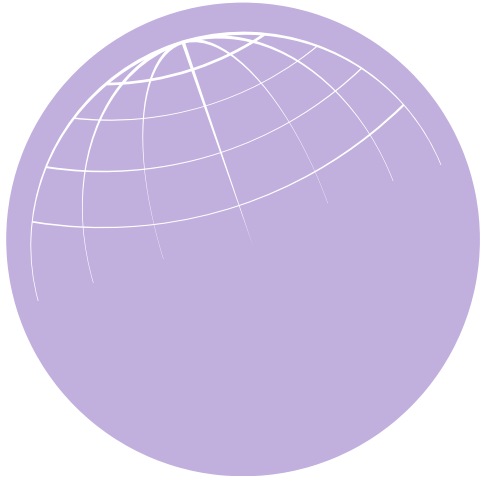


LONDON  
HIGHER



# BEYOND BORDERS

EXPLORING THE  
SOFT POWER  
OF LONDON'S  
UNIVERSITIES

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# FOREWORD

As a truly global city, London stands at the forefront of the UK's ability to wield influence and exert soft power on the world stage. The capital's world-class universities play a vital role in cultivating and projecting this soft power abroad.

London's higher education institutions attract the brightest minds from around the world, foster critical research collaborations that tackle global challenges, and produce graduates who go on to become leaders and innovators across multiple sectors and industries internationally. The phenomenal academic excellence, cutting-edge research, and diverse cultural vibrancy of London create an unparalleled engine for generating new knowledge, artistic expression, entrepreneurial thinking and technological breakthroughs.

This concentration of intellectual capital cements London's position as a global hub with influential soft power. The universities in London propagate values of openness, creativity, democracy and free speech around the world through their teaching, research endeavours and networks of international alumni. In this interconnected world, soft power assets like London's higher education sector are invaluable for promoting stability, cross-cultural understanding and cooperation to address shared global issues.

This is why it has been my priority as 695th Lord Mayor of the City of London to bring together thought leaders from the scientific, academic, and business worlds to demonstrate the City's strengths in solving global challenges through my 'Connect to Prosper' approach.

This report aligns with this mission and comprehensively demonstrates how the global impact and esteem of London's universities contribute tremendously to the economic and societal benefit of the UK as a whole. It is therefore of paramount importance that policymakers across the board appreciate the full value of Brand London in higher education, and take every measure to protect, sustain and nurture the international pre-eminence of the capital's academic institutions. Doing so will ensure the UK's enduring status as a trusted partner and influential voice internationally for generations to come.

**Professor Michael Mainelli**  
**Lord Mayor of the City of London, 2023-24**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

London represents a significant asset for the UK in today's interconnected world. Amidst global change and instability, London's capacity to forge networks, exert influence, and draw in resources remains paramount. This could not be achieved without the universities and other higher education institutions that attract international talent, investment and collaboration, contributing significantly to the UK's global success. This report explains and showcases the importance of London and its higher education sector to UK soft power, and how this is leveraged for the benefit of British society and its economy. By outlining what soft power is and why it matters, we can clearly situate the contributions of London and its higher education sector to perceptions of the UK, the British national image and to UK plc. Research and innovation, strategic partnerships, mobilities of students, alumni and researchers, and wider knowledge exchange are all significant contributors to a strong higher education sector, which in turn, is a fundamental part of British appeal and soft power.

This report comes at a critical juncture. With a new Mayoral term underway and a new government in place, we now have political alignment in City Hall and Westminster, and a renewed chance for universities to play a pivotal role in regional growth, national success, and international influence. We are keen that policymakers recognise and champion this, and work with London's higher education sector to tackle global issues, such as reaching Net Zero by 2050. Such issues require cooperation at multiple levels with multiple stakeholders. London's higher education sector is a great example of partnership working for shared prosperity, and an important resource for leaders to draw from as they seek to cement the UK's leadership on the world stage. Its influence goes beyond borders, with London alumni making contributions across the globe and across disciplines. Mobilities, including exchange programmes and research collaborations, create lasting connections with the UK and promote investment and business opportunities that benefit the country.

To maintain London's status as a soft power asset, we ask:

## **The UK government to:**

1. champion London's status as a globally destination of choice and recognise the benefits this brings to the entire country by protecting the Graduate Route visa to retain skilled talent and remain internationally competitive, also supporting the transition from the Graduate Route to other routes such as the Skilled Worker visas; and
2. maintain international research collaboration (e.g. through Horizon Europe and future framework programmes) and expand the Turing scheme to include inbound staff mobility and research exchanges, to facilitate opportunities for collaboration.

**The Mayor of London to:**

1. work with London's higher education sector to maintain the capital's status as the world's best student city through support of London Higher's Study London campaign;
2. strengthen support for spinouts and start-ups to secure London's status as an attractive location to build businesses in important sectors and increase graduate retention; and
3. help leverage the influence of higher education institutions in regional diplomatic efforts, such as hosting or partnering for inbound international delegations that the mayor receives, providing opportunities to foster greater collaboration.

**The higher education sector to:**

1. ensure employers understand the Graduate Route and how it can help meet high-level skills demands in the labour market; and
2. work closely with organisations like the British Council, City of London Corporation and Mayor of London to advance soft power through knowledge and cultural diplomacy, such as through the establishment of ambassadors to promote London's status as a global destination of choice in several key sectors (e.g. working with prominent arts graduates to promote the cultural industries and their importance).
3. Work with organisations like the US-UK Fulbright Commission to champion opportunities for students and faculty to engage in international exchange and facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

# CHAPTER 1

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'SOFT POWER'?

Soft power – defined as influence via attraction and persuasion rather than coercion – has the ability to shape people's perceptions of trust, stability, and the overall image of a country. This has been previously demonstrated through research undertaken by the British Council, perhaps the most well-known organisation for fostering international cultural relations and a leading contributor to UK soft power. In times of political uncertainty, warm relations can be sustained through effective knowledge and cultural diplomacies to maintain underlying relationships and global standing.

The UK Soft Power Group (UKSPG), jointly convened by the British Council and the British Foreign Policy Group, produced a report entitled 'The Future of UK Soft Power: Building a Strategic Framework'. The report mapped the UK's soft power assets and provided a series of recommendations to enable them to flourish. It highlighted the world-class science, technology, research and education offerings as integral to the UK's appeal:

*"The UK boasts a highly respected higher education sector, home to four of the top ten universities globally. Its world-leading higher education and research institutions attract talent from across the world, which not only brings direct economic benefits to the UK, but also nurtures vast networks of international exchange of ideas and people and embeds longer-term partnerships in which mobility is also boosted."*

Throughout this report we therefore aim to highlight the contributions of London graduates and higher education in general to global society for common good and progress, celebrating collaboration and cooperation. These efforts are essential to secure the UK's global position as a trusted international partner that 'has a vital role to play as a source of stability and security'.

## SOFT POWER AND KNOWLEDGE DIPLOMACY IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)'s annual Soft Power Index, measures the number of serving world leaders educated abroad. In 2023, the UK trailed only the United States for world leaders educated (58 to 65), with an overall 43% of world leaders being educated in the UK or the US. This is far ahead of the next best-placed countries (France at 34; Russia at 9) and is a useful proxy for indicating high-level influence on the world stage.

UKSPG lists 'advancing international leadership and influence' as a core function of soft power assets, hence why the HEPI Index is a useful starting point for demonstrating the value of higher education to UK soft power. Nevertheless, we think it is important to go beyond heads of state and government to explore the ways in which graduates from London's higher education institutions are impacting global societies, and how this in turn benefits the UK and the world. In addition, university leaders, researchers and teachers educated in the UK will be drawn to collaborating with the country, as detailed in our section on student mobility.

Showcasing the contributions of London's universities and graduates is also critical given current rhetoric and policy developments, such as the limits to dependant visas for international students and the Migration Advisory Committee's rapid review of the Graduate route visa commissioned by the Home Secretary. We build upon research undertaken by HEPI/Kaplan International Pathways/ Universities UK International/London Economics identifying the economic benefits of international students to the UK economy (£41.9 billion in 2021/22, with £9.59 billion of this impact coming from London's international students), demonstrating the global impact our graduates have in advancing knowledge equity and disciplines at the forefront of progress: climate science, medicine and healthcare, arts and the creative industries, technology and more. Soft power and non-state diplomacies are vital mechanisms through which the UK can maintain its global standing and foster relations in the spirit of cooperation and collaboration across the globe. London is a major contributor to the UK's global soft power, and in turn, higher education is a fundamental part of the city's appeal and offering. A thriving university sector establishes lasting relationships across the globe, drives the economy and shapes society.

This report paints a picture of the global impact of London's universities, the importance of international partnerships, and the key role of Brand London and its higher education sector to UK plc. Conversations with several London institutions, Vice-Chancellors, Directors of International, prominent organisations like the British Council and US-UK Fulbright Commission, peers and members of Parliament have allowed us to capture examples of where the reputation and strength of 'London HE' has been an asset to the UK.

The attractiveness of brand London, with its cultural offering and vibrant higher education landscape is important to the UK, its national image, economy and overall soft power. The collective strength and appeal of education and culture is evident in Portland Communications' Soft Power 30 Index, stating that 'the UK's greatest soft power strengths remains in the Culture and Education sub-indices'. Indeed, Portland ranked the UK second in both education and culture soft power globally, trailing only the United States. With this context in mind, we further explore why soft power matters, how effective utilisation of soft power assets can benefit a country, and how London fits into this picture.

## WHY DOES SOFT POWER MATTER AND WHY IS IT A GOOD THING TO CULTIVATE?

The UK benefits economically and socially from creating and maintaining warm international relations. Separate from military 'hard power', soft power can influence perceptions of trust, stability, and overall image of a country. In times of political uncertainty, knowledge and culture diplomacies can sustain underlying relationships, allowing the UK to maintain its global status. The UK Soft Power Group (UKSPG) notes that soft power is 'a central part of national 'branding', which governments increasingly draw on to achieve key international objectives – many of the UK's ambitions, including excellence in science and technology, support for democracy and liberal values, expanding our partnerships, and enhancing global resilience against upstream threats, are aided by a thriving and coordinated soft power sector that promotes the UK's values and influence in the international community.' It adds that if soft power assets such as education are 'successfully harnessed, they are of significant utility as prominent components within the UK's foreign policy and diplomatic arsenal.'

In short, UKSPG states that soft power assets can:

1. improve domestic and international peace and security;
2. advance international leadership and influence;
3. improve economic resilience; and
4. support levelling up.

It is important to address the latter points from a London point of view – regional prosperity and productivity are critical for the UK, and the entire country should be empowered to flourish and contribute to the UK's economy and immense cultural offering. Nevertheless, levelling up cannot and should not mean levelling down London. As put forth in our recent general election manifesto, London is the UK's only truly global city – and a destination of choice for business and finance. It competes with the foremost major world cities like New York, Tokyo and Shanghai, and outstrips Paris and Madrid as Europe's leading destination for FDI (foreign direct investment). Indeed, London and New York are the only world cities ranked 'Alpha ++' by the Globalization and World Cities Research Network (GaWC), reflecting their connectivity, integration and global economic importance. The UK's next highest-ranked cities are Manchester and Edinburgh, six ranks lower.

London's importance to the national economy is evident. Department for Business and Trade (DBT) figures show that London accounts for £190 billion of the UK's total exports – nearly a third (29.1%). Similarly, the direct economic benefit of education to the UK economy is clear: figures from the Department for Education (DfE) show that in 2021, education exports and transnational education (TNE) were worth £27.9 billion to the British economy, with higher education accounting for 77.9% of this figure. This includes income such as tuition fees, living expenditure, research income, and IP income. The total value of education exports has risen by 75% since 2010. For context, the food and drink sector's 2022 record-high figure of £24.8 billion accounts for £3 billion less.



Of course, higher education does not account for all trade happening in London, however the above figures illustrate the direct impact of higher education to the economy and as a consequence, the importance of London to the UK. London's appeal as a place to study and live is evident from its accolades: the capital has been ranked as the [Best Student City](#) for six consecutive years by QS; the third most visited city in the world, per Mastercard's [Global Destination Cities Index 2019](#); and the soft power and high skills capital of the world, per [Deloitte. Centre for London research](#) summarises London's attractiveness and highlights the city's "famous educational, cultural and sporting institutions" as being key to [London's appeal](#). Beyond economics, the British Council's 2023 [Global Perceptions Survey](#) shows the UK ranks second overall for overall attractiveness amongst G20 nations as a destination. It also warns that 'there is no room for complacency'. With the UK perceived as a valuable and trustworthy partner for economic, sociocultural and knowledge exchange and cooperation, assets that underpin the UK's soft power must be championed and invested in to enhance our global competitiveness – in this case, we are making the argument for London and its higher education sector.

## WHY IS SOFT POWER IN THIS FORM A GOOD THING TO CULTIVATE?

Nowadays, London's influence on the global stage takes the form of a partnership that works around shared understanding and aims. The power the capital wants to exert is the kind that, [in the words of the British Council](#), 'support[s] peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust' between nations in mutually beneficial ways. Putting the ideas, individuals and products of London universities out there across the globe means being a productive, innovative and responsible part of a two-way conversation. This voice in a shared conversation is doubly important in the context of the significant global challenges that we are currently facing such as climate change and human migration, which can only be tackled as a collective. The work being done at London's universities has a role to play in international conversations that benefits society globally and should not be considered only in a UK-only context.

We know that international students put careful thought into which subject areas are most valuable to employers and the world around them. Research from the [Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services](#) makes it clear that international students give consideration to the advantages of Healthcare, Medicine and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects and the types of organisations it is possible to work in with these subjects. These are all areas that share a high level of societal impact and benefit, when graduates leave London to enter the working world either back in their home countries or elsewhere in the world, they both carry soft power abroad and spread the benefits of their London education globally.

London's higher education institutions are employing various measures to avoid perpetrating international 'brain drain' or human capital flight from other countries. Modern technology can offer residents of other parts of the world an education they would previously have had to travel to London to get. There are also open access journals, online and hybrid conferences and employability opportunities, and new technological ways of engaging with higher education. New initiatives and pilot programmes are establishing new ways of linking students, researchers and knowledge around the world, such as SOAS's 2023 announcement of its equal partnership research degree with South Africa's University of the Witwatersrand. This degree considers 'the impact of climate breakdown, financialisation and the pandemic on wellbeing in Africa' using a new educational model to bring mutually beneficial opportunities to researchers across the world, whether they go on to contribute to conversations about climate adaptability as academics, in the international workforce, or as private citizens.

Higher education's activities responding to the climate crisis more broadly can be a good example of the positive role London's soft power plays in the wider world. Tackling climate breakdown requires input from many disciplines, participants inside and outside academia, and all around the world. The urgency of the issue requires many strands of work to happen simultaneously across all continents. The United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) publishes large-scale research projects into many aspects of climate change, most notably their assessment reports providing some of the most complete international data on the changing climate. London is the third largest contributor of researchers to IPCC reports, across London Higher member institutions and other higher education institutions in the capital, behind only Beijing and Tokyo. The sixteen contributions across four recent large-scale reports show London using its voice to have its research findings in climate crisis-related fields heard on the world stage, and in turn using that voice to benefit global efforts to combat the climate emergency. London's scientific expertise is worth sharing with the world; London institutions are represented in the global top twenty ranked institutions for Environmental Science, Chemistry, Physics & Astronomy, Biology and Geography, as per the 2024 QS international subject rankings.

When London uses its excellent expertise, resources, academics, students and researchers to take part in international conversations, the benefits are global. With reference to improving domestic/international peace and security and advancing international leadership and influence, we detail a case study from King's College London as an example of how expertise and excellence in the capital has benefits for global peace and prosperity through partnership working.

## CASE STUDY

The African Leadership Centre ([ALC](#)) is a collaboration between King's College London and the University of Nairobi, Kenya. With sites in London and Nairobi, the ALC '[aims to develop a new community of leaders generating cutting edge-knowledge for peace, security and development in Africa](#)'. It does this through its Fellowship programmes for African Scholars/African Women and King's-based postgraduate degree programmes in Global Leadership in relation to peace and development. The ALC was founded by Professor 'Funmi Olonisakin, a King's alumna, Professor of Security, Leadership and Development and King's current Vice-President International, Engagement and Service. Over the past two decades, around [150 scholars from 22 African countries](#) have been educated through the ALC. This venture seeks to shape African leaders, centre their ideas, and place them at the heart of policy decision-making that affects the continent – it is based on the upskilling, production and exchange of knowledge to transform society. The ALC's presence in Nairobi is significant – the Kenyan capital is home to the [United Nations' \(UN\) African headquarters](#), one of the UN's four major world sites and a global diplomatic hub. King's' annual [Africa Week](#) is a celebration of the partnership and collaborative work the institution does with African institutions, also convening leading experts and policymakers. The opening [keynote event](#) for Africa Week 2024 included remarks from Their Excellencies the High Commissioners of Kenya, Zambia and Namibia to the UK, highlighting how London higher education facilitates global knowledge exchange.

The [School of Security Studies](#) at King's College London is also renowned as a world-leading hub of research and knowledge that directly influences policy and practice. It offers multiple [postgraduate programmes](#) in academic fields such as conflict resolution and international peacebuilding, and its community of experts actively supports the construction of peaceful and stable societies across the world. The annual [London Defence Conference](#) tackles issues surrounding regional and international security – speakers have included the British Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Secretary, the President of Poland, and the [Prime Minister of Kosovo](#).

The above case study is an illustration of the expertise and excellence housed within London higher education, its contribution to the UK's international relationships, its leadership on the world stage, and its convening power. The following chapter predominantly focuses on the inward-facing benefits of cultivating soft power.

# CHAPTER 2

## LEVERAGING SOFT POWER FOR UK SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

A strong higher education sector in the capital facilitates trade and boosts income, but beyond this, its prestige attracts global skilled talent, promotes research collaborations and enables knowledge exchange. Clearly, the attractiveness and reputation of London HE results in economic, social and cultural benefit for the UK.

### ECONOMIC IMPACT

The UK HE sector's contribution of £115.7 billion to the economy in 2021-22, supporting 385,500 FTE jobs directly and a further 382,500 in the wider economy, is a testament to its economic importance. London's higher education institutions alone contribute £27bn in economic output, £14.8bn in gross value added, and support 125,800 jobs – all of which are the highest figures nationally, making it a crucial economic hub. London's higher education institutions also produce over 140,000 skilled graduates every year, ranking as the foremost global city for a highest educated and skilled population.

The importance of international students to the economy is also well laid out, with a net benefit of £9.59bn produced by London's international students on the UK economy in 2021/22, equating to an average net impact in London of £131 million per constituency, or £1,040 per resident. In almost all London constituencies (prior to the 2023 Boundary Commission review), international students generate a net economic impact of over £75 million – and the capital is home to seven of the top 20 parliamentary constituencies generating the greatest net impact from international students. These include West Ham (ranking 7th), Bethnal Green and Bow (10th), East Ham (11th), Bermondsey & Old Southwark (12th), Poplar and Limehouse (13th) and Brent (19th). Holborn and St Pancras, Sir Keir Starmer's seat, ranks second nationally with £291m of net economic impact by international students. Given the current policy and political climate which has led to changes to the dependant visa and a review of the Graduate Route, it is essential to emphasise that international students are massive contributors to, rather than a drain on, the economy. With over 27% (98,000 of 359,000+) of international first-year students based in London, and with a third of students in the capital being international, London's position as a global destination of choice is clear. London Higher intends to keep it this way, through the upcoming launch of the Study London campaign which aims to highlight why London is still a great place for students to study in.

## SPINOUTS AND INVESTMENT

In addition to economic production and the training of highly skilled graduates, London's mighty research base attracts investment, enables skilled graduates to kickstart their entrepreneurial journeys, and drives national growth. Spinouts enable HEIs to commercialise intellectual property and research done at the cutting edge, contributing to the UK economy and developing new technologies and initiatives that benefit society and tackle global challenges, such as in the fields of clinical diagnostics, medical devices and healthcare products, and clean technology, to name a few. Beauhurst research spotlights the University of Greenwich's [Carbon8 Systems](#), as an example of a spinout 'at the forefront of technological advancement within the UK, tackling the most pressing global problems'. Its [Spotlight on Spinouts](#) report shows London is a [hub for university spinouts](#), with the local authorities of Camden (with 57 spinouts) and Westminster (48) placing in the top ten nationwide. They are home to a comparable number of spinouts as the entire cities of Manchester, Cambridge and Bristol, respectively. Imperial College London ranks third nationally for most university spinouts (108), with UCL (90) and the Royal College of Art (67) also featuring in the top ten. King's College London is featured as an institution exhibiting particularly fast growth over 2021-2023, with its spinouts raising £534m in equity investment. 27% of spinout directors (1,204 of 4,457) are non-UK nationals, with the US, Ireland, Germany, China, Italy, Australia, France, Netherlands, Spain and Canada forming the top ten. The geographically diverse nature of these directors indicates the global appeal of doing business in the UK.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY AND TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION

International mobilities, both inbound and outbound, are vital mechanisms that develop cross-cultural competence, intelligence and trust. British Council research lays out that [international student mobility \(ISM\)](#) enhances the understanding of a host country's language, customs, traditions and values, fostering trust and developing more global perspectives. It is an important asset for soft power: alumni who have a positive experience spread the word, influencing future ISM decisions. London's position as Best Student City is testament to its wide-ranging cultural offer and has stood strong against wider rhetoric that seeks to downplay the importance of international students. A 2023 [report](#) for the International Higher Education Commission (IHEC) examines the role of internationalised curricula at home, arguing that knowledge diplomacy – in this case the convening of domestic/international students in outwards-looking institutions – will grow more important in the transfer of knowledge solutions for global use. Increased internationalisation, whether through curriculum design or mobilities, influences perceptions of the UK, contributes to soft power, and can lead to longer-term connections. The transfer of these solutions, and the wider impact of London graduates to society is further explored in our next chapter.

British Council [analysis](#) highlights that those who study in the UK: (i) have more personal connections to the country; (ii) gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of the UK; and (iii) trust the government and its people more in comparison to those who do not study here. There are multiple mobility programmes and initiatives which seek to improve cross-cultural understanding, foster collaboration and solidify warm relations, such as Fulbright scholarships. [The US-UK Fulbright Commission](#) supports postgraduate mobilities (Master's and Doctoral level), in addition to scholar awards for lecturers and researchers. There have been over 24,000 US-UK exchanges since 1948, with a global community of almost [400,000](#) Fulbright alumni. More than 2,500 of these were linked to London institutions. For 2023-24, there are 12 postgraduate and two scholar Fulbrighters at London institutions, and recent alumni are testament to the power of funded mobility schemes – the British Council report on ISM notes that 'the affection and connections which ISM develop with the UK may then also be carried forward into academic or business careers which are connected to the city or region of the UK in which they studied'.

Take, for example, [Aram Tufan](#), a University of Westminster alum who founded Happy Student, a platform designed to help students navigate new cities and facilitate their university experience in the round. Aram, a Turkish student, drew on his experience in London to create a platform via the university's '[Students as Co-Creators](#)' programme that led to him being shortlisted in the [Great British Entrepreneur Awards](#). Aram has been inspired by his links to London, creating a product to enhance international student experience and championing all that the capital has to offer. Aram's story is powerful – and speaks to a wider point. 38% of all student start-ups [are founded in London](#). If international students feel welcome, inspired and supported throughout their time in the capital, they can develop as entrepreneurs, and choose to invest in the UK. Beyond their economic value, these international students enrich London's higher education sector, interacting with their UK peers, creating deep links to the country and its culture, and sustaining relationships that lead to longer-term links.

Mobility also profoundly impacts London students, empowering them to go on and make a difference; according to [Alumni research](#) done to celebrate 75 years of the US-UK Fulbright Commission, 94% of respondents said the exchange had a significant impact on their life.

An example of a London student Fulbrighter whose experience has aided the impact they are making in the world is Dr Amel Ibrahim, an academic clinician with a background in surgery and regenerative medicine. After graduating from Imperial with a BSc in Immunobiology & Pathology and MBBS Medicine, she successfully undertook a PhD in regenerative medicine at University College London alongside core surgical training and a plastic surgery academic registrar position. Her research focused on combining computational biology, nanotechnology and stem cell biology to tissue engineer personalised bone implants for treating craniofacial defects in children. She is now in New York having been awarded the Fulbright scholarship to develop her work in biotechnology and healthcare innovation at New York University. She has since founded a biotech startup based in Harlem called Bioworkshop which has developed a

human relevant drug discovery & development platform to make drug R&D more accurate and efficient. In the spirit of the Fulbright Amel continues to bridge her work in the US with the UK. She has built collaborations with academics at UK Universities such as UCL for Bioworkshop and is also founder of a UK-based telehealth dermatology startup called City Skin Clinic.

Transnational education (TNE) is another form of educational mobility, allowing a vast international population to benefit from British higher education delivered locally. TNE is a critical part of the UK's global education offering, central to the UK's education export figure and allowing the British system and curriculum to be available to a large proportion of the world's population. It fosters ties to British institutions (through degrees awarded by our universities or the presence of branch campuses) and can create net positive multipliers, improving perceptions of the UK abroad. It is too substantial to cover fully in this report; Universities UK International (UUKi) has produced a report that captures the scale of TNE by level of study and global region.

Mobilities of all forms improve learning gains: aiding academic progress and cross-disciplinary interaction, promoting a values-based approach to learning and creating inclusive and global outlooks in students. The experience of global connections and international networks brings together diverse multiple perspectives, underpins the educational experience, and contributed to strong student outcomes, as put forth by the London School of Economics and Political Science's analysis of its performance in the 2023 Teaching Excellence Framework, where the university was rated Gold for this indicator.

## RESEARCH AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

In addition to educational mobilities, strategic and research partnerships are also core parts of soft power cultivation, not only for economic benefits, but more broadly in terms of perceptions of the UK as a trustworthy partner and a destination of choice for research and investment. Uncertainty over the UK's association to Horizon Europe and Copernicus, the European Union's flagship framework programme for research, development and innovation, damaged perceptions of the UK as a valuable international partner. Despite the UK government underwriting funding guarantees, universities across the country have relayed how there was still reluctance to involve UK partners in funding bids, unsure whether they would hold up their end of the deal. UK academics were also unable to act as lead partners on large-scale projects. Challenges such as climate change and pandemics are global, necessitating cross-border collaboration to tackle them. Strengthening and securing participation in multilateral programmes like Horizon (and its successor programmes) allows London, the UK's top-ranked innovation cluster, to build on its substantial research base, contributing towards solving global issues and driving growth in key sectors such as technology (including AI), renewable energy and sustainability, health, creative and more.

Bilateral partnerships also have the power to strengthen UK plc, with the leadership and influence of London's universities felt on the world stage.

## CASE STUDY

The Royal Veterinary College (RVC)'s memorandum of understanding with Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore is a pioneering partnership that will showcase and harness the excellence of a London university for international benefit. RVC is the top-ranked veterinary school in the world (QS, 2024), and its partnership with NTU will enable the creation of the first and only veterinary medical degree programme in Singapore, advancing Singapore's national research expertise and building capacity for the country to flourish as a hub of veterinary excellence in Southeast Asia. By working in partnership with NTU Singapore in country, RVC is advancing UK leadership in the vital fields of health, disease and pandemic preparedness, and food chain resilience. Equitable and bilateral partnerships such as this demonstrate the value of working with UK institutions, further paving the way for investment and collaboration into the UK.

The above case study is a snapshot of how London universities work collaboratively, the national and international benefits this brings, and the importance of our higher education sector to shaping perceptions, influencing mobility and partnership decisions, and the impact this has on UK economy and society.



# CHAPTER 3

## GLOBAL LONDON: WHAT LONDON UNIVERSITIES CREATE

In this final chapter, we will consider the results and outputs of London's global higher education presence. In other words, what is developed when London universities work to extend their presence and voice around the globe which might otherwise not exist? This chapter will consider the outcomes of students, researchers, staff and alumni using their voices and being an influential part of conversations happening around the world.

### SHARING CAMPUSES, SHARING COURSES

Several of London's higher education institutions operate branch campuses abroad as part of their transnational education offering. As of 2023, there were five London Higher member institutions represented in the Universities UK International network for issues related to overseas campuses. These institutions have campuses operating in three continents in countries as diverse as France, Mauritius, China, Malta, and Uzbekistan, among others. Extending the prestige of London's institutions into other countries offers young people who may not have the opportunity to move to the UK the chance to study for British degrees within British frameworks, with the recognisable name of a London university attached. We know from roundtable discussions we have hosted with current international students that London's courses are widely respected for their approaches to career preparation and up-to-date innovation and technology and that this is a key motivator for prospective students choosing to study here. Graduates from branch campuses of London institutions get to experience the same course design, learning in English, and in many cases having the opportunity to travel to London for part of their studies. These students can benefit from an internationalised curriculum, learning the career-readiness skills that are prioritised and valued in UK degrees, alongside cultural and linguistic competency.

The training of internationally mobile, ambitious graduates with a London institution named on their degree certificate, practiced English skills and cultural and social awareness of Britain also benefits London and the UK more widely. Whether these graduates move to the UK, stay in their home countries or move elsewhere upon graduation, awareness of London's cultural, academic and career-building practice can build social bridges and aid networking and diplomacy across cultures. We have seen this in the relationship between India and the UK and the 'Living Bridge' connecting the two nations' cultures. Someone who studied English law in Singapore or a co-designed Engineering course in China will find areas of commonality with British professionals in their later careers. Experience of our education frameworks, learning in English (alongside some positive memories of a study trip to London in many cases) creates workers and researchers around the world ready to join a negotiation on the same page.

There are many models for courses being offered at branch campuses overseas. Joint programmes delivered internationally across multiple institutions are not a zero-sum game where benefits are divided between nations and education providers with one country 'winning' the deal. Across the many models of joint and dual degrees, as well as progression and articulation agreements, many programmes offer experiential and theoretical education that would not have been possible in only one country, with methods that maximise the benefits for both host institutions and nations. SOAS University of London's equitable partnership model for their programmes taught across multiple nations, for example, focuses specifically on disciplines that can best be studied in an internationally mobile context with the involvement of lower and higher income nations – such as Global Urban Sociology, Environmental Justice, and Applied Development Economics, taught in India and South Africa. This is all done with the aim that resources, excellence and expertise promote and maximise the voice of London in international development without taking away from or taking advantage of other nations.

In the context of changing relationships between the UK and other countries, such as due to Brexit and recent visa changes which have impacted rates of students entering the UK, branch campuses can enable continuity and another way of offering British education, that will not be impacted by foreign policy changes in the same way. It is true that there is significant financial risk in opening branch campuses, and that international regulatory change can impact the ability to operate campuses abroad and offer students mobility opportunities. Considered alongside other types of international student mobility, bringing courses to students in other countries in addition to bringing students to the UK to study creates a diverse variety of pathways for international learners to study for British degrees.

## THE POWER OF LONDON ALUMNI

Biographies and profiles of Christopher Nolan frequently begin with his time at University College London. One example is this extended profile in the New York Times. Following his film *Oppenheimer* winning seven Academy Awards in 2023 and becoming one of the most successful and widely discussed features of the season, these profiles have become increasingly widely read. Fans of his films as well as aspiring filmmakers researching how he became one of his generation's most celebrated directors will read about his early experiences studying English Literature at UCL, originally choosing the institution because of its filming and editing facilities, and then meeting people he has now worked with for decades while running a student film society. The name of UCL sitting next to the most recent Oscar winner for Best Director and Best Picture spotlights the institution and London in general as a place to start a creative career. This is just one example of the way in which alumni from London HEIs subtly increase the soft power and prestige of London institutions, directing potential learners around the world towards the many and varied careers that can start with a degree in London.

This is not only true for creative subjects. The most recent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data release on intellectual property and spinout income reports that Queen Mary University of London leads the country in income from social enterprise ventures.

The School of Business and Management cultivates a social venture fund to engage students in the business of setting up social enterprise early in their careers, establishing the skills in their student body that they will go on to implement in business careers across industries and continents. 41% of students at this institution are international students, and we know from our conversations with London's [international student community](#) that the opportunity to gain practical skills in launching ventures and getting ahead in the business world is a key reason they chose London as a study destination. Perceiving London as an exciting place to incubate new business ventures positively impacts perceptions of the city as well as British higher education and the UK as a whole.

Medical research is also a key driver of soft power and prestige for universities. Since the high-profile efforts of the Covid-19 pandemic era, vaccine development has been at the forefront of conversations about medical innovation. The [Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine](#) against Covid-19 increased the popularity of University of Oxford across the world and brought attention to the Jenner Institute and its wider work. London HEIs are at the forefront of battles against other diseases – such as the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine's [collaborative Strep A vaccine research](#) with partners in Scotland and South Korea, Imperial College London's [Network for Vaccine Research's](#) findings on markers in the blood of long covid sufferers, and [breakthroughs in breast cancer treatment](#) discovered at the Institute of Cancer Research, London. When HEIs invest in research into vaccines and new medical treatments, they attach their names to products with long afterlives that create serious positive impacts for thousands of people around the world.

Alumni from London HEIs who go out in the world to think creatively and drive change in an international context in a huge variety of fields ensure that London's soft power increases. More than can be achieved with any marketing campaign, having real alumni from London HEIs in contributing to many different industries makes it clear to the world that London's universities prepare their students well for careers in all types of sectors. We know from [2021 British Council](#) data that educational and cultural exchange is one of the largest contributors to global trust in the UK as a nation, and alumni are living, breathing examples of where that exchange can take you. Meeting London alumni in other countries, whether they are British domestic students who have moved abroad or international students returning to their home nations or third countries, is the most tangible proof of the value of London higher education's brand and value.

This report is accompanied by a map showing alumni from London's universities who have gone on to create an impact either in the UK or across the world.

## CASE STUDY

The Westminster Working Cultures (WWC) programme works to bring the University of Westminster's current students (both domestic and international), alumni active in various fields and the international business community closer together. The WWC programme offers current students the opportunity to undertake professional development with Westminster alumni who live and work in various countries. The showcasing aspect of the project works in two directions at once that reinforce each other – potential industries and destinations to work and live are shown to the students, sometimes in emerging economies and cultural environments very different from the UK's, at the same time as Westminster's ambitious, diverse student body makes its presence known in working cultures around the world.

The programme grew out from its earliest incarnation in 2017, in which a small group of Westminster students travelled to Hong Kong to explore the local working environment with alumni of the university. The successful relationships established between students, alumni and Hong Kong workers enabled the repetition and expansion of the project.

Anecdotal feedback from programme leads tells us that taking part in WWC has positive effects both on the students' desire to work in particular sectors or work abroad and on the staff in these sectors wanting to do more work with Westminster students. Increasing global awareness on both halves of the equation heightens trust and positive feelings in all directions. The first rounds of undergraduates experiencing WWC have now finished their degrees and moved on to the world of work. WWC's [catalogue of success stories](#) contains testimonials from individuals who completed the programme and went on to credit what they learned from their experience in cities as diverse as Washington DC, Hong Kong and Mumbai in helping them start their vibrant, globally-focused careers. But this is only half of the story – for the staff at the offices in Washington DC, Hong Kong and Mumbai, they will also have formed impressions of the students they engaged with for a short amount of time.

In a few decades' time, perhaps, people with few other points of commonality from three different continents can meet and share positive impressions of their time getting to know students from the University of Westminster in London. This increase in trust and understanding of London's students and institutions, among Americans, Hong Kongers and Indians who may never have been to the UK, through person-to-person engagement. This is of crucial importance for the cultivation of soft power and international cooperation, maintaining cultural relations even during times of political tension.

# RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Soft power is vital to Britain's position in an interconnected and changeable world. Drawing upon multiple case studies, substantial analyses from across sectors, and conversations with key stakeholders, this report shows how the UK's global city London and its world-leading higher education sector are core components that can drive this positive perception and bring myriad benefits to UK society and economy. As essential soft power assets, they must be championed and invested in. We therefore reiterate our asks for local and national government, the university sector and other key organisations, which serve to enable London's universities to flourish and keep contributing to UK soft power. To maintain London's soft power credentials, we ask:

## **The UK government to:**

- champion London's status as a globally destination of choice and recognise the benefits this brings to the entire country by protecting the Graduate Route visa to retain skilled talent and remain internationally competitive, also supporting the transition from the Graduate Route to other routes such as the Skilled Worker visas; and
- maintain international research collaboration (e.g. through Horizon Europe and future framework programmes) and expand the Turing scheme to include inbound staff mobility and research exchanges, to facilitate opportunities for collaboration.

## **The Mayor of London to:**

- work with London's higher education sector to maintain the capital's status as the world's best student city through support of London Higher's Study London campaign;
- strengthen support for spinouts and start-ups to secure London's status as an attractive location to build businesses in important sectors and increase graduate retention; and
- help leverage the influence of higher education institutions in regional diplomatic efforts, such as hosting or partnering for inbound international delegations that the mayor receives, providing opportunities to foster greater collaboration.

## **The higher education sector to:**

- ensure employers understand the Graduate Route and how it can help meet high-level skills demands in the labour market; and

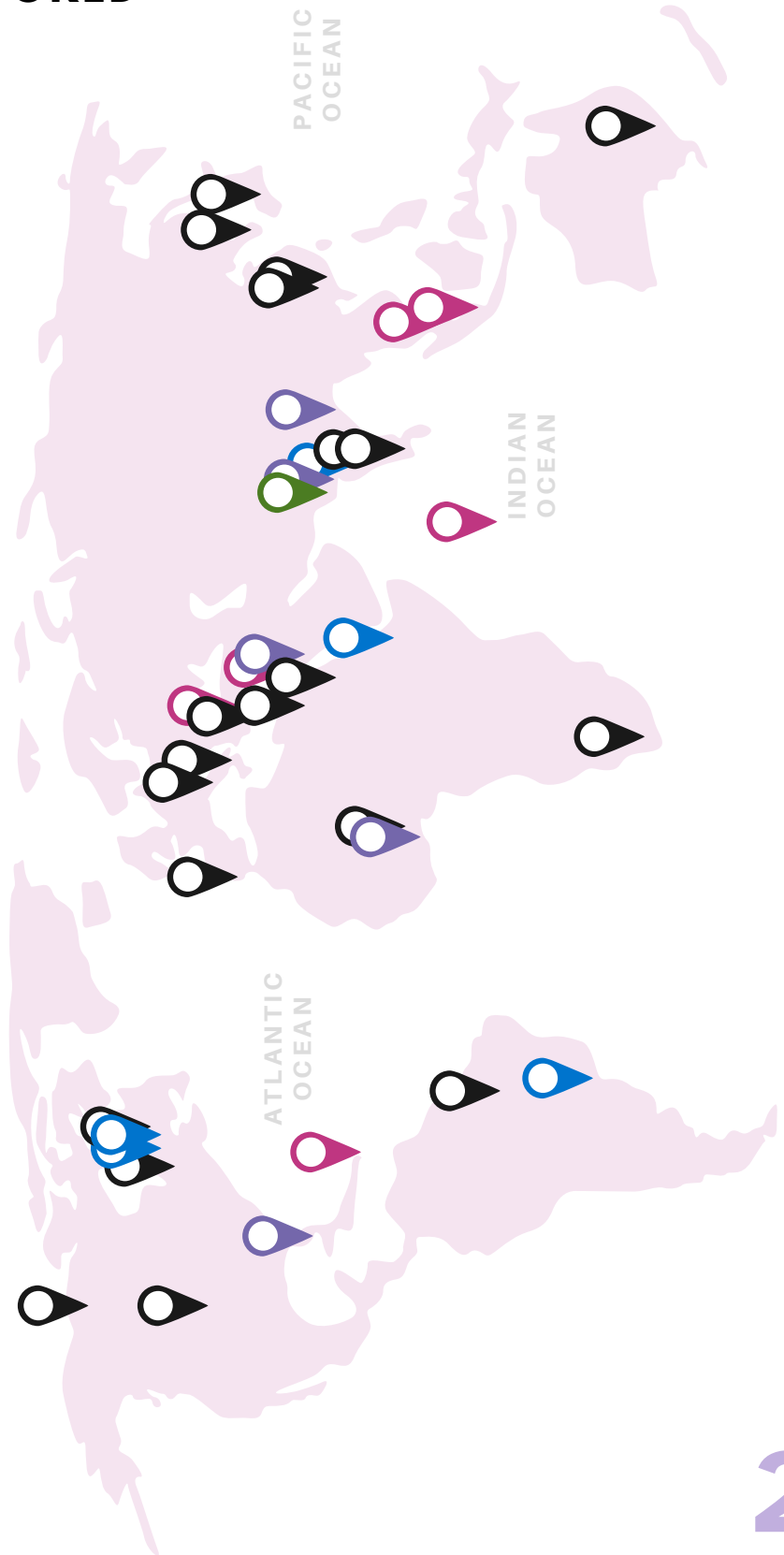
- work closely with organisations like the British Council, City of London Corporation and Mayor of London to advance soft power through knowledge and cultural diplomacy, such as through the establishment of ambassadors to promote London's status as a global destination of choice in several key sectors (e.g. working with prominent arts graduates to promote the cultural industries and their importance).
- Work with organisations like the US-UK Fulbright Commission to champion opportunities for students and faculty to engage in international exchange and facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

# THE SOFT POWER OF LONDON'S ALUMNI

## AROUND THE WORLD

\* all alumni with impact in the UK shown on the next page

- Arts
- Business
- Healthcare
- Social good
- Environment
- Politics
- Other



# THE SOFT POWER OF LONDON'S ALUMNI

## IN THE UK

\* please note that we do not have the precise locations of impact for most alumni featured, so they are mostly clustered randomly around the country, with enough space around them to make them clickable.

-  Arts
-  Business
-  Healthcare
-  Social good
-  Environment
-  Politics
-  Other





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