statistics, 2023). To provide additional context, I investigated median salaries in the Eurozone and China, given that many families reside in these regions. The findings revealed that this trend holds true in those areas as well, where the median annual salary in 2022 was £22,230 and £38,076, respectively (Euronews, 2023; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023). On the other end, only 10% of fathers and 20% of mothers reported earning less than £49,999 annually. Despite the privileged economic situation that these families seem to have, there is a clear gap among male and female income levels. Thirty-five per cent of mothers either did not participate in paid employment or earned less than £30,000 annually, which appears to be a considerably high percentage compared to the 12% (6) of fathers facing similar circumstances. This disparity likely arises from gender-based inequalities and traditional familial roles often assigned to mothers, which include unpaid caregiving responsibilities (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2015). The gender pay-gap remains a notable issue in the UK, with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) data indicating a 7.5% gap among full-time employees in 2023, and a 2024 report showing female FTSE 100 board members earning 69% less than their male counterparts (The Times, 2024).

5.2.5. Family's social and cultural background

I inquired about participants' habits to determine if they were raised in families that valued social networks and culture in its broadest sense. To do this, I asked questions about their reading habits when growing up and now, musical instrument proficiency, and common topics of conversation during social gatherings, such as discussions about books, movies, or politics,

among other topics. I asked about the frequency of their visits to museums, art exhibitions, cinema, ballet, opera, or concerts within the past three years. Specifying the frequency and time frame aimed to differentiate between participants who occasionally visited these venues and those who did so regularly and recently. Since this thesis focuses on the accumulation of economic, social, and cultural capital, these findings are relevant to understand whether the social and cultural opportunities of studying in London were considered to choose their studies location, how they value social and cultural capital, and if this appreciation is related to their family background or developed during their studies.

Findings revealed that all participants were exposed to high culture from a young age. This exposure came through various means, such as traveling to culturally significant locations or learning about art, music, literature, and other cultural forms. These experiences were facilitated by their parents, who played a crucial role in introducing them to these cultural elements. Cultural exposure varied by country of origin; for instance, participants from France or Italy often accessed local museums, while those from Dubai or Ghana had limited local museum access but experienced culture abroad through travel. This aligns with a broad definition of culture, which includes reading, watching movies, traveling, meeting people from diverse backgrounds, and being exposed to different environments and ideas. **Figure 5.9** shows the most frequent cultural activities among participants: watching movies in cinemas and visiting museums, while activities like attending the opera or concerts were less favoured. This reflects insights from Filmgrail (2024), Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (n.d.), and Paste Magazine (2017), which highlight that cinemas and museums significantly engage individuals aged 18–34, whereas opera does not. Most participants were not involved with music in any way and most of them enjoyed conversations about movies and politics.

Q 45 How often do you do the following things in the past 1-3 years?

#	Field	A great deal	A lot	A moderate amount	A little	None at all	Prefer not to say	Total
1	Visited a museum or an art exhibition	13.73% 7	11.76% 6	41.18% 21	25.49% 13	7.84% 4	0.00% 0	51
2	Watched a movie at the cinema	21.57% 11	27.45% 14	23.53% 12	23.53% 12	3.92% 2	0.00% 0	51
3	Visited an opera, ballet or classic concert	3.92% 2	5.88% 3	27.45% 14	27.45% 14	35.29% 18	0.00% 0	51
4	Been to the theatre	7.84% 4	5.88% 3	25.49% 13	37.25% 19	23.53% 12	0.00% 0	51
5	Went to a rock or pop concert	7.84% 4	5.88% 3	25.49% 13	15.69% 8	45.10% 23	0.00% 0	51

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Figure 5.9: Participants cultural preferences (Survey question 45)

The way that social and cultural capital was recognised varied from individual to individual, with no two answers being the same. However, there was a common pattern in their responses: all participants appreciated diversity, meeting friends from different cultures, experiencing new things, and exploring the city in various ways, whether through visiting museums or going to pubs with friends. Many acknowledged that the friendships and contacts made during their studies helped them develop soft skills (e.g., communication and empathy), improved their resources, and ultimately contributed to the development of social, cultural, and economic capital over time. Interestingly, their background and country of origin shaped their understanding of social and cultural capital. As an example, participants from countries where walking was uncommon due to safety or driving habits saw city exploration and admiring architecture as cultural capital which indicates that individuals past habits may shape how they adapt to a new environment, as they carry preferences that influence their interactions and

behaviours in the new setting. This aligns with Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) in which participants' prior experiences influence how they engage with their new environment and recognize cultural capital; while individuals may acquire new forms of capital, their pre-existing habitus continues to shape how they adapt to new cultural and social settings.

Other participants considered that cultural capital was immersing themselves in diverse cultural exchanges through networking with students from other countries; this will be further explored in chapter 8. One clear outcome of this analysis is that participants didn't seem to differentiate among social and cultural capital considering that spending time with a diverse group of students provided them with social and cultural capital as they were socializing and learning from different cultures at the same time. Most participants didn't limit cultural capital to activities around museums, art, music, or other traditional types of culture considering that meeting people from other cultures and spending time with them was an amazing cultural and social experience. Louis, a male student from France, shared that spending time with other international students was a valuable cultural experience for him. Whether socialising at bars or gathering in each other's homes, he felt that these interactions enriched his understanding of different cultures. During his time in England, he gained valuable insights into various countries simply by engaging with peers from diverse backgrounds. This reflects his broad appreciation of cultural capital, which also appears to be closely linked to social capital

"Walking around and exploring the city was cultural enough. I liked looking at the buildings and soaking in the city energy." Sebastian (male, Germany).

"Prague is very cultural, and I didn't feel the need to visit museums or theatres, I didn't have interest. I mostly enjoyed meeting people from difference places but where these encounters happened was less relevant to me. Jan (male, Chez Republic)

5.3. What influenced their decision to study in the UK?

Literature indicates that welcoming migratory laws and the UK higher education reputation are the main drivers that lead international students to choose the UK over other countries (Brooks and Waters, 2011; OECD, 2022; International students in UK higher education, 2023; QS World University Rankings, 2025).

5.3.1. Welcoming migratory laws.

The 'Graduate route' made available to international students in July 2021 allowed them to remain in the UK for two years after completion of their master programme regardless of having employment (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018; Migration Observatory, 2024). This clearly supported the decision of studying in the UK for many students, especially for those coming from countries with weaker working and living conditions who saw studying in the UK as a mean to increase their profile and open the door to work in in the country after graduation. Xiao (female, China) indicated that studying in London paved the way for lucrative employment opportunities in the UK which enhanced her prospects upon returning home in China. All participants in this thesis coming from Latin America, Africa or India shared their intention to remain in the UK after their studies: *"I didn't know what was going to happen. I moved with my wife and children from Latin America to London, initially to stay for 2 years. Now we want to stay for good. I wanted to be transferred with my company to London but needed a UK University degree to be taken seriously at work." Diego (male, Chile).*

The Graduate route remains active, however, the rules implemented in 2024 and 2025 prohibiting most graduate students from bringing their relatives to the UK, requiring them to demonstrate having the financial means to study in the UK and having to finish their studies before obtaining a job offer (GOV.UK, n.d.) could deter prospective students and result in a decline in enrolment numbers (Home Office, 2024).

5.3.2. The UK higher education reputation.

Higher ranked universities are perceived as high quality by students, their parents and employers, attracting students from all over the world. Research by Marginson (2006) demonstrated that global university rankings serve as a proxy for educational quality, making highly ranked institutions more attractive to international students and employers. This is especially relevant for China, where graduates with degrees from global highly ranked universities are usually offered better employment opportunities back home (CGTN, 2024). In the UK, Chinese students made up the largest group of international students during the 2021/2022 academic year, accounting for 22.3% of the total. Similarly, in this study, 29% of the 91 survey respondents identified China as their country of birth.

Several UK universities consistently rank in the top 50 of the QS World University Rankings and Times Higher Education Rankings. The 2025 QS report lists 4 UK universities in the top 10, with university A maintaining a top 10 position for 12 consecutive years (QS World University Rankings, 2025). Marco (male, Italy) told me that "This is no magic, the higher ranked the university is, the more opportunities come with it." Interviews provided additional insights into why international students prefer studying in the UK over other countries. Wei (male, China) mentioned that studying in the UK was the best decision he had ever made as he had various job offers in England and in China right before graduating. He said that employers in China open their doors when they see highly ranked UK universities in a candidate curriculum vitae (CV). Mei (female, China) confirmed that the degree obtained in London helped her secure her current job in China, mostly thanks to having international experience and to the university reputation.

"I studied at Cardiff my undergraduate degree and had to send hundreds of applications to get an interview. After graduating from "university A", just the credential of having this name in your CV opened doors to jobs. I received invitations to interviews the first week of applications, massive difference with my undergraduate experience." – Hans (male, Germany).

I gathered 37 responses from 20 interviews about their key motivations for studying in the UK. The reputation of UK higher education and the high rankings of specific universities were significant draws, alongside the appeal of London as a diverse and globally connected city. Even those that had studied elsewhere in the UK expressed a desire for the unique experience London offers and were interested in seeking employment opportunities in the city post-graduation *"I wanted to go to London, I had been backpacking in Europe and just loved London."* – Priya (female, India). Nadia (female, Egypt) told me that she applied to a few universities, all in London, because she wanted "to be in the place where things happen".

English as the language of instruction and straightforward admissions processes, often without entry exams or work experience requirements, also made the UK an attractive option for most interviewees. This was evidenced by Graddol (2006) and Wilkins and Huisman (2011) who

emphasized the global dominance of English in higher education and its role in attracting students to English-speaking countries and the simplicity in application processes respectively.

Practical factors further reinforced this choice. Tuition fees, while comparable to the USA, were seen as offering higher value due to perceived better quality. Brooks and Waters (2011) indicated that "students perceive UK education as offering better value for money compared to the USA due to shorter programme durations and a strong reputation for quality education". The parents of the participants in this thesis also viewed the UK as safer, citing the absence of guns and fewer drugs, while recommendations from alumni friends and family provided additional reassurance.

5.4. What were participants academic expectations and realities?

Most participants had high expectations regarding the quality of education in the UK, their learning experience, meeting new people from diverse backgrounds, and finishing their studies well prepared to secure employment immediately after graduation. The interviews confirmed that the main fear for those that had previously studied at lower-ranked universities either in the UK or abroad was not meeting the expected academic level and being unable to keep up. Their anxiety stemmed from believing that only the "best of the best" were accepted into highly ranked universities, which led them to anticipate a very high academic standard: *"I expected to find very smart and educated people that was missing in my undergraduate studies in the UK." – Marco (male, Italy).*

"I thought I was going to meet the best of the best." – Diego (male, Chile)

"I was nervous as I expected a high academic level." – Ethan (male, USA)

5.4.1. Academic Experience

Most participants described their academic experience as positive, meeting their expectations in terms of rigour. However, many admitted that the workload was manageable and that their initial fears were unfounded, as they observed a diverse mix of top-performing and average students within their cohorts. This feeling was shared by most interviewees; Maria (female, Mexico) was explicit about it, she told me that she should not have been scared as her university in Mexico was stricter and gave them a heavier workload. Participants mentioned that faculty recognized this variation in academic backgrounds and skill levels, which resulted in a more gradual and inclusive teaching approach to accommodate the majority. As an example, Aisha (female, UAE) mentioned that lecturers were very good, and class dynamics allowed her to focus and understand business concepts for the first time.

One of the main outcomes of this research was the recognition that the learning experience in the UK is more pragmatic, applied, and fluid compared to educational systems in other countries. This was recognised by Phillipe (male, Monaco) who enjoyed making presentations to a professional audience in some modules. He also mentioned that having diverse colleagues increased his learning experience. Participants appreciated the emphasis on team-based coursework alongside exams, rather than relying solely on exam-based assessments as in China or the USA. This approach allowed them to collaborate with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, which was itself a valuable learning experience. Ethan (male, USA) said "I enjoyed it a lot that it was team-based. I got very close to my colleagues and enjoyed every

aspect of teamwork. As an American, I expected more tests, but it was more presentation and project-based, which I loved."

Participants appreciated the approachability of faculty and smaller class sizes at the graduate level compared to their undergraduate studies. Most felt comfortable engaging with professors and building open relationships. However, cultural differences influenced this experience, with students from traditional backgrounds, such as China, being more hesitant to approach faculty, finding the openness less familiar.

5.5. Chapter summary

This chapter presents findings in three areas: international students' backgrounds, reasons for choosing the UK for their studies, and their academic experiences.

5.5.1. Most international students come from similar socio-economic backgrounds.

Most participants come from affluent socio-economic backgrounds, reflected in the educational and occupational profiles of their parents and siblings. They believed in education, had a positive view of studying abroad and possessed the means to finance these studies. Their privileged status aligns with Bourdieu's theory of intergenerational transfer of capital, where studying abroad further enhances their position through the development of goodwill and power (Bourdieu, 1986). Regardless of the similarities in their socio-economic background, students from developing or conflict-ridden countries valued the freedom, safety, and cultural openness they experienced in London, which they saw as a transformative form of cultural capital. In contrast, participants from safer, developed countries focused on meeting diverse people, improving their English level, and exploring culinary traditions, expanding their understanding of capital. These experiences align with Bourdieu's concepts of embodied and institutionalized cultural capital, as families exposed students to diverse cultural experiences early on, enabling them to navigate new environments and further develop their social and cultural capital during their studies in the UK (Bourdieu, 1984).

5.5.2. Four main reasons that explain why international students choose to study in the UK.

Four main reasons emerged for choosing the UK as a study destination. First, the high rankings and global reputation of UK universities appealed to students worldwide. Second, studying abroad was seen to improve life prospects for students from developing and developed nations who shared similar objectives: obtaining better career and financial outcomes. Third, the UK's migratory laws, allowing graduates to work for two years post-study, was a strong incentive, whether for gaining experience or pursuing long-term residency. Finally, the UK's open environment, emphasizing freedom, safety, and its positive diplomatic image, made it an attractive alternative to countries like the US or Australia.

5.5.3. The role of critical thinking and teamwork shape international students' academic journey in the UK.

Reflecting on their experiences, they regarded the education as high-quality and appreciated the pragmatic teaching approach, which emphasized teamwork, projects, presentations and exams. While each participant had a different academic experience, the one commonality

among them was that the teaching style was different to the one in their home country allowing them to apply critical thinking and work in diverse teams.

Chapter 6 will explore participants' expectations and experiences regarding economic capital and employment, while Chapters 7 and 8 will provide an in-depth analysis of social and cultural capital respectively.

Chapter 6: Expectations and Reality about Economic Capital and Employment

6.1. Introduction

6.1.1. Why are employment and income-related outcomes relevant?

When I began this thesis, I was surprised to find that a vast amount of the literature on students' outcomes focuses on employment and income (Wilkins et al., 2011: Bodycott & Lai, 2012) with social and cultural outcomes receiving relatively little attention. Tight (2023) emphasized its significance by pointing out that a "Scopus search conducted on 14 March 2023 revealed 2,731 articles featuring the terms *'employability'*, *'higher'*, and *'education'* in their titles, abstracts, or keywords". This vast collection of research highlights the increasing academic and policy focus on employability and its influence on shaping higher education curricula and graduate prospects.

After conducting surveys and interviews, I observed that this was also prioritised by male and female students. All participants, regardless of gender, aimed to increase their economic capital over social and cultural capital. Survey results show that 93% of men and 79% of women consider having good financial outcomes to be extremely or very important, compared to 66% and 14% of participants thinking about social and cultural outcomes being very important, respectively. Brooks, Gupta, and Jayadeva (2021) investigated higher education students' aspirations for life after university through focus groups conducted across six countries. Their findings coincide with the ones in this thesis: career progression was the most frequently discussed aspiration among participants' "for many of our participants, securing a "good" job was a key objective of their time within HE".

6.1.2. What is the Aim of this Chapter?

The broad objective of this chapter is to determine whether studying abroad has a positive impact on participants' accumulation of economic capital. As all participants in this thesis come from high socio-economic backgrounds, already possessing economic capital before their studies began; this chapter aims to understand if students were able to secure relevant paid employment after graduation that further contributed to the accumulation of additional economic capital (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014), and if they believe their studies in the UK played a role in securing this role. To achieve this, I explored and compared participants' retrospective views on their perceptions of employment and income before starting their studies with their actual experiences post-graduation and in present time. I asked questions about if students stayed in the UK or left the country after graduation and whether they continued studying, looked for jobs, or pursued other destinations. Other questions focused on the time required to find employment and whether their first job after graduation and professional career align with their interests and objectives. Additionally, I inquired if they felt accomplished with their careers and income at present time to understand how their economic capital evolved over time.

Why is This Relevant?

Employability is a crucial yet loosely defined concept in higher education, with no clear proof that universities' efforts truly enhance graduates' career prospects (Tight, 2023). While institutions align curricula with industry needs, their impact remains uncertain. Engaging students directly can offer valuable insights into what employability means to them and how

their education can better prepare them for the job market. Understanding students' perspectives on employment and financial outcomes could help universities in three key areas: (1) aligning and updating curricula to match industry demands, (2) developing other forms of capital, such as social and cultural, to improve job opportunities, and (3) fostering long-term relationships with alumni and employers to create stronger career pathways.

As an example, to enhance graduates' job prospects, my university included AI-focused modules in a master's in finance, reflecting its growing importance in the field. By integrating AI, the programme expected to meet industry demands and boost graduate employability. Creating opportunities for international students to build social and cultural capital could improve employability and earning potential. Networking events, company visits, and guest lectures connect students with employers in relaxed settings, often leading to job opportunities. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital emphasizes the value of meaningful social connections over mere quantity, aligning with these efforts. Lastly, sustaining ties with alumni may foster university-employer collaboration, helping identify needed skills, create job pipelines, and enable knowledge sharing through internships and research partnerships.

This chapter directly addresses research question 2, which explores how studying abroad affects students' development of economic capital and is divided into the following sub-themes: What were students' expectations regarding employment and income before their studies? What is students' reality? Looking back, how accomplished do they feel in present time? Do they feel their studies in the UK contributed to their employment prospects and the accumulation of economic capital?

6.2. What were students' expectations regarding employment and income before their studies?

6.2.1. Finding paid employment

For participants, achieving good economic outcomes meant securing a relevant job after graduation that provided favourable financial returns. They were optimistic about their employment prospects with 64% of men and 36% of women believing that they could secure a job within six months of graduation. More than half of the participants preferred to find the "right job," even if it required months of searching, rather than quickly starting in a role that did not interest them. This preference relates with their socio-economic background, as they were supported by their families and did not feel the immediate need to work, reinforcing the idea that studying abroad aims to secure a "good job" and not just any job. The only limitation was their migratory status as they had limited time after graduation to transfer the student to a work visa.

In terms of location, 53% of participants anticipated returning to their home country, expecting to be highly valued by local employers due to their international experience and a perceived higher academic level when studied in the UK, giving them a competitive advantage over those who studied a master's degree at home. Ama (female, Ghana) planned *"to study and work abroad, gain knowledge and return home to manage the family business"*. Thirty-seven per cent of participants wanted to find a job in the UK, with both men and women having similar expectations of remaining in the country. Hans (male, Germany) thought that studying in England would open access to employment opportunities in London and it did as he found a

job and is currently living in the UK. Seventy-four per cent of women indicated that they wanted to find a job in their home country compared to 67% of men. Survey results indicated that women were less inclined towards mobility, primarily considering two options: returning home or staying in the UK after their studies, with a tendency to return home to be close to their parents. In contrast, male students appeared more open to mobility, willing to work in a different country if the right opportunity arose.

6.2.2. Income expectations

To understand participants' income expectations, I provided them with potential income brackets, with the lowest being less than £30,000 and the highest more than £150,000 a year. Findings indicate that most participants had moderate to high expectations, with the majority expecting to earn in between £30,000 and £49,999 per year right after graduation. Their income expectations were definitively optimistic if compared with £30,316, the average pre-tax salary in the UK across all industry sectors for 22 to 29 years old (Forbes, 2024). It is striking that students had such high-income expectations despite most having no previous work experience and being uncertain about the types of jobs they would find after graduation, lacking any reference for salaries. As a personal tutor, I recall guiding international students through potential employment outcomes and helping them determine whether they should pursue front-office client-facing roles or back-office positions based on their personalities. They clearly had limited understanding about the job market, potential salaries and how their skills and knowledge would be valued by employers.

This lack of experience and knowledge about salaries affected all participants equally. However, when the data was broken down by gender, it revealed that female students anticipated lower salaries than their male counterparts, a trend that was common among female students across countries and cultures. Nearly twice as many women (84%) as men (47%) anticipated earning less than £39,999 per year. On the higher end, only 16% of females expected to earn between £40,000 and £150,000, compared to 53% of male students. Considering that both female and male students came from similar socio-economic backgrounds and had the same opportunity to study abroad, it is notable that females expected to earn less after graduation. This disparity could be attributed to females being more realistic about actual wages, prevailing gender stereotypes, or a pragmatic awareness of the gender pay gap that exists in many countries worldwide and that was evidenced in Chapter 5. Later in this chapter, I will examine participants' economic outcomes in greater detail and further explore how female and male students differ in their realities regarding employment and income.

6.3. What is students' reality regarding employment and income? Looking back, how accomplished do they feel in present time?

6.3.1. Employment outcomes after graduation and today

<u>Where did students go after graduation?</u>

More than 50% of the participants preferred to work in the UK after graduation if they had the opportunity to do so but explored job opportunities in different countries, ultimately choosing the best option for themselves, even if it meant forfeiting the chance to remain in the UK after graduation.

The reality is that two-thirds of participants left the UK the same year their studies concluded. The primary reason for this departure was the inability to secure paid employment in the UK post-graduation, with Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic significantly influencing this decision. During Brexit, many employers implemented a hiring freeze (Bloomberg, 2024) until it became clearer how regulatory changes would affect the process of hiring of European employees. At least two interviewees confirmed that their previously signed contracts with companies in London were cancelled before they could start working due to changes in immigration laws related to Brexit. Phillipe (male, Monaco) was not allowed into the UK after taking a short break to travel to his home country after graduation: *"I wanted to stay in the UK to work after graduation. Brexit happened and as I left the UK for to visit my country, Monaco, a few days before starting to work in London, an officer at the border put a stamp in my passport and I could not return. I could not go back to England. The problem with the border was solved after a year but I had lost trust in the system and decided to stay in Monaco."*

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the 305 students graduating in 2020 and 2021. Those graduating in 2020 (111 students) attended classes on campus until February, after which they were sent home to complete the remainder of their program online and unable to return to the UK to seek employment post-graduation due to travel restrictions. Jan (male, Chez Republic) told me that his offer from Credit Suisse to start working on the summer of 2020 was cancelled due to COVID19, which led him to start working as a financial analyst in 2021 in Prague. The same happened to Louis (male, France), he wanted to work in asset management in London, but Julius Bear cancelled his work contract due to the COVID19 pandemic.

The 194 students graduating in 2021 completed their entire program online from their home countries, with many never traveling to the UK at all. This significantly impacted their overall experience and outcomes, including finding employment opportunities in the UK. This is particularly relevant to this thesis as 58% of survey respondents graduated in 2020 and 2021 and were significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. *"I left before graduation due to COVID-19." (survey). "Never been there." (survey). "I did not go to the UK because of the pandemic." (survey).* One exception was Xiao (female, China), who travelled to London during the pandemic to seek paid employment: *"My entire programme was online. I started my studies in China and moved to England early 2022 to look for jobs. It took me 3 weeks to arrive to London due to travel restrictions. Once in London, I was able to secure a job to start in September. I was not going to let my right to work in the UK expire because of the pandemic".* Xiao's choice was entirely self-motivated, driven by her determination to study in London despite the pandemic receiving no support from the university to find this job.

Did they find a relevant job?

Findings indicate that six months after graduation, 80% of male and 74% of female students were working, either in the UK or abroad. Fewer females reported finding employment compared to males because many returned to their home countries to work in the family businesses, which they did not consider as "employment" but rather as helping their families, despite receiving pay. Another factor influencing the results was that part-time students were not actively seeking new employment opportunities, as they were already employed during their studies. Among those actively seeking jobs, 63% secured paid employment within six months of graduation. This was also evidenced by the Graduate Outcomes survey (2023) for the 2021/22 cohort, which confirmed that 61% of respondents was in full-time employment 15 months post-graduation, reflecting a relatively strong employment rate. Overall, employment

outcomes are highly positive, with most participants finding relevant positions shortly after graduation, and some successfully securing jobs in the UK. When asked about the quality of their roles, many participants reported obtaining interesting and/or well-paid positions.

<u>What types of jobs did they secure after graduation and how do they currently feel about their professional outcomes?</u>

Most participants felt happy and accomplished with their current employment, sharing positive comments about the nature of their jobs and their compensation. The interviews revealed that many of them are working in global companies in areas related to their management studies such as consulting, finance, and banking. I observed that the three main factors that impacted their job search and outcomes were the macro-economic situation in the UK at the time of graduation, their age and therefore having previous work experience and the time elapsed since graduation.

The economic and political climate in the UK, including Brexit and COVID-19, significantly impacted these students' ability to secure employment, as the limited time to transition from a student to a work visa forced many to leave shortly after graduation. Mature students who had previous work experience reported greater success, holding responsible positions and seeing steady growth in economic capital through promotions, job changes, and improved conditions. In addition, survey results suggested that students who graduated five years ago perceived their financial, social, employability, and cultural outcomes higher compared to more recent graduates, with a noticeable decline among those who graduated in 2020. This trend may reflect the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as students faced fewer opportunities to work, socialize, and experience a normal life during the pandemic. Lukas (male, Germany) shared, "I feel accomplished, happy, and believe I am in the place I wanted to be. I wanted to work as a trader, and I became one; the learning curve since graduation has been very steep." Marco (male, Italy) noted, "I have worked at NatWest for 3 years... the opportunities have been incredible, and I feel very satisfied with my progression at work." Xiao (female, China) added, "I was promoted several times, increasing my compensation. Working in London in a Big 4 gave me stability and opened doors to corporate work. I am now ready to return to China."

On the negative side, several participants expressed dissatisfaction with their jobs, citing poor work-life balance, average salaries, limited responsibilities, and challenges in finding better roles. Visa-related restrictions and economic or political conditions in the UK, such as immigration laws and uncertainty, further hindered career progression. Survey responses highlighted these frustrations: "Too much work to do, poor work-life balance," and "Extremely stressful… the hours and responsibilities are difficult to manage." Others expressed disappointment with their roles: "Wasn't the job I expected," "Not too satisfied compared to my academic qualification," and "Dull, looking for a change now 2.5 years after graduation." These challenges reflect some of the difficulties graduates face in the UK job market. Research suggests that while graduates are finding employment, the quality of these jobs and the associated satisfaction may not meet expectations, highlighting the need for a closer examination of the current state of the graduate labour market in the UK. StandOut CV (2023) publication revealed that UK graduates reported a lower life satisfaction score (6.7) compared to their typical age group (6.9), suggesting that employment does not always equate to personal fulfilment.

Overall, most participants reported being satisfied with their current jobs, citing meaningful achievements, ample learning opportunities, career advancement, and engaging work. Many

described their roles as challenging yet fulfilling, with survey responses reflecting this positivity: "Interesting, challenging, well-paid, with potential," and "I think I eventually got the job I wanted." Other participants shared similar enthusiasm: "I love it and am very satisfied with it. I work for VF Corp. (one of the biggest retail conglomerates in the world) in finance… they offer many benefits and an excellent career plan." One participant highlighted their leadership role: "Challenging, full of opportunities. I am the Managing Director of one of the subsidiaries of a Big Mining Company," while others expressed alignment with their aspirations: "What I aspired to do," "I love my job," and "Satisfactory and interesting job that better links my professional knowledge to the real world." These responses underline the overall success and satisfaction many participants found in their careers.

6.3.2. Income outcomes after graduation and today

Participants were optimistic about their potential income after graduation, believing that their studies would enable them to secure well-compensated jobs. Expectations were surpassed, as only 8% of participants anticipated earning more than £70,000 annually, while 23% achieved this level of income, indicating substantial progress over time. Findings revealed a clear upward trend in participants' earnings. At the time of the survey, 60% of participants reported an increase of 20% or more in their annual income since graduation.

Table 6.9 illustrates the evolution of participants' income from their expectations to their actual earnings, demonstrating notable progress for many. It is important to note that 38% of participants earned less than £30,000 at the time of the survey, likely because more than half the sample (58%) completed their studies in 2020 and 2021, entering a weaker job market post-COVID-19, and currently working in entry-level positions or internships.

Income Range	Expected income before studies (Q1)	Real income after Graduation (Q15)	Income Today (Q16)
< £30,000	24 (29%)	29 (45%)	24 (38%)
£30,001 - £49,999	44 (52%)	18 (28%)	10 (16%)
£50,000 - £69,999	9 (11%)	6 (9%)	7 (11%)
£70,000 - £99,999	3 (4%)	1 (2%)	7 (11%)
£100,000 - £150,000	3 (4%)	2 (3%)	7 (11%)
> £150,001	-	-	1 (1%)
Didn't earn anything	-	2 (3%)	7 (11%)
Other (cannot calculate income due to currency disparities or lack of information)	-	9 (10%)	1 (1%)
TOTAL	83 (100%)	67 (100%)	64 (100%)

Table 6.9: Participants' income expectations and realities (compilation of responses from survey questions 1, 15 and 16)

6.3.2.1. Gender Gap

Eighty-four per cent (84%) of female participants expected to earn less than £39,999 a year, compared to 47% of male students. On the positive side, their current income ended up being

higher than expected with 58% earning less than £39,999 compared to the expected 84%, but, unfortunately, findings revealed the existence of a gender gap. **Table 6.10** shows that 58% of female participants earn less than £30,000 annually, compared to 27% of male participants. This disparity is also evident among higher earners, with only 10% of females earning more than £40,000 a year, compared to 40% of males in this income range.

Response	Female	Male
100,000-150,000		7%
70,000-99,999		3%
50,000-69,999	5%	17%
40,000-49,999	5%	13%
30,000-39,999	21%	20%
I didn't earn any income when I first started working		3%
Less than 30,000	58%	27%
Other	11%	10%
Total	100%	100%

Table 6.10: Income reality by gender (at the time of the survey)

6.4. Do participants think that their studies in the UK helped them find a relevant job?

Most participants agreed that studying in the UK helped them secure relevant employment after graduation, with the university career services, such as CV workshops and mock interviews, playing a key role. While many found these services helpful, some credited specific professors and the university's high ranking for opening doors to employers. Lukas (male, Germany) noted that a professor's guidance was instrumental in preparing him for the interview that secured his job. Participants shared examples of the impact of their studies in the UK. Louis (male, France) said, "I joined a consulting firm thanks to a friend from university who introduced me to the hiring manager", while Maria (female, Mexico) highlighted alumni connections: "I got my current job in consulting because the people who interviewed me were university A alumni". Others emphasized soft skills gained during their studies: "The public speaking opportunities and career support helped me feel confident in interviews and create a professional CV" said Nadia (female, Egypt). The programme's strong reputation was also a deciding factor, Xiao (female, China) indicated: "The University A degree helped me get my first job after graduation, mostly thanks to the university reputation". However, participants seeking employment in the USA, Latin America, and Arab countries found their studies in the UK less impactful in their home regions, limiting its influence on job opportunities.

6.5. Chapter Summary

This chapter explored how studying in the UK impacts international students' ability to secure relevant, well-paid employment and how they perceive their studies have contributed to their economic capital over time. It examines participants' post-graduation activities, comparing their employment and income expectations before studies, retrospectively, with their actual experiences, and evaluates their sense of career and income satisfaction. This chapter focuses on two key findings: studying in the UK builds economic capital across genders and cultures, but a gender gap in economic outcomes persists.

6.5.1. Studying in the UK Contributes to Building Economic Capital Regardless of Gender and Cultural Differences

Most participants expressed a sense of accomplishment and happiness with their current jobs, citing positive aspects of their roles, compensation, and the contribution of their studies to their economic capital. Many secured relevant jobs within six months of graduation, with those working during their studies gaining increased responsibilities and promotions soon after. Participants credited their studies in the UK for enhancing their employability, particularly through soft skills development that improved their interview performance and workplace interactions. The university's high ranking also played a key role in opening doors to more interviews and job opportunities. Financial outcomes were generally positive, with many earning above the UK average for their age group as compared with the earnings published by Forbes (2024), and having actual income often exceeding expectations. Time emerged as an important factor, as those who graduated earlier reported greater career advancements and better employment conditions. This is in line with NAFSA (2021) studies which indicate that studying abroad can improve employability and early-career wages due to the acquisition of marketable skills and global experiences with employers favouring candidates with international education exposure.

On the downside, finding work in London was challenging due to political and economic uncertainties between 2015 and 2021, especially because of macro-economic events such as Brexit and the COVID19 pandemic, and the impossibility to transfer their student to a work visa without a proper job offer leading to many graduates leaving the UK for opportunities abroad.

6.5.2. The gender gap is real.

Income-related outcomes were largely positive, with reality surpassing expectations for both genders. Notably, 23% of participants reported earning over £70,000 annually, compared to just 8% who anticipated this. Many participants highlighted consistent job promotions and salary growth since graduation.

However, a significant gender gap persists. While 58% of female participants earn less than £30,000 annually, only 27% of males fall into this category. This gap appears more influenced by cultural norms in participants' home countries than by the UK itself. Cultural norms in traditional societies significantly influence women's educational and career trajectories, with some cultures prioritizing higher education for enhancing domestic roles over professional ambitions (Cambridge University Press, 2021). Research shows that in certain societies, educated women are expected to use their knowledge within the household, supporting their families rather than pursuing external employment (Dergipark, 2020). These expectations often result in women being sent abroad for education to enhance their status as future wives rather than as career professionals (Cambridge University Press, 2021). This said and regardless of cultural norms, a persistent gender pay gap has existed among management programme graduates since 2019 in the UK with women consistently earning less than their male counterparts, highlighting systemic inequalities (Financial Times, 2023). Recognising these challenges, UK universities could support female students in building confidence to challenge gender disparities and negotiate better opportunities during job interviews.

Chapter 7: Expectations and Reality about Social Capital

7.1. Introduction

7.1.1. Why are social outcomes relevant?

Bourdieu (1986) indicated that social capital is not only about making friends, but it also enhances economic capital by unlocking access to resources and opportunities through networks. While participants in this study primarily viewed social capital as creating supportive friendships rather than strategic networking, its impact was profound, boosting well-being, resilience, and career growth. On the negative side, students from traditional cultures faced unique challenges in forming connections while in the UK, often experiencing isolation and mental health struggles (Myburg, Niehaus, and Poggenpoel, 2002), underscoring the essential role of social capital in shaping positive experiences and driving economic and professional success. Understanding students' perceptions of social capital and their ability to build networks is essential for supporting them during their studies in the UK as helping them adapt to a new social environment can improve their study experience and foster long-term benefits, such as alumni collaboration and the development of a more inclusive, global community (Sharma & Jung, 1985; Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010; Hsu, 2011).

7.1.2. What is the Aim of this Chapter?

The primary objective of this chapter is to understand if and how international students form social connections during their studies and whether these networks enhanced their social capital over time. To achieve this, I analysed and compared participants' retrospective social expectations prior to arrival with their actual experiences and the evolution of their social networks over time since graduation. I inquired whether they still maintain friendships made during their studies abroad to understand the role that time played in network-building and evaluated the usefulness of these connections. This chapter directly addresses research question 2, which explores how studying abroad affects students' development of social capital.

<u>Why is This Relevant?</u>

As discussed in sub-chapter 2.6, many international students face homesickness, disorientation, and unhappiness while adapting to a new educational system, especially those studying abroad for the first time or from vastly different cultures. Support from domestic students is often limited, with evidence showing that domestic students rarely engage with international peers, leaving the latter to form networks primarily with other international students from similar backgrounds (Huang, 2008; Medved et al., 2013). University support systems are often reactive, requiring students to identify and report issues, which can leave many without help for months, affecting their health, social engagement, and academic success.

Understanding students' perspectives on social outcomes can help universities in three ways: fostering integration between domestic and international students at the start of their studies, organizing events to promote networking, and maintaining engagement post-graduation to build strong, global alumni networks. These efforts aim to create a community where all students feel connected, fostering lasting ties with peers, the university, and their home

countries linking with Bourdieu (1986) ideas about social capital potential to build goodwill and positions of power, enhancing other forms of capital.

This chapter explores the following sub-themes: students' expectations and experiences of making friends and networking before and during their studies in the UK, the value and sustainability of these relationships over time, and the challenges universities in the UK face in helping international students build social capital. A Bourdieusian approach is applied, acknowledging how family socio-economic background shapes students' ability to form connections.

7.2. Retrospectively, what were students' experiences before and during their studies in terms of making friends and networking?

7.2.1. Students' previous social capital and expectations

As discussed in Chapter 5, all students in this study grew up in families that provided them with various forms of capital. Many participants described having socially active childhoods, being involved in diverse activities, travelling frequently, and engaging in their parents' networks. By the time they arrived in London, they were prepared to embrace diversity and form new friendships, having learned the value of relationships early on. During the interviews, most participants recalled being excited about meeting new people, aware of their university's international environment and London's diversity. Philippe (male, Monaco) expressed a desire to meet people from different countries and gain an international perspective, while Ama (female, Ghana) aimed to build a global network and learn from other cultures: "I wanted to meet a diverse group of new people and have a network in many countries around the world." Only two participants cited social outcomes as a primary goal of their postgraduate studies, with most considering friendship and networking as natural outcomes. Despite the existence of evidence showing that engaging with the university community significantly impacts professional development (Das & Jensen, 2008; Steele et al., 2016), participants focus was enhancing their academic profiles. Notably, 36% of survey respondents studied entirely remotely during 2020/2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions, including Chinese students, the largest group in this thesis, who faced strict lockdowns. These students had minimal expectations of social outcomes, unable to attend campus or interact with peers, faculty, or staff.

7.2.2. What happened during their studies?

An important finding is that all participants who studied in England, in person, fondly remembered their social lives during their studies and maintained those relationships over time, as confirmed through surveys and interviews. In the survey, 77% (46 participants) rated their social outcomes as good or excellent, while 23% rated them as average to terrible. The latter group consisted of those who studied during lockdown and were unable to meet anyone. During interviews, participants often smiled when discussing the friendships they formed, with most describing these relationships as the highlight of their time in the UK. The exception, both in the survey and interviews, were those who studied remotely during COVID-19, as they lacked opportunities to build new connections.

Easiness to make friends

Interviews revealed that most participants found it easy to make friends during their studies in the UK, bonding over shared experiences as international students. Starting their programs without knowing anyone and having no family nearby encouraged them to spend time together during weekdays and weekends, fostering lasting friendships. Group projects played a key role, helping them connect with peers they might not have approached otherwise, and these collaborations often extended to social activities like going to pubs, where they shared lively conversations and stories about their home countries. Despite cultural differences, their similar socio-economic backgrounds and mutual value for social connections created a strong sense of camaraderie. Marco (male, Italy) reflected, "I met very smart, diligent people, friends for life. I made new friends and keep in touch. I even went to a colleague's wedding in Ecuador. I have a group of 12-15 friends; we stay connected on WhatsApp and travel together. Six are in London, and the rest are all over." Ethan (male, USA) added. "I got very close to my colleagues and enjoyed every aspect of teamwork that allowed me to spend time with them after class." Phillipe (male, Monaco) shared, "I made many friends, mostly from India and Peru. Whenever I visit London, I meet 2 or 3 good friends who live there. The social part at the university in London was very good, very easy." Hans (male, Germany) noted, "I made global connections, and now I realize how valuable that was." I observed that female participants were generally reserved when discussing the social connections they formed during their studies. This was especially true for those who studied during the COVID-19 pandemic, as some made no friendships at all. Maria, from Mexico, was the exception; she mentioned making many friends and traveling with them. However, she also shared that she fell in love with a boy from Colombia, which led her to socialise less than she had hoped. Group projects and subsequent informal activities, such as socializing at pubs, resonate with Montgomery and McDowell's (2009) findings that structured academic collaborations often facilitate deeper social bonds.

Social capital usefulness

Participants' perspectives on social capital evolved significantly from the start of their studies to after graduation. Initially, most viewed social capital to make supportive and fun friendships, but over time, they came to value the global connections they formed and the long-term benefits these brought to their lives. This aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital as a resource that grows through networks and can influence academic and professional outcomes. Several participants highlighted how their networks supported their academic success. Li (female, China) noted, "My friends helped me understand difficult points in my studies, helping me navigate throughout them." This reflects findings by Montgomery and McDowell (2009), who emphasize the importance of peer support in enhancing academic performance among international students. Participants recognized the professional advantages of their networks; Li (female, China) secured a job in the UK through her roommate's introduction to a company, leading to her sponsorship and long-term employment in London. She shared, "One of my friends worked in a company I wanted to work for. She introduced me to her boss, which opened the door to an interview. Social capital in China is very important. I keep in touch with many of the friends I studied with in London as this opens doors.". Ethan (male, USA) reflected, "What I took from my studies in the UK are the social connections. Having this network is the most valuable thing. I also have very close friends from my time in London." Seibert, Kraimer and Liden (2001) evidenced what participants indicated during the interviews

conceptualizing social capital in terms of a network structure and social resources, finding that both were significant predictors of career success.

7.2.2.2. Not so positive experiences

<u>Limited opportunities to socialise with domestic students.</u>

Most participants primarily socialized with other international students, finding it difficult to connect with domestic students. They felt more at ease spending time with peers in similar circumstances, relying on these friendships for support and companionship. This aligns with Montgomery and McDowell (2009), who found that international students often form close-knit communities among themselves due to limited engagement from domestic students in international activities. Ethan (male, USA) shared, "All international people grouped together. I remember having a group of friends of 50 people. We didn't have family in town, so we met on weekends and during the week, we did social things and studied together. We got very close." A key concern among participants was the small number of UK students in the program compared to other universities in the UK. Those who had completed undergraduate studies at other UK institutions noted a more balanced mix of domestic and international students, allowing greater interaction and mutual learning. This imbalance is particularly evident in graduate programs at university A, where over 70% of the cohort is international, with Chinese students being the largest group. Many Chinese students primarily networked with others from their home country, missing the opportunities for cultural exchange that a diverse environment offers. This is reflected in Volet and Ang's (2012) observation about Chinese students often having limited interaction with other cultures while studying abroad. Mei (China) remarked, "At Lancaster University, I worked on projects with UK and European students. This does not happen at University A, as there are almost no domestic students. I only made friends from China, my home country." Participants highlighted the overwhelming international presence; Hans (Germany) noted, "It was very international, and the course had very few British people. There were only a handful of British students, clearly a minority compared to the rest of the cohort." Similarly, Phillipe (Monaco) stated, "At University A during my time, most of the students were international." This is in line with the ICEF Monitor report (2024) that indicates that universities in the UK increasingly rely on international students to sustain their financial stability, which can limit opportunities for domestic students and impact classroom integration. This focus on international recruitment has raised concerns about access to courses and potential segregation between domestic and international students as the concentration of international students in certain programmes can alter classroom dynamics and may lead to the formation of social groups along cultural lines, potentially hindering integration. (LSE Blogs, 2024).

<u>Missed networking opportunities.</u>

Many higher education institutions have dedicated careers and alumni teams that organize networking events to help students connect with peers and industry professionals. These events, ranging from casual pizza gatherings to career panels and company visits, aim to build social capital and soft skills, such as initiating conversations in professional settings. However, most students in this study did not fully utilize these opportunities, often attending to only a few events. The MSc in Management programme, hosted by University A, holds three tailored events annually, but participants cited logistical issues as a barrier. Since the programme was

taught in two different campuses, many students hesitated to travel. Aisha (female, UAE) shared, "As I studied in Canary Wharf, there was nothing. I would have to go to Bloomsbury, which took 40 minutes. Most days I was tired after a whole day in class and just wanted to finish, so I missed networking events."

More mature students recognized the value of these events and actively participated to enhance their social capital. Diego (male, Chile) reflected, "Networking events helped me feel more socially confident as I could speak in English with employers in a relaxed environment." Other students became complacent and chose not to attend, later expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of networking opportunities. Diego (Chile) compared university A unfavourably with London Business School suggesting that making activities mandatory might encourage participation: "At London Business School, networking is at another level. You become friends with 30/40 people and are forced to do a lot of activities together. This does not happen at other universities, where students are given freedom to choose activities, which means most students don't do any. Universities should improve networking among students, rather than just with employers, through mandatory activities and social events." A survey by Inside Higher Ed (2024) found that 60% of community college students and 25% of four-year college students reported not being involved in campus activities, citing similar barriers. These findings suggest that logistical issues, like those experienced by the participants in this thesis, are common impediments to student engagement in university-organized events.

Lack of alumni events.

University A did not organize alumni events either in the UK or abroad, only beginning to hold such events internationally in 2023/2024. Instead, all post-graduation meetings were alumni-led. This was a missed opportunity, as alumni events could have fostered valuable connections among graduates, the university, and employers. The lack of organized post-graduation engagement resulted in a loss of social, cultural, and economic capital for all parties. Mei (female, China) observed, "my university failed to organize alumni events in foreign countries. Other universities, such as the University of Manchester, hold alumni events abroad, including in China."

7.2.2.3 The COVID-19 effect.

During the 2020/2021 academic year, 36% of participants studied entirely remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions. In China, strict lockdowns prevented students from meeting in person, even though many were in the same country. Most reported they were unable to connect with peers after the pandemic, citing a lack of confidence to reach out, especially since they had never met in person. Xiao (female, China) shared, "During my time of study, I made no friends. We were connected through remote activities, but I wasn't motivated and didn't attend. I met friends in projects but never face to face. I went to London a year after my studies and met one friend for the first time." Many students felt they missed the chance to build social capital, leaving them with sadness and a sense of unfulfilled potential as they told me during the interviews. Some acknowledged that a positive social experience is vital when studying abroad and regretted not delaying their studies until in-person learning resumed. Ama (Ghana) reflected, "I didn't meet enough friends because of COVID-19. I only met two people from finance and data analytics while working on my dissertation at the university premises. Everything was online, so I never met anyone from my own programme."

7.3. Looking back, have they been able to maintain and grow the friendships made during their studies in the UK, and how useful have these relationships been?

7.3.1. Students' social experience was good!

Most participants reflected positively on their social experiences during their studies in the UK, appreciating the connections they made. They credited their time at the university with helping them grow personal and professional networks, improve interpersonal skills, and feel more comfortable interacting with people from diverse backgrounds. Aleksandar (male, Serbia) noted, "It was fun! I was one of the oldest in the cohort and studied with a younger generation. I was more patient, which helped me develop soft skills I later applied at work." On average, participants', maintained connections with five friends from their time in London, staying in touch through social media and meeting in person when possible. Jan (male, Czech Republic) described the social life as "exciting," adding, "I met new people, all very different from what I had experienced before." Maria (Mexico) shared, "I met many friends. When I visit London, I usually see three friends," while Sebastian (Germany) observed, "People were not looking for close friendships but rather a wider network, which has influenced my perspective on the value of diversity."

Post-graduation experiences varied, with social capital growing organically based on individual effort rather than university support. Students who actively nurtured their networks reaped long-term benefits, both personally and professionally. Ethan (USA) remarked, "I made very close friendships and keep in touch with 8 or 9 friends almost daily. We go on trips together every year. My network is very valuable and spread across the world." Phillipe (Monaco) added, "I am still in contact with students from my time studying in the UK. We meet in person as often as possible and mainly communicate through WhatsApp and FaceTime. Only two weeks ago, we discussed a gathering in London."

7.3.2. Distance and life commitments.

Maintaining relationships over time proved challenging for many participants due to distance, as most returned to their home countries, often in different parts of the world and time zones. Limited availability due to work responsibilities and life commitments also made it harder to stay connected. Hans (male, Germany) explained, "Most of my friends were international. I keep in contact with those in London and meet for coffee, but it's challenging to stay in touch with friends on the other side of the world." Lukas (male, Germany) noted, "I am still in touch with a few people, from places like Pakistan and Europe," while Priya (female, India) shared, "I only keep in touch with one friend. I have moved so much that I couldn't maintain social connections." Participants in countries with large alumni communities, like the UK and China, found it easier to stay connected. In China, alumni networks in cities like Shanghai host gatherings, with one participant attending a dinner with ten of their colleagues from her studies in the UK, only one of them graduated with her. Aisha (UAE) remarked, "I met a lot of friends and keep in touch with them, but not all since most of them are international." All the efforts seemed to be alumni-led, highlighting a lack of post-graduation engagement from the university.

Those who studied during the pandemic had little to no social experience. Recent studies indicate that online learning can impede the development of social connections and social capital among students. Research by Li et al. (2023) examined the association between students' digital cultural and social capital and their learning outcomes, highlighting challenges in fostering meaningful interactions in online settings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift to remote education increased feelings of isolation and loneliness, as the absence of in-person interactions hindered the formation of meaningful social bonds (Hansen-Brown et al., 2022). Moreover, the lack of face-to-face engagement in online education has been linked to a decline in overall social capital. While faculty and peer interactions continued in virtual formats, a study focusing on the pandemic period revealed that the family capital component diminished, contributing to a reduction in overall social capital (Wong et al, 2024). Mei (female, China) explained, "I met friends during my undergraduate studies at Lancaster University, including British and European students but I don't keep in touch with anyone from my postgraduate studies as I studied remotely due to COVID-19."

7.4. From a student perspective, what are the main problems universities in the UK face to help international students build more and better social capital over time?

Despite participants' positive feelings about their social connections, many were vocal about areas where universities in the UK could improve, particularly regarding career-related events, networking, alumni engagement, and support during their adaptation to the UK and its academic system. Their feedback highlights four main areas for improvement.

7.4.1. Career-related events

Participants found the career events at their university unhelpful or irrelevant to their needs, often skipping them due to logistical challenges or lack of perceived value. Aisha (female, UAE) shared, "There were no career activities at Canary Wharf. I would have to go to Bloomsbury for events, and it took 40 minutes. The university should organise events close to teaching venues for student convenience." Poor scheduling also hindered participation, as some events conflicted with evening classes. Hans (male, Germany) remarked, "No late classes as this impacts your experience. You can't attend extracurricular activities or networking sessions as you must be in class. Very annoying."

Others were disappointed by unmet expectations, such as the lack of internships and job offers, leading to lack of interest or frustration. Lukas (male, Germany) explained, "universities could do better and implement mandatory career sessions. These sessions were useful but not helpful as I didn't get a job from them. I was busy and stressed with tests and assessments, not having time for anything else." Similarly, Jan (male, Czech Republic) noted, "Career fairs are not useful as internships are not provided. I was a top student, but the university didn't provide me with an internship." Many students lacked interest in the companies and speakers featured at these events, as they had little work experience or clarity about career goals. This disconnection prevented them from seeing the value of learning about career options or engaging with domestic employers. For some, their focus on returning to work in their home countries after graduation made these events less relevant.

7.4.2. Social and networking events

The department where I worked organized an average of three social events per academic year for each programme. The first, held during induction week, was highly successful, with full attendance and students eager to meet new people before academic pressures began. The second event was a Christmas dinner, and the final one, typically a fun activity like karting or bowling, took place at the end of term two before the Easter break. From the university's perspective, organizing large social events was challenging due to students' demanding schedules, with frequent assessments and many leaving immediately after term ended. As a result, these three events were the only official social gatherings, leaving students to plan additional activities on their own. Networking events, outside the official careers and alumni agenda, were initiated by students who contacted recruiters and department heads, organizing smaller events on campus.

However, the university missed opportunities to foster connections through in-class activities or events that encouraged interactions across programs and with alumni. James (Nigeria) suggested that "universities could promote mixing among different programmes, creating a large network of students working in various industries." He told me during the interview that the university is the best place to meet new people, and the focus should be on building connections with colleagues rather than employers. Li (female, China) noted, "I am very satisfied with my experience studying in the UK, but I would suggest more opportunities to make friends and exchange ideas through social events." Diego (male, Chile) agreed that universities could do more to enhance social capital, he suggested that they should connect students with corporate problems through projects guided by professors to build connections and social capital while learning."

7.4.3. Alumni events

Research shows that alumni events play a vital role in fostering a sense of community among graduates, facilitating connections that promote belonging and professional growth. These events allow alumni to mentor current students, provide career advice, and create opportunities for internships and job placements through guest talks, participation in capstone projects, and philanthropic contributions (Bass, n.d.). However, during the years of this study, university A did not organize alumni events in the UK or abroad, leaving students to maintain connections on their own.

Mei (China) observed, "Other universities organize alumni events in foreign countries for networking." Interviews revealed that most students had no ongoing connection with the university, professors, or the host country, with post-graduation interactions limited to close friends. This lack of engagement resulted in missed opportunities for students, the university, and the host country, as a shared sense of belonging and community was not cultivated.

7.4.4. Social and academic support at students' arrival

Over several years, I have participated in the orientation week event at university A, addressing large groups of students on their first day and explaining essential areas such as the academic system, assessment types, term schedules, and support services like mental health awareness, social clubs, and careers departments. The four-day of orientation provided extensive information, concluding with a social activity. In my experience, much of this information is forgotten quickly, leaving students unprepared for early assessments as they navigate the

system, locate classrooms, buy books, and adjust to a new environment. This initial period, often overwhelming, combines academic and personal challenges like settling into a new city and meeting new people. Despite this, participants did not report stress or a lack of support upon arrival in the survey and during interviews, possibly because many had adapted to the UK during prior undergraduate studies or retained only positive memories of their transition; the latter is called "rosy retrospection" and suggests that individuals tend to view their study abroad experiences more positively over time due to a cognitive bias which causes past events to be remembered as more favourable than they actually were (Mitchell et al., 1997).

Despite international students not recalling the start of their studies in the UK as particularly stressful, there remains a clear lack of support in helping them adapt. Institutions often expect international students to adjust at the same pace as domestic students, overlooking the unique challenges they face. However, fostering social connections and organizing ice-breaking activities could further ease students' adaptation and enhance their sense of belonging. Peer and staff support is vital for academic adjustment and success, creating a conducive learning environment (Ramsay et al., 2007; Agyeman and Mugume, 2023).

7.5. Chapter Summary

Chapter 7 examines whether studying in the UK helped international students build social capital and assess its long-term usefulness. It explores participants' social connections during their studies, the challenges of building social capital, and whether they maintain these connections. Given their high socio-economic backgrounds, the chapter investigates whether studying at university in the UK enhanced their social capital and its current value. Findings revealed that students who studied on campus were satisfied with their social outcomes, maintaining an average of five friendships that contributed to build additional social, cultural, and economic capital. However, participants felt the university could have improved their experience by facilitating connections with more peers, especially with domestic students, and engaging them post-graduation.

This chapter highlights five key findings: 1) Universities don't actively support students in the creation of social capital, 2) HEIs prioritize short-term financial gains over long-term opportunities, 3) The challenge of "unknown unknowns", 4) Excessive freedom to choose activities often leading to disengagement and 5) The overlooked value of social capital in higher education.

7.5.1. Universities don't actively support students in their creation of social capital.

Participants in this thesis suggested that UK universities struggle to support students in building social capital during their studies and after graduation. This is partly due to the assumption that international students will quickly adapt to their new environment without tailored support mechanisms. Ecochard and Fotheringham (2017) highlighted that international students encounter unique challenges in transitioning to higher education in the UK, necessitating more nuanced support systems to facilitate their integration and social network development. Students are expected to grasp their programme details quickly, with little consideration for the adaptation period needed to navigate their new reality. This "one size fits all" approach is common, as many universities fail to implement activities that actively foster social connections. A report by the Office for Students (2021) suggested that current efforts may be insufficient in addressing the specific needs of these students. Initiatives such as pairing

domestic and international students through buddy systems or organizing mandatory social and networking events could significantly enhance social capital, encourage collaboration and connections across cohorts and programmes, creating a stronger sense of community (Agyeman and Mugume, 2023).

Post-graduation, UK universities often neglect alumni engagement, leaving students to maintain connections independently. Participants in this study noted that their only ties to their university in the UK were with a small group of friends, often fewer than 10% of their cohort, with no communication with most of the students in their cohort, professors or staff. The absence of alumni events or reunions, especially outside the UK, represents a missed opportunity to harness the social and economic capital graduates can offer. In contrast, institutions like IE Business School in Spain regularly organize alumni events in key countries, fostering valuable connections and enhancing graduates' professional networks. Initiatives such as annual reunions, regional alumni gatherings, mentorship networks, and featuring alumni in university communications are effective strategies for expanding social capital among current students and graduates. These efforts not only strengthen alumni ties to the institution but also provide opportunities for ongoing professional development and collaboration (Bass, n.d.; Mak and Cheung, 2018).

7.5.2. Most HEIs in the UK focus is on current financial gains missing future opportunities.

UK universities primarily focus on academic excellence, ensuring students graduate on time and succeed in their studies. This emphasis often frames higher education institutions as revenue-driven, prioritizing academic outcomes over long-term engagement with alumni, particularly with those who leave the country after graduation. Such a narrow focus on academics and immediate financial gains, often seen as markers of success, results in missed opportunities to cultivate lasting connections with graduates that could lead to mentorships, collaborations, and fundraising (Ramsay et al., 2007; CASE, 2021). In contrast, North American universities excel at fostering alumni engagement through initiatives like annual reunions, which keep alumni connected to their universities and the host country. This approach yields significant financial benefits. As an example, U.S. universities raised $58 billion in donations in 2023, $12 billions of which came from alumni (CASE, 2024). In the UK, universities raised £1 billion in donations for the first time in 2020, with alumni contributions playing a major role (CASE, 2021). While the UK's population is smaller than the U.S., this difference is unjustified as its universities are globally competitive, hosting many prestigious institutions that attract international students.

Participants in this study confirmed they had never been solicited for donations or asked to contribute to their UK university in any form. This highlights a missed opportunity, as alumni contributions can support students, fund research, and improve facilities. To maximize the benefits international students' offer, UK universities need to shift their approach, focusing on building social capital during and after studies to foster lasting relationships with graduates (Mak and Cheung, 2018).

7.5.3. The "unknown unknown"

The international students in this study, despite coming from diverse cultural backgrounds, shared similarities in their upbringing, including involvement in family networks and an appreciation for social capital. Upon arriving in the UK, they faced common challenges, such

as adapting to a new environment, becoming self-reliant, and navigating life without immediate family support. These shared experiences often united them, fostering close bonds and encouraging the formation of networks among international peers. However, not all students proactively sought connections or recognized the networking and career opportunities available to them. Many would have benefited from a mentor to help them navigate the transition, better understand London and their university, and form deeper, more supportive relationships. Mentorship programs have been shown to significantly enhance international students' integration and social capital (Ramsay et al., 2007).

Evidence from the interviews indicate that despite having limited proactive university support, participants were satisfied with their social connections, forming an average of five meaningful relationships during their time in London. Most participants studied in cohorts of 100 or more students, yet they reported maintaining contact with an average of only five peers. This limited network suggests that they were unable to fully grasp and leverage the benefits of broader academic and professional connections. Despite being in a diverse and resource-rich environment, their engagement remained narrow, potentially restricting opportunities for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and long-term networking advantages. Drawing on Donald Rumsfeld's 2002 concept of "unknown unknowns," which describes things we are unaware of and cannot anticipate because we do not know they exist; students often felt satisfied with their social outcomes, unaware that they could have formed more and stronger connections, leading to greater long-term benefits.

7.5.4. Too much freedom to choose (social) activities leads to low student engagement

As explored in this chapter, universities in the UK organise social and networking events but makes them voluntary, assuming students have the maturity, understanding, and motivation to recognise that many of these events could boost their social capital and employment opportunities. This approach extends to other university services; for instance, each student is assigned a personal tutor meant to act as a confidant. Students are expected to inform their tutor about any problems or challenges they face with the tutor's role being to refer students to the appropriate departments and ensure they receive the necessary support. By experience, most students ignore their tutor's emails and only meet with them in extreme situations, often after they have been struggling with issues for some time and are desperate for help, being a reactive service instead of proactive. The UK system is designed to give students the freedom to choose, but this primarily benefits those who feel confident in their ability to make decisions. The reality is that most of them are not able to do so, at least until they have been part of the system for some time. Interviews confirmed that those who benefit from social and networking events are those with enough maturity to understand how attending these events can lead to the creation of social capital and the benefits that could arise from it. Personality types also play a role; more extroverted and experienced students are likely to attend events more frequently and approach others compared to those who struggle to communicate in English or come from more traditional cultures.

When participants were asked why they didn't use their time in the UK to build more connections, they primarily indicated that the events organised by the university did not align with their interests or that they were dealing with stress and mental health issues, which forced them to focus solely on academics without having time to network. This clearly shows that they struggled to understand the potential benefits of building social capital and that they didn't take advantage of the university services to help them cope with their unique struggles. Universities could address this lack of engagement by helping students comprehend the value

of social capital through specific and tangible examples of how attending these events could benefit them. Establishing a dedicated a team responsible for the social welfare of students, guiding them in making connections, and assisting professors in coordinating team-building activities could be beneficial. Networking events should be clearly explained to students, scheduled at convenient times (avoiding clashes with lectures), be tailored to facilitate connections, and be included as part of module assessments or made mandatory somehow.

7.5.5. The overlooked value of social capital in higher education.

Building social capital is far more crucial than it may initially seem. Students who studied online during the COVID-19 pandemic were significantly hindered in forming connections with peers, professors, and university staff, which deeply impacted their overall experience. Many reflected on their time earning a degree in the UK as negative, believing they should have waited until in-person classes resumed. Despite receiving the same academic content, identical modules taught by the same professors, the key difference was the ability to build relationships and social capital. UK universities tend to prioritize academics, assuming social capital will naturally develop, but when this element is removed, many students feel that academics alone are not worth the time and investment. This highlights the indispensable role of social connections in shaping a meaningful and fulfilling university experience.

8.1. Introduction

8.1.1. Why are cultural capital outcomes relevant?

The definition of cultural capital varies among researchers; for instance, Thompson (2016) interprets cultural capital in a more traditional manner, emphasizing activities that lead to educational success such as visiting museums or helping children with homework. Alternatively, Bourdieu (1986) presents a broader view of this type of capital. He considers any non-economic resource that individuals can use to gain social advantage as cultural capital including language and traditions (embodied), credentials (institutionalized) and culture that comes from traditional sources such as visiting museums and theatres (objective); this broader understanding of cultural capital will be applied to this thesis.

8.1.2. What is the Aim of this Chapter?

This chapter primary objective is to understand if international students' cultural capital was enhanced during their studies in the UK. To achieve this, I asked participants to reflect retrospectively on their cultural expectations prior to beginning their studies and to compare these with their actual experiences. Additionally, I examined their current views on cultural capital in relation to economic and social capital to understand whether they acknowledge its value and how it connects to other forms of capital. This chapter specifically addresses research question 2, which investigates the impact of studying abroad on students' development of cultural capital.

<u>Why is This Relevant?</u>

Cultural capital significantly influences academic success and social engagement, fostering leadership, critical thinking, creativity, and innovation in students (Riches, 2020; Classroom Management Expert, 2024). It is closely tied to social and economic capital, reducing educational inequalities by providing diverse cultural experiences and knowledge. Bourdieu (1986) highlighted how culture and education reinforce social hierarchies, with cultural capital passed between generations, perpetuating inequalities. Equipping international students with cross-cultural competencies promotes success in a globalized world and fosters inclusive, diverse communities.

In the UK, these students enrich society by introducing new traditions, languages, and customs, encouraging intercultural dialogue, enhancing learning, and reducing inequality. Over time, they may become ambassadors for their countries, breaking stereotypes and fostering understanding among peers and communities (Sharma & Jung, 1985; Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010; Hsu, 2011). Universities can leverage international students' diversity to create environments where they confidently share their cultures and engage with UK traditions, strengthening bonds and enhancing cultural, social, and economic capital, impacting academic and personal success (Bourdieu, 1986). This chapter examines students' engagement with cultural capital before and during studies, their reflections on its impact, and their recommendations for how UK universities can better support cultural capital development.

8.2. What were students' experiences before and during their studies in terms of cultural capital?

8.2.1. Students' previous cultural capital

All participants were raised in high socio-economic backgrounds that emphasized cultural and social engagement, displaying embodied and institutionalized cultural capital as recognized by Bourdieu (1986) upon arriving in the UK. During the interviews, I inquired about their family activities during their upbringing; while many grew up in families with working parents and rarely visited cultural venues like museums or theatres, they engaged in activities such as reading, watching movies, socializing, traveling, and dining at diverse restaurants. These experiences, along with stimulating conversations and social exchanges, contributed to their sense of cultural capital.

Studying abroad was highly valued, rooted in their families' socio-economic status. Many had family members who had also studied abroad, highlighting the importance placed on institutionalized cultural capital. Earning a degree from a prestigious UK university signalled academic and social success, enhancing their status within their social circles and reinforcing their position, ultimately leading to greater power and influence.

8.2.2. Students' expectations on cultural capital

Participants ranked cultural capital as the least important type of capital in both surveys and interviews, prioritizing economic and social capital in this order. Most had no specific expectations regarding cultural outcomes and often mixed cultural and social capital expectations.

I couldn't identify all their cultural expectations in the survey responses because the survey questions were biased, reflecting my own views on the topic rather than those of the respondents. Participants were asked to choose expected cultural outcomes from a set of predefined options but during the analysis, I realized that these options were based on my initial understanding of cultural capital before a deeper exploration. These options included traditional cultural activities such as visiting museums and theatres or engaging in activities like reading and music (attending concerts or playing an instrument), while social interactions were excluded as I initially classified them under social capital. Question 3 in the survey, which allowed students to select multiple applicable options, received 193 responses. As shown in **Figure 8.10**, students anticipated engaging in activities such as visiting theatres, galleries, museums, and national sites, as well as increasing exposure to books, movies, and political and social issues. While several participants confirmed these responses during interviews, the survey options excluded social events involving interaction with international students as cultural activities which they viewed as social and cultural events, consequently, not fully capturing the participants' broader perspectives on cultural capital.

#	Field		Choice Count
1	Visit theatres, galleries and/or museums	22.80%	44
2	Visit national sites often during my studies	18.65%	36
3	Develop my musical or artistic characteristics	6.22%	12
4	Read more	13.47%	26
5	Be more exposed to books and or movies	16.58%	32
6	Be more exposed to political and/or social issues	17.62%	34
7	I didn't expect anything	4.15%	8
8	Other	0.52%	1
			193

Figure 8.10: Expected cultural outcomes (Survey question 3)

The interviews provided more insights into participants' thoughts. Most indicated they didn't have any specific expectations regarding culture and had not spend much time thinking about it. Their primary focus was on other aspects of studying abroad, such as academic performance and making new friends. However, they also revealed that participants' understanding of cultural capital was much broader that what I had anticipated. They indeed had cultural capital expectations, but they were intertwined with their social capital expectations and included making social connections with diverse people and learning from their cultures, even in settings like the university, their own homes, or pubs. This broader view of cultural richness emerged during the interviews; *"My expectations were based on what my friends had told me as many of them were there. I expected people to be more open and friendly in pubs; at least more open than in France." Phillipe (male, Monaco).*

8.2.3. What happened during their studies?

Participants defined cultural capital as a blend of traditional cultural experiences and social interactions with friends from different cultures. For example, many participants visited museums and theatres, immersing themselves in the city's cultural ambiance; *"I expected to have the ability to meet with other people, talk to other people, visit museums. History is one of my favourite topics, I wanted to visit the national gallery and the British museum. I thought that it was very important that the university was in London." Hans (male, Germany).* These activities together with walking around the city and going to bars with classmates from other cultures, were seen as both social and cultural experiences; *"I liked the fact that the school was in the middle of the city, and I would be able to see London while I was going to school." Ama (female, Ghana).*

They understood cultural capital as exposure to individuals from other cultures, learning from their habits and traditions, and having conversations about political and social issues in their home countries. This exposure involved stepping outside their familiar environment and embracing a new, open atmosphere.

"I didn't visit museums or theatres often as I didn't have time during the term, and it was not a priority for me - I am not very cultural. I used to go to bars, visit the home of other students and learn from their cultures." Louis (male, France).

"I went to galleries, all major museums and experienced the local culture but I am not extremely passionate about culture, and it didn't have a major impact on me. I walked around

to explore the city; it was cultural enough to look at the buildings and soak the city energy just by walking around. Sebastian (male, Germany).

8.2.3.1. Country of origin and habits impact how cultural capital is perceived.

Interviews revealed how participants' countries of origin and family habits shaped their approaches to building cultural capital while in the UK. Those who frequently visited museums in their home countries preferred new activities, such as socializing with people from different nations, viewing this as a rare opportunity. Conversely, participants from places where cultural exploration was limited relished walking around the city and engaging with London's rich cultural landscape. A participant from Mexico, Maria, enjoyed walking freely around London, contrasting sharply with her experiences in Mexico City: *"The best of London was taking public transportation and walking around. This is not something you can do in Mexico City as a woman; it is too dangerous. London felt safe, felt like freedom! I could do whatever I wanted, visit museums, concerts, explore Brighton, go to flower markets."* In contrast, a participant from Prague, already accustomed to museums at home, prioritized social interactions: he spent more time with friends in pubs, valuing social experiences over traditional cultural activities.

Participants consistently enjoyed walking around London, sightseeing, and experiencing ancient architecture. Some viewed the city itself as a museum, while others blended social and cultural experiences. For instance, Ama (female, Ghana) shared, *"It was COVID time, and I walked around the city, visited Piccadilly and Hyde Park often, and even went to the cinema. Back home in Ghana, I couldn't walk around or go to the cinema. London changed me, I realized I loved walking freely and seeing things."* Priya (female, India) found inspiration in London's vibrancy, saying, *"I skateboarded in London! The city is a museum; it is inspiring."* Phillipe (male, Monaco) reflected, *"I enjoyed being in ancient buildings; it felt like going to Hogwarts."*

These findings suggest that studying in the UK provided participants with a unique blend of cultural and social experiences that significantly enhanced their understanding and appreciation of cultural capital. They expressed happiness regarding their social and cultural outcomes, often blending the two with 72% confirming that their cultural awareness improved due to studying abroad compared to having studied in their home country. Most agreed that having first-hand experiences of other cultures provided a more immersive learning environment with everyone concurring that their cultural capital was significantly enhanced during their studies in London. Marco (male, Italy) summed it up: *"During the master's, I didn't go to many museums but attended exhibitions and joined friends on visits. These opportunities enriched my cultural capital."* Overall, participants emphasized how these immersive experiences deepened their appreciation for cultural diversity and enriched their personal growth.

8.3 Looking back, how do participants perceive their cultural capital?

Eighty-six per cent of 60 participants agreed that studying abroad significantly contributed to their cultural capital. They didn't differentiate among cultural and social capital with 73% rating their cultural outcomes as good or excellent, closely mirroring the 77% who rated their social outcomes similarly; this high level of agreement underscores the intertwined nature of cultural and social experiences in the context of studying abroad for these students.

8.3.1. Cultural offer at their university in the UK

Participants agreed that attending a university in the UK was a cultural experience given the diverse backgrounds of classmates, with their cohort comprising students from over 30 different nationalities. They also mentioned how faculty members brought various cultures, enriching classes with their unique backgrounds and experiences. Beyond the normal interaction with other students and faculty, the university organized networking and career events featuring speakers from various companies and backgrounds. While these events could be seen as part of social capital, participants viewed them as opportunities to simultaneously build social and cultural capital. Attendees used these events to gain knowledge about different cultures and broaden their cultural understanding; *"Being in London just opened more opportunities to attend different things. I made efforts to attend all guest talks that came to the university. Culturally speaking the university brought speakers from different backgrounds, countries, and cultures; this brough exposure to me." (James, male from Nigeria)*.

8.3.2. London as an ideal place to build cultural capital.

Participants universally recognized London as an ideal place to build both cultural and social capital, regardless of gender or country of origin. They valued the university's location in the city, which allowed them to immerse themselves in London's rich cultural landscape simply by walking to class. Most appreciated the city's diverse opportunities and year-round activities. Diego (male, Chine) highlighted how London's variety of museums, parks, and events made it an enriching experience for his family: *"I had children during my studies, and the variety of museums and parks is huge. You can disconnect or enjoy a nice walk in vast green spaces right in the city. We tried to go to the theatre often, and there's always something happening, circus, fireworks. The city transforms with the seasons, from Christmas lights to summer flowers."* Xiao (female, China) also shared her enthusiasm, saying, *"I loved visiting vintage shops. During my studies, I met friends in museums and restaurants, walked through the city often, and even went snowboarding!"*

Freedom to walk, explore, and express themselves was a recurring theme. Many participants enjoyed sightseeing, engaging in activities with friends, and feeling liberated to try new things. Ama (female from Ghana) explained how London's openness helped her acquire new skills: *"In Ghana, I would feel embarrassed learning to swim or ride a bike, but in London, no one cares what you're doing. Everyone's open, you just try. I felt more comfortable than back home."* These insights underline how London provided participants with a unique blend of cultural exploration and personal growth, enhancing their ability to build cultural and social capital in meaningful ways.

8.3.3. Proximity to Europe

Being in a location so close to Europe was also noted as a source of cultural capital enabling participants to travel around Europe more easily and cost-effectively than from their home countries, enhancing their cultural and social capital. *"I travelled to other countries including Swiss, Iceland and France during my studies. Li (female, China).*

"I enjoyed traveling as the UK is so close to Europe. My boyfriend lived in Swisse, and we would meet in different European countries. Besides traveling, London allowed me to spend more time in nature, play tennis, visit museums and concerts. This changed when I left the UK as my family is very conservative and do not let me go to concerts. So, I enjoyed the distance

to my home country as this gave me freedom to try new things, there is not much you can do in Dubai as a young woman. I felt empowered in London! Aisha (female, UAE)

8.3.4. Their time in the UK is a memorable and happy period.

While not everyone took advantage of the UK cultural offerings, such as museums, theatres, or concerts, all participants felt they had developed cultural capital alongside social capital through interactions with diverse individuals in social settings. They fondly remember their time in the UK, blending their cultural and social experiences into a memorable and happy period of their lives.

"My time in London was awesome. I have very good memories and would do it again." Marco (male, Italy)

"Fun! I loved it. It was a great year. I stayed until the end of my visa and enjoyed as much as I could what the university and the city had to offer." Ethan (male, USA).

8.4. How could universities in the UK support international students in building more and better cultural capital over time?

Participants didn't provide specifics on how their university could help students build more cultural capital as their understanding of cultural and social capital was intertwined. My interpretation of this is that the suggestions in sub chapter about how to increase social capital, could also apply to how to increase cultural capital, including having more and better targeted careers, social, networking, and alumni events.

My contribution to this chapter is based on students' feelings about what they liked and disliked about their cultural experiences during their time studying at a UK university, as well as my own experiences as an alumnus of IE Business School in Madrid, where I am frequently invited to social and cultural events in London. In my view, understanding students' perspectives on cultural outcomes can help universities in three key areas: Enhance cultural exchange among international students while on campus, engage these students with the UK cultural offerings and build deeper and stronger cultural connections that keep these students engaged after graduation with each other and the university.

8.4.1. Enhance cultural exchange among international students while on campus through activities and events.

University campuses can create a vibrant environment where international students feel valued, and everyone benefits from a rich cultural exchange. Some of the events that could be organised include cultural festivals and fairs, international cuisine days, international film, literature clubs, cultural theme nights or student-led panels and discussions to name a few. As an example, cultural festivals could showcase these students' traditions, food, music, dance, and art; international cuisine days could engage student with cooking and sharing samples of dishes from different cultures or an international film club could host international films or books and organise screenings, readings, and discussions that highlight diverse cultural perspectives.

8.4.2. Engage international students with the cultural offerings within the UK by organizing events and visits to key sites.

By providing diverse and immersive cultural experiences, international students can fully appreciate and engage with the rich cultural landscape of the city where they study within the UK. Some of the activities that universities could lead include museums and gallery visits, theatre outings, historical site excursions or guided city tours. These visits would enhance students' cultural capital while allowing them to spend time together outside their academic settings creating stronger networks among themselves.

8.4.3. Build deeper and stronger cultural connections that keep these students engaged after graduation with each other and the university.

By implementing strategies that connect alumni with current students in cultural settings, the university could support the creation of an interconnected alumni community that remains engaged with each other and the university long after graduation. As an example, the university could organise travel programs and cultural tours for alumni and current students, ask alumni to contribute/sponsor cultural events or host annual cultural celebrations and festivals that bring alumni and current students together to celebrate the diversity and cultural heritage of the student community.

8.5   Chapter Summary

Chapter 8 explores whether studying in the UK helped international students build cultural capital, how they achieved this, and whether their cultural capital increased over time. It also examines how this growth influenced their lifestyles and contributed to their accumulation of social and economic capital. To investigate these questions, participants were asked about their cultural habits before arriving in the UK and the activities they engaged in during their time in London. These discussions aimed to uncover their understanding of cultural capital and their efforts to develop it.

The findings reveal that all participants believed they possessed cultural capital before coming to the UK. However, exposure to diverse cultures at their university in the UK and their experiences in London significantly enhanced their cultural awareness and understanding. Among the 60 participants, 86% agreed that studying abroad had a substantial impact on their cultural capital. The chapter concludes that studying in the UK helps international students enhance their cultural capital, regardless of their backgrounds. Participants' understanding of cultural capital was closely linked to their previous living conditions and habits, with each bringing a unique perspective. The findings also suggest that universities could do more to actively support and expand students' cultural capital during their studies, further enriching their overall experience and personal growth.

8.5.1. Studying in the UK helps international students build cultural capital, regardless of gender.

All participants, unanimously, agreed that their cultural capital significantly increased during their studies in the UK, attributing this growth to a combination of academic learning, cultural exposure, and diverse social interactions. The university provided exposure to various cultures, traditions, and perspectives, both in the classroom and through events, helping students appreciate and integrate diverse cultural elements into their lives. London's rich cultural landscape, including museums, theatres, and cultural events, offered opportunities to expand their horizons and deepen their understanding. Additionally, social interactions, through university-organized activities and the vibrant city life, allowed students to connect with peers from different backgrounds, further enriching their cultural awareness and experience.

This perspective aligns with findings from Newsome and Cooper (2016) and Zhang and Ren (2024), who note that international students in the UK enhance their cultural and social experiences through academic exposure and interactions with diverse peers, contributing to their cultural identity development.

8.5.2. Participants' understanding of cultural capital is unique and related to their prior living conditions at home and previous habits.

Participants' perceptions of cultural capital are distinctly influenced by their country of origin and childhood habits, rather than by gender, as both male and female students demonstrated similar understandings of cultural capital. This observation aligns with Dumais (2002), who found that while cultural capital plays a significant role in educational success, its effects are not markedly different between genders.

Students have a broad and inclusive understanding of cultural capital. They recognize the importance of activities like visiting museums, theatres, and concerts in building cultural capital, but they also value other activities that may be initially classified as social. For instance, walking around the city or sightseeing are considered significant sources of cultural capital, as well as meeting with friends for university work or leisure and attending networking events, regardless of their social nature. This broad perspective highlights how everyday interactions and experiences during their time in the UK served as opportunities to enhance their cultural awareness and understanding. This comprehensive view of cultural capital is supported by Bourdieu's (1986) theory, which emphasizes that cultural capital encompasses a wide range of cultural knowledge, skills, and experiences acquired through both formal and informal means.

8.5.3. Universities could do more to enhance students' cultural capital.

While most participants were satisfied with the opportunities to build cultural capital during their studies in the UK, universities often seem to prioritize academic success and economic outcomes over cultural development. For example, as MSc Finance programme director, the only cultural experience offered to students was a visit to the Stock Exchange. Events at university A often centred on networking with companies or recreational activities like bowling or karting, with limited emphasis on culturally enriching experiences. This observation aligns with findings by Newsome and Cooper (2016), who noted that international students in the UK often face challenges in accessing cultural experiences beyond academic settings, as

universities may not prioritize cultural integration to the same extent as academic achievements.

Universities provide an ideal setting to foster cultural capital, which supports academic success, social integration, and professional opportunities. They can enhance cultural capital by organizing events and outings that encourage cultural exchange, engagement with local traditions, and connection-building among students and alumni. Activities like cultural festivals, film or literature clubs, and visits to key cultural sites allow students to share traditions and immerse themselves in the UK's cultural landscape. Such events provide relaxed environments for networking, strengthening bonds, and expanding knowledge. A study by the *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* (2021) found that participation in cultural activities contributes to students' sense of belonging and enhances their overall educational experience. Additionally, alumni involvement in university culture has been shown to strengthen community ties and provide valuable networking opportunities, as highlighted by Forward Pathway (2023).

By adopting these strategies, UK universities can enrich students' cultural capital, creating an inclusive academic environment that enhances their overall growth and supports engagement beyond graduation.

Chapter 9: Conclusions

9.1 Research Problem and Objectives

The objective of this thesis is centred on examining the expectations and experiences of international students in the UK, from their own perspective, focusing on whether HEIs effectively support them during their studies and after graduation. The research is driven by a critique of the current "one-size-fits-all" approach that treats international students primarily as revenue generators, without adequately considering their individual needs or the long-term impact of their studies abroad on their lives.

I aimed to understand what international students expected from their UK education, what they experienced, and how they value their studies through their reflections on the economic, social, and cultural capital they gain. It also examines whether universities provide an environment conducive to help them build lasting connections with peers, the institution, and the UK, from the student perspective. These connections aim to ensure that international students develop a meaningful bond with their university and the host country, fostering lifelong contributions through research collaborations, professional initiatives, donations to their alma mater or other types of alumni support. Ultimately, the goal is to promote stronger, more meaningful relationships that benefit the students, institutions, and the country in the long term.

9.2. Key Findings

The findings of this thesis were predominantly positive, with most international students expressing satisfaction with the economic, social, and cultural outcomes derived from their studies in the UK. For example, most participants obtained paid employment within six months of graduation, worked in roles they considered relevant to their qualifications and expressed satisfaction with their social and cultural experiences.

Four key findings emerged from the study. First, female participants exhibited lower expectations across economic, social, and cultural capital compared to male participants, with a particularly pronounced disparity in financial expectations, as women anticipated lower earnings and reported lower actual incomes despite having similar educational qualifications. Second, most students were unsuccessful in securing internships or employment in the UK after graduation, often forced to return home due to restrictive immigration policies or unforeseen circumstances like changes in the right to stay in the UK due to Brexit or COVID-19. Third, UK HEIs primarily focus is on academic success, often losing contact with students after graduation, and overlooking post-graduation outcomes and long-term alumni connections. For most international students who return home, ties with the university, its staff, faculty, and peers often faded, reducing opportunities for ongoing engagement and collaboration. Fourth, both HEIs and students show a strong focus on employment and economic benefits, often neglecting the importance of cultural and social capital. Neglecting cultural and social capital not only limits students' holistic development but also undermines the broader potential of HEIs to create well-rounded graduates capable of thriving in diverse, interconnected environments. This oversight neglects Bourdieu's (1986) theories where the three forms of capital are deeply interrelated, with cultural and social capital often serving as prerequisites for transforming economic capital.

With respect to social and cultural capital, students did not make a clear distinction between the two types of capital. Instead, they viewed these two forms of capital as interconnected, with both being developed simultaneously through their everyday experiences in a global and diverse environment. Whether they were going to the movies, reading, or socializing over drinks in a pub with their classmates, students considered these activities as contributing equally to both their social and cultural enrichment. This blending of social and cultural capital suggests that students valued the holistic experience of studying abroad, recognizing that both types of capital were built through informal interactions as much as through formal settings.

Academically, there was general recognition that the learning experience in the UK is more pragmatic, applied, and flexible compared to other countries. Students appreciated the focus on team-based coursework alongside exams, in contrast to education systems in other countries that rely more heavily on exams. This collaborative approach, with students from diverse backgrounds, was valued as an important part of the learning process and considered by them as a resource to build social and cultural capital.

Many participants had studied their undergraduate degree in the UK as a strategy to improve their English level and secure admissions into a top ranked university for their master studies. Findings indicate that most international students chose the UK for its HEI's strong reputation, particularly universities' rankings and the potential to work in the UK after graduation helping them gain valuable knowledge and skills that would lead to better employment outcomes and overall life improvement. Additionally, the opportunity to spend time in London, recognized as an iconic city by all participants, regardless of background and gender, was a significant factor in their decision-making.

Participants' country of origin played a crucial role in shaping their educational experiences, social strategies, and future aspirations. While all students aimed for academic success and favourable employment outcomes, their approaches towards mobility varied by national background. For instance, students from Ghana often viewed staying in the UK as essential for upward mobility, reflecting limited career prospects at home, whereas Italian students tended to be more mobile and open to multiple post-study destinations (Waters, 2012). Students from EU countries typically showed more flexibility in their settlement intentions and reported fewer cultural or social integration challenges with their experiences being often shaped by cultural familiarity, language proximity, and exposure to intra-European mobility through schemes like Erasmus+ (Findlay et al., 2012; Brooks & Waters, 2011). Migration intentions seemed to be shaped by broader structural and policy environments; students from economically or politically unstable regions often saw the UK as a long-term destination, while many EU students viewed it as just one option within a wider transnational pathway. Additionally, while students from developing countries often pursued undergraduate study abroad out of necessity, wealthier students tended to seek postgraduate education abroad for enrichment (Brooks & Waters, 2009).

Social and cultural capital were on occasions understood differently depending on country of origin. Participants from economically or politically unstable regions placed greater value on simple activities, such as walking around London or going to the cinema, compared to those from more stable countries like other EU nations. The freedom to walk, a sense of safety, and the ability to carry out everyday tasks in a secure environment were particularly appreciated by students from unstable areas, an appreciation not typically expressed by those from more stable backgrounds. These contrasts indicate how regional background may have shaped the student experience and influence their decisions after graduation.

The two main challenges identified were the lack of institutional support for building social and cultural capital and the impact of the UK's ever-changing migration policies. Universities often focus primarily on academic development, leaving students to navigate social and cultural integration on their own, which can limit their ability to form meaningful networks and fully benefit from their international education experience. At the same time, frequent changes in migratory policies have created uncertainty, making it more difficult for international graduates to remain in the UK for work or entrepreneurship. This lack of stability discourages many talented students from staying, ultimately hindering the UK's ability to retain global talent and benefit from their skills and innovations.

9.3.   Answers to the Research Questions

9.3.1. Research Question 1

RQ: How do differences in gender and socio-economic background affect how international students perceive their studies abroad before studies?

Gender-based differences

Male and female students had similar expectations for their studies in the UK, with both groups prioritizing economic over social and cultural outcomes. Surveys and interviews revealed that it was especially important for all participants to secure a relevant and well-paid job shortly after graduation. Differences emerged in their financial gains expectations with female expecting to earn less than male students, regardless of their background or country of origin; this will be further explained in sub chapter 9.3.2.

All students expressed a strong desire to gain social experiences, including making friends, building networks, and interacting with peers in a diverse, global environment. However, the interviews evidenced that their approaches to social capital differed; male students were interested in a larger number of more casual relationships and female students were more focused on forming deeper, lasting friendships that provided support during their time abroad. This was evidenced by Padova University Press (2010) paper; male students often focus on building wider, casual networks, while female students emphasize creating deeper, supportive relationships. Both male and female students indicated that they had not given much thought to cultural capital before their studies, as their primary concerns centred on the academic challenges and social adjustments they were about to face. A blog posted in iSchoolConnect (2024) indicated that students may not initially consider cultural capital, as their primary concerns revolve around academic challenges and social adjustments.

Regardless of gender, most students expressed a desire to either return to their home country or stay in the UK for work after graduation. However, male students showed a greater openness to mobility, willing to work anywhere if the conditions were favourable. In contrast, female students, especially those from China, were more inclined to return to their home country shortly after graduation to be closer to their families and lifelong friends.

Socio-economic based differences

All participants came from affluent families, where parents and siblings held degrees, often from universities abroad. Although it was challenging to obtain precise information about

family income levels, the data suggests that most families were financially stable, with parents working in professional roles or as entrepreneurs. Participants' families placed a strong emphasis on education and on having international experiences and valued the UK's educational system. Their financial security allowed them to afford sending their children to study abroad, highlighting that international education tends to be accessible primarily to those that already have economic capital before studies rather than the most academically gifted.

They appreciated the opportunity they were given to study abroad and understood the possibilities this provided to gain valuable capital. By the time they arrived at the UK, many already possessed economic, social, and cultural capital, enabling them to recognize how their experience studying in London further contributed to the accumulation of these forms of capital, as will be elaborated later in this chapter. This outcome links well with Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory that emphasized that individuals often possess varying degrees of economic, social, and cultural capital prior to engaging in new experiences, such as studying abroad. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of habitus was clearly evidenced, as most participants originated from high socio-economic backgrounds, exhibiting signs of growing up in environments where social networks played a crucial role and where their parents provided them with significant social and cultural capital. Despite this, most participants did not recognize social capital as a source of power leading to economic capital; instead, they focused on making friendships in a new environment.

9.3.2. Research question 2

RQ: How do differences in gender and socio-economic background affect the outcomes of studying abroad including:

> 2.1.: The development of social and cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu.
> 2.2: Employability after students' return to their home country from the UK

RQ 2.1. The development of social and cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu.

All participants, regardless of gender, ranked social and cultural outcomes second and third respectively in importance after economic factors, but their approaches differed.

Social capital

All participants in this thesis agreed that studying abroad enhanced their social capital. Male students prioritized meeting diverse people and forming broad connections, while female students focused on building deep, meaningful friendships to avoid isolation. Despite these differences, 77% of the survey participants reported good or excellent social outcomes, with all interviewees finding it easy to make friends. Students valued the opportunities to meet people from diverse backgrounds, particularly in London, and typically maintained connections with around five friends' post-graduation. Social personalities stayed connected with more peers, as post-graduation networking relied primarily on individual efforts rather than institutional support.

However, participants regretted having limited interaction with domestic students and the lack of networking and alumni events. Two outcomes emerged: the first one is that programme directors and module leaders missed opportunities to encourage collaboration between domestic and international students on class projects, missing an opportunity to foster new connections. The second one is that participants had a misconception about the nature of networking events viewing them as something that should be tailored for their convenience, rather than as valuable opportunities that might require some effort and initiative. This mindset suggests a lack of understanding about the importance of networking in professional development, where being proactive and willing to go out of one's way is often necessary. This reluctance to engage unless the events were mandatory and led to them finding a job, indicates a gap in the participants' recognition of the intrinsic value of networking and the need to educate students on the long-term value of building social capital.

Most of them were satisfied with their social experiences, even if they remained connected with less than 10% of their cohort, though this satisfaction may reflect a limited understanding of the potential benefits that come from engaging in broader social networks. The exception were the students who studied during the COVID-19 pandemic as they were unable to meet anyone face to face due to lockdown restrictions in their own countries, which led them to feel frustrated for the missed opportunities to socialize and most importantly, felt unhappy with their overall studies. This recognizes the importance of social capital, as not having any social outcomes made students very unhappy despite having met their academic and employment goals.

Cultural capital

All participants, regardless of gender, built cultural capital during their studies in the UK with 86% (52) of the survey respondents believing that studying abroad significantly contributed to their cultural capital. This said, every single student I interviewed had a different understanding of cultural capital, with their views being mostly aligned with Bourdieu's concept of embodied capital.

Their interpretation of cultural capital varied depending on three variables: their habits, their internalized values and previous life experiences. Their country of origin and the habits formed during upbringing played a crucial role in shaping their understanding of cultural capital. As an example, participants from regions experiencing conflict felt that freely walking around London was their most profound cultural experience as they felt safe and unrestricted. They deeply valued every aspect of being in London, from exploring the city, sightseeing to visiting museums and theatres. In contrast, students from countries with similar cultural environments, such as those from Europe, did not perceive London's cultural offerings with the same level of interest. Instead, they thought that their cultural capital came from the diverse friendships they formed; considering that spending time with people from other countries was an experience that led to increase their cultural capital as they learnt from cultures and habits.

However, regardless of their unique understanding of what cultural capital means, it appears that all activities and efforts to build it were student-led, with little to no university-driven initiatives supporting this development. By failing to organize on-campus events or collaborate with alumni, institutions miss opportunities to deepen students' cultural knowledge, foster integration, and build a sense of belonging. This also overlooks the long-term value of cultural capital in shaping students' futures. Research shows that HEIs that actively promote cultural capital tend to achieve stronger alumni engagement, fostering lasting social and professional ties (CASE, 2019; Education and Information Technologies, 2022).

RQ 2.2 Employability after students' return to their home country from the UK

Employability

The findings reveal that studying in the UK significantly enhances students' economic capital, irrespective of gender. According to the survey, 80% of male and 74% of female graduates secured employment within six months of graduation, either in the UK or internationally. Many found positions in prestigious global companies across industries such as consulting, finance, and banking. Graduates, particularly those with several years of experience, expressed a strong sense of career accomplishment. They credited their UK studies as crucial to securing employment and improving working conditions highlighting their university reputation and the connections formed as key factors, noting that employers often prioritized the institution's ranking over individual skills during the hiring process.

Participants from stable home countries were selective in their job choices, often waiting for the right opportunity and being open to relocation. In contrast, those from conflict-affected regions sought to remain in the UK, accepting any available job as a path to a better life. Age and prior work experience also influenced outcomes, with mature students and those with professional experience securing better roles, promotions, and conditions after their master's degrees compared to those with no prior work experience.

However, more recent graduates reported facing challenges, including being in roles they perceived as a poor fit or struggling with work-life balance. This is likely influenced by the labour market conditions in 2021, when the last surveyed graduates completed their studies. The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on global economies may have created unfavourable job market conditions, impacted graduates' initial experiences and shaped their perspectives during the survey and interviews.

Financial returns

On the financial side, expectations regarding earnings were often exceeded with 23% of the survey participants earning more than £70,000 annually compared to the 8% that expected to do so. The data revealed an upward trend in participants' earnings, with 60% reporting an increase of 20% or more in their annual income since graduation. However, the gender gap in

earnings remains a significant concern with 58% compared to 27% male participants earning less than £30,000 annually. This was also reflected in higher brackets with only 10% of females (compared to 40% of male participants) earning more than £40,000 a year.

While the overall impact of studying at a UK university was positive for many participants in terms of job opportunities and income growth, some significant challenges were also highlighted. Notably, two-thirds of the participants left the UK after graduation, with a large number expressing a desire to stay but being unable to secure paid employment within the limited time provided by their student visas. The restrictions on transitioning from a study visa to a work visa played a critical role in forcing students to leave, even when they were willing to remain. Additionally, mentions of Brexit and COVID-19 surfaced frequently in the interviews, with participants reporting that these events created substantial uncertainty in the UK job market. Some students who had signed contracts with companies saw their offers withdrawn as employers hesitated to proceed amidst the political and economic instability. This led to many international graduates returning home and losing their chance to work in the UK, as the companies opted to cancel contracts until the uncertainty was resolved.

Despite these disparities, the overall impact of studying in the UK on participants' economic outcomes was largely positive, with most securing better job opportunities and achieving income growth over time enabling them to build significant economic capital.

9.3.3. Research Question 3

RQ: How do students' perceptions on their studies in the UK evolve based on the time elapsed since graduation?

Over time, international students' perceptions of their UK studies have grown more positive, with longer-term graduates better appreciating their education's value. They have benefited from career advancements, promotions, and salary increases that recent graduates have yet to experience. Their social and cultural capital has also expanded through lasting connections made during their studies in the UK, with many staying in regular contact and meeting annually despite living in different countries. This research highlights how economic and political contexts at graduation, such as Brexit and COVID-19, significantly impacted students' experiences. Brexit-era graduates faced job offer cancellations in the UK, forcing many to return to their home countries, while COVID-19 graduates struggled to find employment anywhere due to the global economic downturn, delaying their financial growth and limiting social and cultural capital, leading to great levels of dissatisfaction.

Despite these challenges, most participants viewed their UK studies positively, describing their experience with words like "Awesome," "Rewarding," "Nostalgic," "Enriched," and "Valuable." They felt their time in the UK boosted their confidence, helped them create social networks, and provided them with a sense of empowerment. Overall, while Brexit and COVID-19 posed short-term obstacles, long-term reflections were largely positive.

9.3.4. Research Question 4

RQ: How could the differences in students' perceptions and outcomes be explained in terms of provision of education for international students in the UK?

While participants were satisfied with the academic quality and their employment outcomes, they identified a need for more frequent and higher-quality social and cultural events to help build stronger networks and cultural capital. All participants, regardless of social background, gender and country of origin, agreed that opportunities to interact with domestic students, peers from other programmes, and faculty were insufficient. One participant compared his experience at university A as a postgraduate student to London Business School (LBS), where he studied a bachelor's degree; at LBS structured classroom projects encouraged early networking, resulting in a significantly larger professional circle than at university A.

Survey and interview results suggest that UK universities should focus on organizing smaller, frequent social events that connect students across programmes as well as with alumni and employers, while also making larger events more culturally relevant. Participants recommended that universities have a comprehensive agenda of activities from arrival to post-graduation; these activities could include icebreaker events, faculty-led group projects, and cultural showcases where international students present aspects of their heritage. Initiatives like city exploration activities could also help students integrate into British culture while expanding their networks. Given the UK diverse international student community, universities seem to be missing an opportunity to foster a dynamic, lifelong network of engaged students and alumni.

9.4. Contributions to Knowledge

Most studies on international students focus on their economic and employment outcomes after graduation, primarily tracking those who stay connected with the university. However, there is a significant gap in data on students' long-term trajectories, including whether they stay in the UK or leave, where they go, and how their studies in the UK influence their economic, social, and cultural capital over time, as conceptualized by Bourdieu (1986).

This research contributes to knowledge in two key areas. First, it examines international students' post-graduation experiences over time, revealing that most leave the UK whether due to macroeconomic conditions (such as Brexit or COVID19) or restrictive immigration policies limiting their transition from student to work visas. Despite this challenge, most students were satisfied with their academic experience and employment outcomes, with over 70% stating that studying in the UK helped them secure good jobs, in the UK or abroad, and accumulate economic capital over time. Reviewing the Graduate Route to allow international students to stay in the UK for 2 years after graduation without requiring a sponsor could increase enrolment numbers and retain talent, creating value for these students, HEIs and the UK countries.

The second key finding is that all participants, regardless of social background and gender, experienced limited social and cultural engagement during their studies in the UK, as evidenced in the small number of connections they maintained after graduation, an average of just 5 per

student from cohorts of over 100 students, and on their limited interactions with their university and the UK after graduation. This is partly due to both, students and HEIs, prioritizing academic outcomes and employment, focusing primarily on activities that maximized these goals. This highlights an opportunity for UK universities to enhance their support by offering structured events that build social and cultural capital, an underutilized aspect despite the diverse and dynamic student population in the UK. Implementing ideas like the ones experimented by Pritchard & Skinner (2002), where existential tasks were assigned to international students to be carried out with local people, could help build long-lasting relationships. These relationships can, in turn, foster strong alumni connections and positively impact post-graduation outcomes. By creating meaningful interactions between international and local students, alumni and institutions can cultivate networks that extend beyond academic life, leading to professional opportunities, mentorship, and a sense of belonging that persists even after graduation.

In summary, UK universities prioritize academics to maintain strong rankings and graduation rates but often neglect social and cultural capital development and post-graduation engagement. This thesis urges universities to integrate these aspects into their strategic goals through structured initiatives. The issue is not treating international students differently, is acknowledging that HEIs need to be proactive creating opportunities for these students to mix and network with domestic students, industry professionals and universities staff and faculty, with the goals to create social networks, secure employment, and enjoy their time abroad. The problem lies in universities' narrow focus on academics and employment, overlooking the broader benefits of investing in social and cultural capital, which can enhance both academic success and long-term opportunities. Failing to engage students in these areas leads to missed opportunities for future collaborations and professional networks.

Generalisability of findings

The institution where this research was conducted hosts one of the most internationally and culturally diverse student populations in the UK, with international students comprising approximately 52% of the total student body (HESA, 2022). In 2021–22, over 24,000 international students were enrolled at this institution, with significant representation from Asia, particularly China, as well as the European Union, North America, the Middle East, Africa, and South America. Beyond geographic diversity, the university also shows growing variation in socio-economic backgrounds. For example, 23% of its students come from households earning below £16,190 per year, a figure that exceeds the average for similar institutions in the UK (UCL, 2022). Given its scale, international composition, and mix of socio-economic and educational backgrounds, in my view this institution and its postgraduate programmes, where many of its international students enrol, provide a rich and varied setting for empirical investigation. The diversity of the student body in the postgraduate programmes, including the master's in management examined in this study, strengthened the potential to generalise the findings to other contexts within UK higher education.

This said, students coming from private schools at university A remain overrepresented at 32.4% compared to the national average of 6/7% (Sutton Trust, 2022) with participants primarily being high-achieving and ambitious students, characteristics that may be more common in elite or research-intensive institutions; these findings align with broader literature that suggests higher education continues to reflect and reproduce social inequalities. Access and progression in higher education remain significantly influenced by social class, with

working-class students still underrepresented and often facing additional barriers (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay, 2017).

9.5. Research Limitations

The first limitation is the potential bias from my personal experiences and views on how international students adapt to studying in the UK. To address this, I engaged in self-reflection, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected students' perspectives rather than my own, striving to remain impartial throughout the research.

The second limitation relates to the lack of diversity in participants' socio-economic backgrounds, as all came from families that valued and could afford UK higher education. This homogeneity may limit the generalizability of the findings to students from less privileged backgrounds. However, it also highlights that financial constraints may prevent talented students from lower socio-economic backgrounds from studying abroad, emphasizing the need for targeted financial support.

9.6. Recommendations for future research and final thoughts

Future research should focus on two key areas: how HEIs can provide more opportunities to build social and cultural capital for students, and how immigration policies can facilitate a smoother transition from a study to a work visa for those wishing to stay and work in the UK.

While universities may have the necessary resources, supporting students' social and cultural experiences might not always be a priority. Future studies could investigate the motivations, challenges, and institutional constraints that contribute to this gap. A potential case study could assess the impact of a structured initiative aimed at enhancing social and cultural capital by organizing diverse events throughout an academic year for a specific cohort. Comparing post-graduation outcomes between students who participated and those who did not could offer valuable insights into student satisfaction, engagement, and long-term collaboration, particularly when universities take an active role in fostering social and cultural connections.

Additionally, examining the UK's immigration policies in comparison to countries that allow international graduates to stay for work or to create companies, could highlight the long-term value of such policies. Transitions from student visas to work or entrepreneurial visas should be streamlined if students can demonstrate their potential to contribute positively to the UK economy. Findings could inform both HEIs and policymakers, offering an evidence-based framework to align student experiences with broader institutional and national goals.

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Appendix 1: Consent question (survey)

"I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 2 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 2 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed. I understand that data generated through anonymous surveys may not be removed since it may not be identified. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles, or presentation without my consent."

Appendix 2: Survey questions with answers

Q1: Income

#	Field		Choice Count
1	Less than £30,000 a year	28.92%	24
2	Between £30,000-39,999 year	38.55%	32
3	Between £40,000-49,999 year	14.46%	12
4	Between £50,000-$69,999	10.84%	9
5	Between £70,000-£99,999	3.61%	3
6	Between £100,000-£150,000	3.61%	3
7	More than £150,000	0.00%	0
8	Other	0.00%	0
			83

Q2: Expectations about studies in the UK

#	Field		Choice Count
1	I would make more friends	14.65%	46
2	I was going to meet friends from many different places	17.20%	54
3	I would improve my communication skills by meeting more people	14.97%	47
4	Making more friends would help me advance professionally later on	14.01%	44
5	I was going to understand diversity better	6.05%	19
6	I would feel a sense of belonging in the UK	5.41%	17
7	My parents would be proud of me	11.15%	35
8	My life-long friends (back at home) would be proud of me	4.78%	15
9	I would improve my social status	11.46%	36
10	I didn't expect anything	0.32%	1
11	Other	0.00%	0
			314

Q3: Expectations about cultural capital

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	Visit theatres, galleries and/or museums	22.80%	44
2	Visit national sites often during my studies	18.65%	36
3	Develop my musical or artistic characteristics	6.22%	12
4	Read more	13.47%	26
5	Be more exposed to books and or movies	16.58%	32
6	Be more exposed to political and/or social issues	17.62%	34
7	I didn't expect anything	4.15%	8
8	Other	0.52%	1
			193

Q4: Employability (TEXT)

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	I thought I was going to find a MORE INTERESTING job in my home country than if I had studied at a local university	17.14%	12
2	I was going to find a BETTER PAID job in my home country than if I had studied at a local university	31.43%	22
3	I was going to find a job in the UK and stay in the country	34.29%	24
4	I was going to find a job outside my home country but not necessarily in the UK	5.71%	4
5	I didn't think about this before my studies and just went with the flow	5.71%	4
6	I never expected to work in paid employment after graduation, only wanted the prestige of graduating from a master's degree.	4.29%	3
7	Other	1.43%	1
			70

Q5 How important it was for you to achieve the following outcomes after graduation?

#	Field	Extremely important	Very important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not at all important	Total
1	Securing good financial outcomes	48.57% 34	38.57% 27	8.57% 6	1.43% 1	2.86% 2	70
2	Having good social outcomes	20.00% 14	45.71% 32	32.86% 23	1.43% 1	0.00% 0	70
3	Having good cultural outcomes	14.29% 10	38.57% 27	35.71% 25	5.71% 4	5.71% 4	70
4	Finding a good job, one I really liked	52.86% 37	30.00% 21	11.43% 8	2.86% 2	2.86% 2	70
5	Finding a job quickly, even if it was not my ideal job	10.00% 7	24.29% 17	27.14% 19	15.71% 11	22.86% 16	70

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Q6: Employability: What was your expectation regarding employability?

#	Field	Choice Count	
5	Definitely not	5.80%	4
6	Probably not	2.90%	2
7	Might or might not	14.49%	10
8	Probably yes	23.19%	16
9	Definitely yes	53.62%	37
			69

Q7: Other expectations (TEXT)

"Learn more and find the most attractive direction of my future job, study and life."

"Critical and multi-dimensional thinking/analytical skills (Uncommon in traditional Chinese students)"

Q8: Graduation year

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	2016	1.49%	1
2	2017	4.48%	3
3	2018	16.42%	11
4	2019	17.91%	12
5	2020	22.39%	15
6	2021	34.33%	23
7	Other	2.99%	2
			67

Showing rows 1 - 8 of 8

Q9: Were you an international student?

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	Yes, I came from Europe	31.34%	21
2	No, I am from the UK	4.48%	3
3	Other	1.49%	1
4	Yes, I came from outside Europe	62.69%	42
			67

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Q10: Why did you select University A? <u>Several answers were allowed.</u>

#	Field		Choice Count
1	I believe in the prestige of the higher education system in the UK	25.40%	48
2	I wanted to study at University A regardless of location	7.94%	15
3	I wanted to be in London	25.40%	48
4	I wanted to work in London after graduation and the visa provided by the university supported this decision	7.41%	14
5	I wanted to study in English	7.41%	14
6	I wanted to study abroad and leave my home town and experience different things for a year	13.23%	25
7	I wanted to meet people from different cultures	11.64%	22
8	Other	1.59%	3
			189

Q11. What did you do immediately after studies?

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	I took an internship in the UK and left the country after it	7.69%	5
2	I found paid employment in the UK and stayed until now	12.31%	8
3	I searched but didn't find paid employment in the UK and left the country	13.85%	9
4	I stayed in the UK for a few months for leisure/travel and left the country after it	7.69%	5
5	I left the UK right away	26.15%	17
6	Other	32.31%	21
			65

Showing rows 1 - 7 of 7

Q12: When did you leave the UK after studies?

1	The same year	66.67%	38
2	1 year after my studies	5.26%	3
3	2 years after my studies	0.00%	0
4	3 years or later after my studies	1.75%	1
5	I didn't leave the UK after my studies	15.79%	9
6	Other	10.53%	6
			57

Showing rows 1 - 7 of 7

Q13: After studies, how long it took you to find a job?

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	Less than 3 months	40.00%	26
2	From 3 to 6 months	23.08%	15
3	From 6 to 9 months	4.62%	3
4	From 9 to 12 months	3.08%	2
5	More than 1 year	6.15%	4
6	I didn't look for a job after my studies	6.15%	4
7	Other	16.92%	11
			65

Showing rows 1 - 8 of 8

Q14 Why didn't you look for a job after graduation?

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	I didn't look for a job for cultural reasons	0.00%	0
2	I didn't look for a job for religion reasons	0.00%	0
3	I got married and wanted to raise a family	0.00%	0
4	I took care of elderly parents	0.00%	0
5	I started my own business	25.00%	1
6	I joined the family business (paid or unpaid)	25.00%	1
7	I tried but could not find a relevant job	0.00%	0
8	Other	50.00%	2
			4

Showing rows 1 - 9 of 9

Q15: After studies, what was your first salary equivalent in UK£?

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	Less than £30,000	45.31%	29
2	£30,000-£39,999	18.75%	12
3	£40,000-£49,999	9.38%	6
4	£50,000-$69,999	9.38%	6
5	£70,000-£99,999	1.56%	1
6	£100,000-£150,000	3.13%	2
7	More than £150,000	0.00%	0
8	I didn't earn any income when I first started working	3.13%	2
9	Other	9.38%	6
			64

Showing rows 1 - 10 of 10

Q16: What is your total income now?

#	Field		Choice Count
1	Less than £30,000	37.50%	24
2	£30,000-£39,999	15.63%	10
3	£40,000-£49,999	0.00%	0
4	£50,000-$69,999	10.94%	7
5	£70,000-£99,999	10.94%	7
6	£100,000-£150,000	10.94%	7
7	More than £150,000	1.56%	1
8	I don't earn any income now	10.94%	7
9	Other	1.56%	1
			64

Showing rows 1 - 10 of 10

Q17. After studies how would you describe the following outcomes?

#	Field	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Terrible	Total
1	Financial	21.67% 13	36.67% 22	31.67% 19	8.33% 5	1.67% 1	60
2	Social	28.33% 17	48.33% 29	11.67% 7	6.67% 4	5.00% 3	60
3	Cultural	26.67% 16	46.67% 28	20.00% 12	6.67% 4	0.00% 0	60
4	Employability	20.00% 12	53.33% 32	20.00% 12	6.67% 4	0.00% 0	60

Showing rows 1 - 4 of 4

Q18: Employment now: how would you describe your current job? Only text
N: 12

good

Just entered the first stage of my career. Although the salary is quite average, big four can be a good start for me.

1. Working at Big 4 in Kazakhstan, tough but interesting.

Wasn't the job I expected I will do.

very good…

124

Q 19 Indicate how the following factors have affected your financial outcomes?

#	Field	A great deal	A lot	A moderate amount	A little	None at all	Total
1	My studies in my home country	10.00% 6	21.67% 13	30.00% 18	16.67% 10	21.67% 13	60
2	My studies in the UK	30.00% 18	40.00% 24	23.33% 14	3.33% 2	3.33% 2	60
3	My family socio-economic status	23.33% 14	26.67% 16	25.00% 15	10.00% 6	15.00% 9	60
4	My social capital (friends, social network)	26.67% 16	18.33% 11	33.33% 20	11.67% 7	10.00% 6	60
5	My cultural capital (knowledge related to music, art, literature, etc)	18.33% 11	21.67% 13	25.00% 15	11.67% 7	23.33% 14	60

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Q20: Financial outcomes: Which of the following statements is closer to your financial outcomes?

#	Field	Choice Count
1	It has increased less than 20% since graduation of the MSc	20.00% 12
2	It has increased from 21-50% since graduation of the MSc	16.67% 10
3	It has increased more than 50% since graduation of the MSc	23.33% 14
4	It is lower now than before studying the MSc	3.33% 2
5	It remains the same as when I graduated from the MSc	21.67% 13
6	Other	15.00% 9
		60

Showing rows 1 - 7 of 7

Q21: Did your studies abroad contributed to your cultural capital?

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Definitely yes	61.67% 37
2	Probably yes	25.00% 15
3	Might or might not	6.67% 4
4	Probably not	3.33% 2
5	Definitely not	1.67% 1
6	Other	1.67% 1
		60

Q22: How did your studies abroad contribute to your cultural capital?

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	I was able to visit theatres, galleries and/or museums often during my studies	22.89%	38
2	I was able to visit national sites often during my studies	16.27%	27
3	I was able to develop my musical or artistic characteristics	11.45%	19
4	I was able to read more	13.25%	22
5	I was more exposed to books and or movies	11.45%	19
6	I was more exposed to political and/or social issues	19.88%	33
7	I don't enjoy anything culturally	1.20%	2
8	I didn't have any available time for cultural events/activities	1.81%	3
9	Other	1.81%	3
			166

Showing rows 1 - 10 of 10

Q23: Would your cultural capital outcome be better if you had studies at your home country instead? N: 58 less students answered this question.

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	Strongly disagree	41.38%	24
2	Somewhat disagree	31.03%	18
3	Somewhat agree	13.79%	8
4	Strongly agree	13.79%	8
			58

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Q24: Which of the following is closer to your social outcomes?

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	I have increased my personal network (friends)	29.22%	45
2	I have increased my professional network (useful contacts for work related matters)	24.03%	37
3	I am able to relate better with other people in social events and at work	21.43%	33
4	I feel more comfortable around people from other countries/cultures	23.38%	36
5	Nothing has changes socially for me	1.95%	3
6	Other	0.00%	0
			154

Q 25 Looking back in time, how have the following outcomes changed since your graduation?

#	Field	Far too much	Slightly too much	Neither too much nor too little	Slightly too little	Far too little	Total
1	Social outcomes	13.79% 8	29.31% 17	48.28% 28	6.90% 4	1.72% 1	58
2	Employability	24.14% 14	32.76% 19	36.21% 21	1.72% 1	5.17% 3	58
3	Financial outcomes	17.24% 10	32.76% 19	39.66% 23	6.90% 4	3.45% 2	58
4	Cultural outcomes	15.52% 9	32.76% 19	43.10% 25	6.90% 4	1.72% 1	58

Showing rows 1 - 4 of 4

Q26: How do you feel about your financial, social and cultural outcomes compared to what you expected before your studies?

Text.

"Better but still need to improve"

"Almost as expected"

N/A

"Improved a lot"

"For financial outcome, it didn't change much as I just graduated less than 2 years. For social and culture, I am much more diversity and enjoy making friends from different countries and places. Also, it would be much comfortable and confident with global colleagues."

Q 27 Looking back, do you think University A could have supported you in the following areas?

#	Field	Definitely yes	Probably yes	Probably not	Definitely not	Total
1	Increasing your financial outcomes by teaching more practical topics applicable to industry requirements, offer more support with career development etc.	36.21% 21	43.10% 25	17.24% 10	3.45% 2	58
2	Increasing your social outcomes by organising more social/networking events or reducing your study workload?	34.48% 20	39.66% 23	22.41% 13	3.45% 2	58
3	Increasing your cultural capital outcomes by sponsoring more cultural events or reducing your study workload?	17.24% 10	34.48% 20	41.38% 24	6.90% 4	58
4	Improving your employability outcomes by providing summer internships?	46.55% 27	36.21% 21	5.17% 3	12.07% 7	58

Showing rows 1 - 4 of 4

Q28: Priorities in outcomes

#	Field		Choice Count
1	Financial outcomes	23.98%	41
2	Social outcomes	25.15%	43
3	Cultural outcomes	22.22%	38
4	Employability	28.65%	49
			171

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Q29: Social Outcomes. How could your university in the UK help you develop better social outcomes?

#	Field		Choice Count
1	Organising more social events/parties	23.31%	38
2	Having more clubs/societies	9.82%	16
3	Having more sports-related events	10.43%	17
4	Organising more conferences and professional events where I could have networked with other students	19.02%	31
5	Organising more conferences and events where I could have networked with industry professionals.	19.63%	32
6	Having more team projects allowing me to work with students from other programmes	11.66%	19
7	The university provided with enough opportunities to network and/or socialise but I didn't have time to attend	3.07%	5
8	This is not relevant to me	2.45%	4
9	Other	0.61%	1
			163

Q30 How could University A have helped you increase employability outcomes? Multiple answers allowed: N: 184

#	Field		Choice Count
1	Organising more networking events with companies	18.48%	34
2	Organising more networking events with recruiters	20.65%	38
3	Organising company visits	19.57%	36
4	Offering training on skills rather than core concepts (programming, public speaking, etc)	17.93%	33
5	Providing better access to summer internships	20.11%	37
6	Not really, it is my responsibility as a student to develop my employability	1.63%	3
7	Other	1.63%	3
			184

Q31: Cultural Capital Outcomes? How could University A have helped you increase your cultural capital outcomes? Multiple answers allowed.

#		%	Count
3	Reducing students workload allowing for more time to attend cultural events	8.33%	9
1	Providing more information about theatres, galleries, museums and national sites	15.74%	17
2	Providing more information about musical events including concerts	14.81%	16
4	Providing extra-curricular activities related to the arts	18.52%	20
8	Other	2.78%	3
6	No, the university organised more cultural events and activities that the ones I could attend	1.85%	2
7	I was satisfied with the cultural offer of the university and if I didn't attend more events is because of personal choice	15.74%	17
5	Financing access to cultural events such as concerts or exhibitions	22.22%	24
			108

Q32. Do you think your university should have continues supporting you after the completion of your studies?

#	Field	Definitely yes		Probably yes		Probably not		Definitely not		Total
1	Higher financial outcomes	45.10%	23	43.14%	22	11.76%	6	0.00%	0	51
2	Higher social capital	49.02%	25	39.22%	20	11.76%	6	0.00%	0	51
3	Higher employability	56.86%	29	39.22%	20	3.92%	2	0.00%	0	51
4	Higher cultural capital	33.33%	17	33.33%	17	27.45%	14	5.88%	3	51

Showing rows 1 - 4 of 4

Q33: Gender

#	Field		Choice Count
1	Male	62.75%	32
2	Female	37.25%	19
3	Non-binary / third gender	0.00%	0
4	Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
5	Other	0.00%	0
			51

Q34: Age

#	Field		Choice Count
1	22-25	64.71%	33
2	26-30	25.49%	13
3	31-35	9.80%	5
4	36-40	0.00%	0
5	41-45	0.00%	0
6	46+	0.00%	0
7	Other	0.00%	0
9	Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
			51

Showing rows 1 - 9 of 9

Q 35: Ethnicity

#	Field		Choice Count
1	White	39.22%	20
2	Black or African American	3.92%	2
3	American Indian or Alaska Native	0.00%	0
4	Asian-non Chinese	11.76%	6
5	Chinese	33.33%	17
6	Other	11.76%	6
7	Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
			51

Q36 where were you born?

#	Field		Choice Count
1	North America	7.84%	4
2	Central or South America	3.92%	2
3	Europe Ex-United Kingdom	33.33%	17
4	United Kingdom	3.92%	2
5	Africa	5.88%	3
6	Asia- Ex-China	5.88%	3
7	China	29.41%	15
8	Australia	0.00%	0
9	India	3.92%	2
10	Other	5.88%	3
11	Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
			51

Showing rows 1 - 12 of 12

Q37 Where do you live now?

#	Field		Choice Count
1	North America	9.80%	5
2	Central or South America	0.00%	0
3	Europe - Ex United Kingdom	17.65%	9
4	United Kingdom	31.37%	16
5	Africa	0.00%	0
6	F. Asia - Ex-China	1.96%	1
7	China	23.53%	12
8	Australia	0.00%	0
9	India	3.92%	2
10	Other	11.76%	6
11	Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
			51

Q 38 Highest degree of education you have completed

#	Field		Choice Count
1	Bachelor's Degree	1.96%	1
2	Master's Degree	98.04%	50
3	Ph.D. or higher	0.00%	0
4	Other	0.00%	0
5	Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
			51

Showing rows 1 - 6 of 6

Q39 Marital Status

#	Field		Choice Count
1	Married	5.88%	3
2	Widowed	0.00%	0
3	Divorced	0.00%	0
4	Separated	0.00%	0
5	Never married	92.16%	47
6	Prefer not to say	1.96%	1
			51

Showing rows 1 - 7 of 7

Q 40: Do you have children?

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	Yes, 1	1.96%	1
2	Yes, 2	1.96%	1
3	Yes, 3 or more	0.00%	0
4	No	96.08%	49
5	Other	0.00%	0
6	Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
			51

Showing rows 1 - 7 of 7

Q 41 Religion

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	Catholicism/Christianity	39.22%	20
2	Judaism	0.00%	0
3	Islam	13.73%	7
4	Buddhism	3.92%	2
5	Hinduism	3.92%	2
6	Prefer not to say	17.65%	9
7	Other	21.57%	11
			51

Showing rows 1 - 8 of 8

Q 42 Current employment status?

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	Employed Full-Time	76.47%	39
2	Employed Part-Time	1.96%	1
3	Seeking opportunities	13.73%	7
4	Studying an working	0.00%	0
5	Studying and not working	1.96%	1
6	Other	5.88%	3
7	Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
			51

Showing rows 1 - 8 of 8

Q 43 What is your family highest level of education?

#	Field	They are not 17 years old yet	High school graduate	Bachelor's Degree	MAster's Degree	PhD or higher	Trade School	Prefer not to say	Total
1	Mother	1.96% 1	29.41% 15	39.22% 20	17.65% 9	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	11.76% 6	51
2	Father	1.96% 1	11.76% 6	39.22% 20	29.41% 15	5.88% 3	0.00% 0	11.76% 6	51
3	Oldest sibling	7.84% 4	11.76% 6	31.37% 16	33.33% 17	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15.69% 8	51

Showing rows 1 - 3 of 3

Q 44 Parents annual income?

#	Field	Not at paid employment	Less than £ $30,000	£30,000 - £49,999	£50,000 - £69,999	£70,000 - £89,999	£90,000 - £109,999	More than £110,000	Prefer not to say	Total
1	Father	5.88% 3	5.88% 3	3.92% 2	3.92% 2	5.88% 3	3.92% 2	33.33% 17	37.25% 19	51
2	Mother	19.61% 10	15.69% 8	3.92% 2	5.88% 3	3.92% 2	5.88% 3	9.80% 5	35.29% 18	51

Showing rows 1 - 2 of 2

Q 45 How often do you do the following things in the past 1-3 years?

#	Field	A great deal	A lot	A moderate amount	A little	None at all	Prefer not to say	Total
1	Visited a museum or an art exhibition	13.73% 7	11.76% 6	41.18% 21	25.49% 13	7.84% 4	0.00% 0	51
2	Watched a movie at the cinema	21.57% 11	27.45% 14	23.53% 12	23.53% 12	3.92% 2	0.00% 0	51
3	Visited an opera, ballet or classic concert	3.92% 2	5.88% 3	27.45% 14	27.45% 14	35.29% 18	0.00% 0	51
4	Been to the theatre	7.84% 4	5.88% 3	25.49% 13	37.25% 19	23.53% 12	0.00% 0	51
5	Went to a rock or pop concert	7.84% 4	5.88% 3	25.49% 13	15.69% 8	45.10% 23	0.00% 0	51

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Q 46 Do you play a musical instrument or sign in a group/choir?

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Yes	31.37% 16
2	No	68.63% 35
3	Other	0.00% 0
4	Prefer not to say	0.00% 0
		51

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Q 47 How often do you talk to others about the following topics?

#	Field	Always	Most of the time	About half the time	Sometimes	Never	Prefer not to say	Total
1	About books	7.84% 4	11.76% 6	11.76% 6	62.75% 32	5.88% 3	0.00% 0	51
2	About movies or TV programs	27.45% 14	15.69% 8	31.37% 16	25.49% 13	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	51
3	About works of art or art in general?	7.84% 4	5.88% 3	7.84% 4	56.86% 29	21.57% 11	0.00% 0	51
4	About political or social question	11.76% 6	25.49% 13	27.45% 14	33.33% 17	1.96% 1	0.00% 0	51

Showing rows 1 - 4 of 4

Q48 How much time do you spend reading on a day off?

	Field	Choice Count
.	Nothing at all	7.84% 4
	Less than an hour	19.61% 10
	1 hour	47.06% 24
	2 hours	19.61% 10
	3 or more hours	5.88% 3
	Other	0.00% 0
	Prefer not to say	0.00% 0
		51

Showing rows 1 - 8 of 8

Q 49 How accomplished do you feel?

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Extremely accomplished	5.88% 3
2	Somewhat accomplished	45.10% 23
3	Accomplished but could improve	39.22% 20
4	Not accomplished at all	9.80% 5
5	Other	0.00% 0
6	Prefer not to say	0.00% 0
		51

Showing rows 1 - 7 of 7

Q 50 could you meet me for an interview?

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Yes	70.59% 36
2	No	25.49% 13
4	Other	3.92% 2
		51

Appendix 3: Screenshots of codes created in Qualtrics.

Appendix 4: Sample of interview questions

INTERVIEW

Name:
Gender:
Age at the time of the interview:
Age at graduation:

Interview
Zoom link recording:

1. When did you graduate from the master's in management (year):
2. Tell me your story.
3. Expectation before studies?
4. Reality when you arrived in the UK.
5. Was it worth studying in the UK?
6. What was your social experience during your studies?
7. How did you manage diversity?
8. Since graduation, have you moved again?
9. Have you done further studies after graduation?
10. Do you plan to return to your hometown or are you in your hometown?
11. Tell me about your work now. What do you do? (Employability).
12. Annual income range in euros or GBP?
13. Do you think the degree in the UK has helped get to this role? How? Do you have better jobs after than before the degree? Has it taken you to the next level?
14. Did your parents attend university?
15. Do they work? Profession?
16. Do you have siblings?
17. Do they work? Profession
18. How many people in your family has degrees/ masters?
19. Are you married? Do you have children?
20. Is yes, what do they study?
21. Would you consider yourself and your family from high socio-economic status? Education, income, lifestyle.
22. What is your perception about your university in the UK?
23. Before you studied in the UK, what did you expect? (expectations).
24. Do you perceive that studying in London had increased your employability versus students that didn't study abroad? (employability). How much of this is thanks to these studies?
25. What did you gain from your stay in the UK? Cultural, social, network (reality).

Social and Cultural capital
26. Did you do something else other than studying? Visit museums, travel, attend conferences? Expected tom meet friends, connections, social, lots of international students?
27. What do you like to do when you are not working? (Cultural and social capital).
28. Has this changed since you studied in the UK, or you have always been like this? (Cultural and social capital)
29. Do you keep in touch with colleagues and friends, professors that you met during your studies?
30. How could universities and the UK improve the experience?
    a. Employability
    b. Social
    c. Cultural
31. Did you take advantage of the student visa to start working in London?

Summary:

32. If you had to summarise in one word your perceptions before studying in the UK, what would it be? And your experience while at university?
33. What do you think your outcomes were from your studies?

34. What would you have done different if you had the opportunity to choose a university/location/degree and start again?
35. What could universities in the UK do to make the experience of international students better?

Appendix 5: Ethics documents approved by Lancaster University

Educational Research | Lancaster University

21st January 2021

Dear Leila

Thank you for submitting your ethics application and additional information for **How international students' perceive their UK graduate education based on their socio-economic background and gender.** The information you provided has been reviewed and I can confirm that approval has been granted for this project.

As Principal Investigator your responsibilities include:

- ensuring that (where applicable) all the necessary legal and regulatory requirements in order to conduct the research are met, and the necessary licenses and approvals have been obtained;
- reporting any ethics-related issues that occur during the course of the research or arising from the research (e.g. unforeseen ethical issues, complaints about the conduct of the research, adverse reactions such as extreme distress) to the Research Ethics Officer (Dr Murat Oztok or Dr Natasa Lackovic).
- submitting details of proposed substantive amendments to the protocol to **Prof Carolyn Jackson** for approval.

Please do not hesitate to contact your supervisor if you require further information about this.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Doherty
Programme Co-ordinator
PhD in Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement

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-THE END-