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# **CHANGING LIVES**

## **Internationalising the Skills Sector**

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# 1. FOREWORD

## Should colleges work internationally?

The question comes up again and again, often when something has gone wrong – or when someone thinks something has gone wrong. We in the British Council are sure that the answer to the question is “yes”, because we see the benefits every day through our work, both within the UK and overseas.

But these are challenging times for the skills sector in this country, and we know that the case for working internationally needs to be made, and it needs to be made in terms which work for colleges and for other training providers. We need to show that working internationally, and having a global mindset, is part of “the day job” and not a distraction from it.

That’s why we commissioned this independent report. We wanted to explore how far working internationally, or seeing their work through international eyes, could help colleges and other providers to do what they want to do, particularly for their students.

Iain Mackinnon, who has done this work for us, has called the report “Changing Lives” and we certainly agree that’s the key. Working internationally is not something ‘nice to do’, largely irrelevant to colleges’ core business, something which can safely be dropped when things get tough.

It is a hugely valuable way to make big differences for students, for staff and for their colleges, but also to address challenges and develop opportunities for the UK Skills Sector as a whole.

I am grateful to Iain for this stimulating paper. I encourage others to read it, to debate it with us, and to work with us to make more difference for students and for learners across the UK.

**Tracy Ferrier**

**Global Skills Lead, British Council**

**June 2017**

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The British Council commissioned this study to understand “the potential effectiveness of internationalisation as a mechanism to address current challenges faced by the skills sector in the UK”, and to understand “how a cohesive internationalisation strategy can be best implemented and to what purposes.”

The British Council defined “internationalisation” broadly. It wanted to go beyond attracting the high profile activities of international students and running programmes overseas, to include any activity in the skills field which reflects an international perspective.

In order to focus the work we identified six themes of key current and future importance to the UK Skills Sector, and explored to what extent internationalisation makes, or can make, a valuable contribution to each of them:

- encouraging students to aspire
- teaching and learning – i.e. continuous improvement in teaching and learning
- staff retention and motivation
- meeting local needs better – covering both devolution, and meeting employers’ needs
- greater financial security
- promoting inclusion and diversity.

We did not present them in any priority order. All struck a chord to a great or lesser extent, but much the strongest connection was made with (a) benefits for students, (b) financial advantage – both making a profit, and winning project funding, and (c) benefits for staff.

### Conclusions

The heart of the matter is this: internationalisation in the skills sector is about changing lives.

A fortunate few, students and staff, get to go abroad, so the change for them is direct and personal. Students build their confidence and their CVs; they broaden their horizons and raise their aspirations; they learn. Staff learn too, commonly that they have more to offer than they thought they had, so they come back reinvigorated.

Much larger numbers, of both students and staff, benefit indirectly, through the application in the UK of lessons learned overseas, through contact with incoming students and staff, and through increased spending made possible by successful commercial ventures overseas.

Colleges themselves benefit too, in profit earned, in funding secured to cover costs, in better results and enhanced competitive advantage, in raised reputation and in deepening excellence. Ultimately those benefits get passed on to students; benefits for the college are a means to that greater end.

We present a ‘Benefits Matrix’ in which we match each of the six themes identified originally (plus ‘reputation’ as it came up so often in the research) against eight different types of international activity (using the same list as the one we used in our survey).

We note that very few of the benefits we identify are unique to internationalisation. If a college wanted to give students a high impact opportunity which might well change their lives it could run an Outward Bound programme, or provide a week at sea on a Tall Ship.

Advocates will argue that what is unique about internationalisation is the development of an international perspective and, for some, a ‘global mindset’, broader still. There may be more, perhaps through the interplay of different facets of internationalisation working together, but those distinctions and those opportunities need to be clear to the uninitiated.

If “broadening horizons” is the objective, many students and staff could do that by undertaking exchanges within this country, rather more cheaply than flying overseas. Inner city students and their teachers could spend a week in a college in the country, and vice versa. There is increasing difference between each of

the four countries in the UK and lots of opportunity for staff in one country to learn from what happens in another.

Similarly, many colleges find other ways to earn a margin through commercial opportunities. 'International' is one such opportunity, and for some, rather riskier than alternatives back home.

None of this is a problem. It is an opportunity. It enables the British Council to point to shared objectives – like changing students' lives, broadening their horizons, or earning a margin to spend on other things – and promote internationalisation as another means by which colleges can achieve them.

## Recommendations

We offer seven recommendations:

- We recommend (1) that the British Council's strategy for promoting internationalisation of the skills sector should set specific goals.
- We recommend (2) the British Council to set out the scope of 'internationalisation'.
- We recommend (3) the British Council to create a number of case studies showing how students and their colleges have benefitted from different forms of internationalisation.
- We recommend (4) the British Council to undertake an active programme of promoting the benefits of internationalisation to colleges.
- We recommend (5) the British Council, working with the Department for International Trade, to identify ways in which it can help to reduce the commercial risk which those involved face when they consider the more demanding opportunities in the international student market.
- We recommend (6) the British Council to make the case for continuing access to the Erasmus Plus programme after Brexit.
- We recommend (7) the British Council to seek support for internationalisation from both the Government and Ofsted, on the record.

## 3. INTRODUCTION

3.1 The British Council believes that learners and providers throughout the skills sector benefit when they work internationally and when they have an international mindset. The Council wants to identify other levers it can use to encourage the skills sector to be more international, and wondered how far internationalisation might help the sector to tackle the many challenges which it faces. This is the report of the project which the Council commissioned to explore that question.

3.2 The main section of the brief reads as follows:

“The British Council is commissioning this research to further understand the impact and potential impact of internationalisation on Skills Development with particular emphasis on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). We are particularly concerned with the potential effectiveness of internationalisation as a mechanism to address current challenges faced by the Skills sector in the UK. We are seeking to understand the measureable evidence of the impact of internationalisation on different challenges facing learners, staff, organisations and national policy and whether the effect is positive or negative. Additionally we wish to learn from current practice and strategy to understand; if internationalisation can be a positive solution to tackling one or more challenges, how a cohesive internationalisation strategy can be best implemented and to what purposes”.

3.3 The British Council defined “internationalisation” broadly:

“By internationalisation we do not just mean attracting international students and running programmes overseas, but any activity which reflects an international perspective or consideration in Skills Development in Vocational Education such as;

- having an international mindset at organisational or policy level to understand global thought leadership, best practice and pedagogy
- an understanding of global labour market needs and current trends to help build skills that are needed in the global community
- encouraging an international cultural perspective in skills development initiatives to improve citizenship and soft skills
- the development of curriculum and qualifications with international ‘currency’”.

3.4 Interestingly, quite a few of those we interviewed made a different distinction, acknowledging that they commonly thought of “international” as meaning “beyond Europe” – rather an important insight in light of the Referendum decision to leave the European Union.

### Approach and methodology

3.5 In order to focus the work we agreed to identify six themes, to assess how far internationalisation makes a valuable contribution to each of them. After some preliminary testing we agreed that the six would be these:

- encouraging students to aspire
- teaching and learning – i.e. continuous improvement in teaching and learning
- meeting local needs better – covering both devolution, and meeting employers’ needs
- staff retention and motivation
- greater financial security
- promoting inclusion and diversity.

3.6 The six themes were not presented to anyone in the study in any order of priority.

3.7 Our focus was primarily at institutional level – individual colleges and individual training providers – but there are other opportunities for tackling major skills shortages which a sectoral perspective might illuminate. Brexit is bringing into sharper relief opportunities for international trade, and the UK Government is building an Industrial Strategy which will have a much clearer ambition to promote trade than one would have done a year ago. There are bigger forces in play which the British Council’s internationalisation strategy can complement.

3.8 The study comprised four strands:

- a literature review. We found very little written on internationalisation and the skills sector beyond what has been published by the British Council itself. We included relevant work on internationalisation and higher education, internationalisation in other fields, and exporting more generally;
- one-to-one interviews with colleges, aiming for two each in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and two in each English region. We undertook the great majority by phone, with a much smaller number face-to-face. Not surprisingly it was much easier to secure appointments with staff who saw their college as being an ‘international college’ than those who did not;
- a small number of additional interviews, all undertaken by phone, to capture the views of other well-placed observers, including the Department for Education, Association of Colleges (AoC), Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), and the UK Skills Federation / Federation for Industry Sector Skills and Standards;
- a survey of all skills sector providers. We designed a 22-question survey which deliberately re-used most of the questions in the survey which we undertook in 2012 for the Association of Colleges and British Council, with the intention of identifying trends. We agreed the revised questions with the British Council, AoC and AELP, and the four college associations and AELP agreed to circulate the survey to members.

Unlike 2012, however, when we had exactly 100 responses, this time we had just 34, even with reminders. Of those, three were unusable (providers answered the first three questions only), and six more answered only a minority of the questions. 26 of the responses were from colleges, and there were five more from sixth form colleges, with two others (an awarding body, and a private training provider responding from its base in the Republic of Ireland). One more was anonymous and there were no internal clues about what type of organisation it was.

With low numbers like this it would be unwise to treat the survey results as representative, or to place much weight on comparisons with the 2012 results. Though we use some of the results here, in particular the more qualitative comments, we have not included the full report of the survey; which is in a separate working paper.

3.9 Given the poor response from the independent sector, and to avoid tedious repetition, this report refers throughout to “colleges”, and to “students”. In almost every case, however, the comments made apply as well to independent training providers and to their learners.

3.10 One distinguishing characteristic of the independent sector is worth noting at this point. Unlike in colleges, most learners in the independent sector are employees. While there are many other ways in which internationalisation can apply to them too, employees are much less likely to take part in exchanges and similar trips than their counterparts in colleges. That is true of apprentices, too, though a number do get international opportunities, particularly when they work for multi-national companies.

3.11 In order to make the report more readable we have woven the evidence from each source together, rather than presenting the results of each in turn. We begin by reporting our findings under each of the six chosen themes, then report other evidence which does not fall neatly under any of them. We pull the threads together in two final sections with our conclusions and recommendations.

### **A brief note on language**

We have used “internationalisation” throughout the report, but strongly suggest that the British Council should not use the word when seeking to encourage colleges to broaden and deepen what they do.

Because 8-syllable words do not make great slogans. Because this 8-syllable word is open to so many interpretations. And because the word could be heard to indicate that the British Council is pushing an agenda, with particular goals in mind – a misinterpretation which might well get in the way.

It may seem tedious but we suggest that to reach those unpersuaded so far the British Council needs to break down ‘internationalisation’ into its constituent parts, avoiding a single label altogether.



## 4. THE SIX THEMES

4.1 Boiled down to its essentials the question at the heart of this study is how far internationalisation helps colleges with “the day job”. The more that is so, and the more readily it can be evidenced, the better able the British Council will be to encourage other colleges and other independent training providers to be more international in their work. In this chapter we begin by considering the question against the six themes we identified.

### Encouraging students to aspire

4.2 When he answered the question about why his college worked internationally a Vice Principal from a college in Scotland voiced a common response when he said “for the benefit of the students”. Most respondents talked in similar terms.

4.3 In the survey, opportunities for students came second as a reason for engaging in international work (“to enrich the experience of our UK-based learners”), with 80% of respondents (20 of 24) ticking that choice.

4.4 Colleges put the emphasis in different places when they talked about student benefit. Some talked in terms of broadening students’ horizons. The Principal of Lancaster and Morecambe College put it very plainly for the 2016 Erasmus Plus conference in Cardiff:

**“I’m Principal of a very small college in the north of England with a very white population, with a very low ethnic mix. Our students therefore get a very narrow experience ... being able to travel abroad, in a much broader ethnic mix, into new cultures and communities ... is a major learning resource for them”.**

4.5 The rest of his comments are worth quoting in full:

**“The end product for me though is more motivated students, more focused students, whose employability skills are higher, who come back with loads more confidence and above all a much more global view, they’re not narrow and they’re not just in Morecambe and Lancaster any more, they take with them a view of world citizenship and they also I think see themselves being able to contribute to the community in a much greater way”.**

4.6 All that for 60-70 students a year, with even that relatively modest programme at risk if access to the Erasmus Plus programme is lost with Brexit.

4.7 The Principal of City of Glasgow College talked in similar terms about broadening his students’ outlook - and encouraging them to aspire.

4.8 One college makes a virtue of the fact that places on overseas trips are inevitably limited:

**“It’s something students can aspire to; they know there’s competition for the places”.**

4.9 Other colleges focus on more immediate benefits:

**“It’s about employability: what can they put on their CV”?**

4.10 Students from Lancaster and Morecambe College quoted in the same 2016 presentation linked the two, and more, for example:

**“It’s improved my confidence massively. It boosted my personal statement and my CV. And I had loads of fun; I’d love to do it again”.**

4.11 These are all sentiments which resonate strongly with college staff.

4.12 It was interesting that we heard almost no mention of the value of building alumni networks, which is a much stronger feature of international activity in the university sector.

4.13 For example, the Universities Scotland publication “Richer For It”, which explores the benefits of internationalisation for the Scottish university sector, identifies four benefits, one of which is “creation of a

vast network of alumni". Though the position is slowly changing, further education colleges typically give far less attention to building alumni networks than their HE colleagues do, so an approach based on this opportunity will be harder to sell than others – but there are benefits to be won.

4.14 The obvious negative to set alongside all the potential benefits for students is that the benefits of international activity usually go overwhelmingly to those students who get to travel, and numbers are normally small. Many college staff are much more comfortable with things which benefit all students than those which benefit a minority, however thoughtfully that minority is chosen.

### **Teaching and learning – i.e. continuous improvement in teaching and learning**

4.15 Some colleges are clearly convinced that students do not just return from their overseas trips excited and motivated, they see that motivation carrying through into better retention and better achievement, the two component parts of the success rates which matter so much to colleges.

The learners involved in the programmes come back more motivated and focused which improves retention, achievement and success rates.

4.16 Whether hard evidence would back up those claims is unclear, but it is certainly plausible, and just the kind of message which would encourage colleges. It feels like there is a bigger prize to be won here. There really ought to be more obvious, more tangible, more measurable benefits to teaching and learning. It is a topic which might repay discussion between the British Council and the college associations.

4.17 On the broader point, one Vice Principal commented that his college's horizons would be very limited "if you only ever spoke to fellow Scots". In terms of the core business of teaching and learning, he wanted to know "how others do it".

4.18 What we did not hear was comments about colleges 'internationalising' their curriculum. Some may well be doing it, or at least some teachers in some colleges, but we did not hear about it as part of this study. That may be because such a thought process need not be linked in any way to international students, or to international projects – and may not be visible at all to members of the Senior Leadership Team, or international team, who were the main source of evidence for this project.

4.19 Looking across to the university world, it is clear from our literature review that when universities think in terms of the benefits for students from their international work they also think rather more than colleges appear to do about formal learning opportunities – ie2 what happens in a classroom, and not just the broadening of horizons. In his introduction to "Richer for It, the Principal of St Andrews University, Professor Keith Burnett, puts it this way:

**"Every classroom discussion is immeasurably enhanced by the range of perspectives ... gender, politics, economic systems".**

4.20 It is less clear how that thought would apply in a vocational environment where the subject was say, catering, or care.

4.21 Since their foundation in the Middle Ages, universities have always valued international exchange. The EU's Erasmus programme is named for a man who is an excellent example; born a Dutchman, he studied in Paris, and held academic posts in Cambridge, Turin, Louvain and Basel. Vocational education comes from a more didactic tradition.

4.22 Without wishing to get bogged down in the distinctions between education and training, the latter is less likely to involve exploration and more likely transmission of received knowledge – so the value of learning through discussion with others is less apparent. It will vary a good deal between sectors; a business studies course is much more likely to have an international flavour than, say, bricklaying. And times are changing; colleges know that they are preparing their students for working lives which will be decades long, so this is too stark a distinction, but an approach which is second nature in universities does need some translating for colleges. It would be worth setting-out exactly what learning benefits internationalisation brings to colleges and their students.

## Meeting local needs better – covering both devolution, and meeting employers’ needs

4.23 Colleges in England in particular are excited by the prospects, and for some the reality, of devolution deals which promise greater flexibility in skills funding and, perhaps, more funding. We heard, however, almost no indication that colleges see any aspect of internationalisation serving the localism agenda.

4.24 One former college Principal talked about the importance of supporting the international perspective of multi-national companies within his patch, and their international approach to business – but it was very much a minority point-of-view. He was keen, too, to build on the hugely diverse heritage of his students, (and with much more interest in celebrating that diversity than using it as a tool to help prevent radicalisation).

4.25 In a variant of the ‘meeting local need better’ point, one interviewee said how important it was to him to deepen the strengths of his college. International projects gave staff who were at the top of their game another challenge, and another chance to polish their expertise. Cornwall College Group therefore sells its 8-day “Rural Business School”, on a commercial basis, to students who come from overseas. The college earns a fee, but at least as important, like-minded people benefit from working together, including the course tutors, and some of that learning goes on to benefit the community which hosts the college.

4.26 Whatever its merits, however, the idea that internationalisation can be a means of helping colleges to serve their local communities better suffers from an obvious contradiction; ‘international’ and ‘local’ appear to point in opposite directions. And for many colleges the idea will bring back memories of the comment made in 2012 by Sir Michael Wilshaw, then head of Ofsted, that colleges would be better focusing their attention on “Deptford rather than Delhi”. Of all the six themes, this is the hardest to sell to colleges.

### Staff retention and motivation

4.27 Colleges are very much more positive about the benefits which staff gain from taking part in international visits. One international manager said that “a lot of staff get very valuable development opportunities”. They are exposed to other cultures, they find out about other teaching techniques – “and all effectively for free”.

4.28 A tutor at Lancaster and Morecambe College quoted for the Erasmus Plus annual conference in 2016 said of her two visits, to Slovakia and Italy that she had “developed lots of new ideas, which I’ve brought back into my teaching practice”.

4.29 One Principal said that being in China on a project had “re-energized” the staff involved. They came back saying “I didn’t realise how much I know”. Others made similar comments.

4.30 One college whose international work is dominated by EU-funded projects added staff recruitment as a benefit, describing their projects as “a breeding ground for new staff”. The college typically brings in extra staff for international projects on short-term, part-time, contracts. They prove themselves through those projects and “almost all have got permanent jobs”.

4.31 There are also benefits to be gained by staff from incoming international visits. The director responsible for international activities at one college told a revealing anecdote about hosting some college Principals from South Africa, and inviting colleagues to meet them. Most were sceptical that they could learn anything from their guests – but they did. They discovered that despite the superficial differences their South African colleagues were wrestling with very similar problems. And they learnt something too from the fact that whereas in the UK we can usually put money in to solve a problem, in South Africa they have to be more inventive, and are more used to solving problems by finding ways to use their people better.

4.32 In the survey 68% of those who answered the question “why are you engaged in international activity?” ticked the answer “to enrich the experience of our UK-based staff”, the third highest score after financial reasons and benefits for learners. It may not be enough on its own, but staff benefit is a strong secondary motivation for colleges’ international activity.

## Greater financial security

4.33 Money easily topped the poll when we asked about motivation in the survey: 96% of respondents ticked the option “to earn a margin / profit from it”.

4.34 In our interviews, colleges commented on the financial side of international work in one of two ways: some sought to make a profit from it, the larger the better; others saw the income received as covering costs incurred, and therefore enabling something to happen which would not otherwise happen.

4.35 One college Principal was very clear that “increasing income” was his top priority. His college earns £8m a year commercially, of which international business contributes around £1m. It was not just about income though, it was about margin, and this Principal aimed to make a 20% margin on the college’s international work; ie his £1m international income represented a net gain of £200,000. All of it without strings, too.

4.36 But there were risks balancing the rewards, and he carefully added “we’ve got to manage the risk”. In this case, he aimed to reduce the risk by using external staff for much of the work, by working in partnership with a local university, and by building on a twinning arrangement between the city and its partner in China. There was no sense in this interview that making a margin – profit – from international activity is either easy or risk-free (and, of course, using staff on contract to minimise risk also reduces opportunities for existing permanent staff).

4.37 One college re-entering the international recruitment market, with a good deal of experience to draw on, said “it will put us in the black fairly quickly. We know where not to go, and which agents not to use”. Like the previous example, the emphasis was on identifying and managing the risks involved, in the expectation of making a good margin.

4.38 Other colleges talked about summer school programmes as relatively low-risk reliable earners. One college in Northern Ireland runs a programme which brings in 200 young people every summer, welcome income for both the college and the locality.

4.39 On the other hand, one particularly enthusiastic international projects manager, responsible for 10-12 projects a year which last year brought in c€270,000, said: “it really isn’t about making money”. Another explained:

**“You don’t make a margin formally, but the income helps to sustain parts of different posts. It enables you to do things you wouldn’t do otherwise”.**

4.40 A number of college said that they make a point of looking through the project calls from the British Council and others. Fully-funded projects are an important part of the picture for many colleges.

4.41 Several managers said that the most important financial fact was that a project should “wash its face” – ie money in should at least match money out. (One college said that they would not do European projects “if they did not at least wash their face”). This is very different motivation; money received oils the wheels, and enables colleges to provide opportunities for students which they would otherwise not get.

4.42 Several colleges, both in interviews and through the survey, said how worried they are that they would lose access to the Erasmus Plus programme, the main source of funding for projects of this nature, when the UK leaves the European Union.

4.43 There are clearly nuances here, though, illustrated well by this comment from one international manager:

**“When I first came to the college three years ago it was all about the money, what we could earn. Now there’s a much greater sense of *let’s enrich our students*”**

4.44 Aside from the loss of income, one interviewee pointed to the fact that EU-funded projects have often been the ‘nursery slopes’ on which colleges learned to do international work. He wondered how colleges in future would learn the skills needed to take on more demanding (particularly non-European)

international projects and relationships.

4.45 Others talked about the value of small, initial, projects fully-funded by the EU, or through the British Council, which enabled them to get a foothold in a market, and to build credibility and trust, which later led to much bigger projects.

4.46 One manager said that the college had gone to China initially because there was funding available through the former 'Prime Minister's Initiative' – where the Prime Minister concerned was Tony Blair: this is some time ago. They are still there, "as a result". That particular college builds these initial non-profit projects into its strategic thinking.

4.47 The third aspect of funding was the wider value of income earned to the sector and to the local area round each college. It is something which Universities UK has made much of in its sector, widely promoting its conclusion that

**"In 2014-15, international students generated £1bn in tax revenues, equivalent to the salaries of 31,700 nurses or 25,000 police officers."**

4.48 This is about the impact across the whole sector, motivated by concern about the Government's approach to international students, rather than the motivation relevant to any particular institution. It is worth mentioning, however, because it features heavily in higher education literature on internationalisation, and barely at all with the skills sector.

4.49 Internationalisation is clearly relevant to colleges' pressing interest in earning more money, both as profit which can be spent on things which public funding will not cover, and as a means to pay for work which would otherwise not get done. But the attractive possibilities come with risks: the risk of loss and major management headaches for the profit-seekers, and for the rest, the risk that Brexit will remove the largest source of project funds.

### **Promoting inclusion and diversity**

4.50 There was little recognition that internationalisation could support colleges' efforts to promote inclusion and diversity beyond the broader thought, noted above, that international experience widens students' horizons.

4.51 A couple of colleges talked about how 'international' they are already, by which they meant that their students come from a very wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. One large college in London pointed out that 80% of its students were not native speakers of English, and neither were 65% of their staff. But this was said primarily just as a comment, rather than to explain action taken or planned.

4.52 Lambeth College took a very interesting and different approach recently, holding a "We are all immigrants" week at the beginning of March 2017, which included a celebration of the presence in the college of students from a wide range of countries. The fact that students come from a wide range of backgrounds does not mean that they mix, and the college's initiative very much encouraged mixing. Lambeth is a very multi-cultural part of London, however, and it would be hard to replicate the idea that "we are all immigrants" across the whole of the UK, particularly in places where there are very few immigrants.

4.53 Promoting inclusion and diversity feels like it ought to be an easy win, but in practice we found little evidence that it would work as a trigger to encourage greater internationalisation in colleges where such diversity is not already an everyday reality. That may be in part because of the approach taken in this project; if individual teachers, or departments, work this way, but on their own, and not as part of a deliberate strategy, we would have been unlikely to discover it.

### **Other motivations**

4.54 Some colleges cited other motivations for their international work beyond these six.

4.55 **Reputation** was mentioned most often. For one Principal the college's strong international links,

including partnerships with over 70 colleges overseas, was central to his work to bring important people to the city, and to be known for doing so. It enhanced the college's reputation in the city.

4.56 For another, much smaller, college enhanced reputation brought more immediate benefits. "It establishes us as a key player", helping the college build and strengthen local relationships, for example building much stronger links with the local university through an international healthcare project. It is also "a genuine USP in the market" because the college competes with six sixth forms; the fact that it offered a good range of opportunities for overseas visits was part of its competitive edge over rivals.

4.57 In the survey 68% of respondents ticked "to raise our profile" when asked why they were involved in international activity, the fourth highest answer.

4.58 In a different twist, the Principal of Cardiff and the Vale College stressed how important it was to match motivation to the college's particular characteristics, its USP. His international strategy would be different if he was running a different college. In this case the college's USP was that it was based in a student-friendly capital city on the coast; in London, it would be very different. He also makes a point of partnering with his local university, running an international sixth form with an eye on students going on to the university.

## 5. OTHER OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS

5.1 We identified a wider mix of opportunities and barriers, which go beyond the six themes.

### Seizing the opportunities

5.2 Internationalisation comes in a variety of guises and is certainly broader than the high profile opportunities associated with international exchanges and recruitment, but it is worth a look at what other sectors say about the value of exports.

5.3 The Government-supported Open to Export website, sets out its reasons for “why exporting is good for you and your business”:

- faster growth
- greater innovation
- more jobs created
- staff usually earn more
- exporters cope better with upheavals in the economy
- raise your profile and credibility
- professionally and personally enriching.

In virtually every respect, the challenges you expose yourself to by accessing overseas markets will make you raise your game and enhance your own and your company’s skills – and this can last forever.

5.4 Most of that list also applies to the skills sector.

### Attitude of Government

5.5 Three of the 20 respondents who answered the question in our survey cited as a reason for engaging in international activity that “Government encourages it”. The next question asked about barriers, and more than twice as many (seven out of 20) ticked the option “Government discourages it”. So views differ, and those who think that the Government discourages international activity outnumber those who think they are being encouraged. (Our question left it to the respondent to define which government they had in mind, with added complexity outside England where the national Government has some relevant responsibilities, and immigration and visa policy sits at UK level).

5.6 Of the 21 respondents who took the opportunity to write a comment under the question “what single change would be most helpful to your organisation in growing your international activity?”, 11 cited some aspect of Government policy.

5.7 There were general requests for greater support, and for Government to value higher what colleges do internationally:

- greater support [from] DIT
- greater support from government in promoting what colleges can offer internationally (too much emphasis on universities)
- Government valuing international education more

5.8 There were several comments about visa policy and the wider question of how far the UK still genuinely welcomes international students, and is seen to do so:

- the improvement of the perception of the UK as a "study abroad" destination
- lower risk of visa refusals (perhaps through clearer guidelines on credibility)
- review Tier 4 regulations and put FE on an even footing with Universities
- relaxation of immigration rules

- return to the 3 year pre-degree study limit, and allow students to apply from within the UK not have to return to home country to apply for a Tier 4 visa
- more relaxed UKVI Regulations in terms of Ofsted grade related licence and opportunities to work if studying at a College
- to have the same visa regulations as HEIs, students allowed to work 20 hours, increase the number of years of study allowed, visa regulations to encourage rather than deter international students
- removal of students from net migration figures leading to a more welcoming reputation outside the UK.

5.9 Three more referred to Brexit:

- remain part of the EU following Brexit
- abolishing Brexit!
- we have started to be involved more in EU funded projects which boosted our income and student/staff experience so maintaining this revenue source would be the main priority.

5.10 Government itself identified six constraints in International Education: Global Growth and Prosperity, its 2013 international strategy for the education sector:

- lack of coordination between agencies and actors
- [Colleges are] not structured for growth
- visas
- competition from new types of provider [which was more an issue for universities]
- stronger country-to-country competition
- changing customer relationships [e.g. more delivery in-country]

5.11 Much of that remains valid, though the UK Government is less obviously promoting international education opportunities than it was when David Willetts was the responsible minister.

### Internal business constraints

5.12 Most of the other comments about barriers in our survey appear to relate to barriers within the respondent's own organisation:

- identifying commercial opportunities
- more expertise within the organisation
- we are in a Catch 22 situation whereby we are a small team overstretched, but we cannot expand our team until we generate more long-term income
- more resources
- change in business mindset
- support the business in a more proactive manner.

5.13 To another question one college responded:

**Lack of confidence in SLT [Senior Leadership Team], risk averse need guarantees of success and income generation with any international activity...this is not possible. Curriculum staff all working to full teaching load, no capacity to fulfil international opportunities.**

5.14 In discussion later, this college's international manager explained that she had identified a promising opportunity in the Middle East, but her Principal had said she could not go there to visit until the project started earning money. Yet the international manager knew that in a culture which values personal relationships and personal trust, she would not be able to get the project set up unless and until she visited in person. Hence her comment that she was in a Catch 22-style trap.

5.15 There is, perhaps, scope for the British Council to introduce cautious college leaders to others who



have identified and overcome similar obstacles, perhaps formally through some mentoring project – but we have not tested the proposition.

5.16 The Scottish Government has produced an interesting report on internationalising SMEs, much of which covers internal issues such as this. It identifies six obstacles which hinder development, all of which are relevant to the skills sector to a greater or lesser degree:

- lack of awareness of other cultures and other markets
- lack of experience of working overseas
- lack of entrepreneurship
- problems with establishing networks abroad
- problems in dealing with international operations
- relatively lower language skills.

5.17 The report concludes by saying that “theory, literature and experience” suggest that Scottish SMEs “may require support to internationalise”. The Scottish Government has therefore run a number of programmes, such as the ‘Internationalisation Mentoring Programme’ (12 workshops over 12 weeks), and offered a toolkit, marketed as the ‘International Market Development Programme’.

5.18 Just as with SMEs, a number of college interviewees talked about the commercial opportunities available internationally, and did so typically in much the same way as any business would explain venture markets, balancing opportunity with risk, and stressing the value of proper business planning.

5.19 One Principal gave a particularly graphic response when asked what he would say to another Principal interested in working internationally.

**"Is your house in order? Are your local stakeholders behind you? Do you have a business plan? Does it fit with your growth strategy? Your curriculum strategy? Your accommodation strategy? Who will be your contact with UKVI? Who's going to sort out visas?"**

**And if you're really sure, go and talk to the Principal of a college which has pulled out of international recruitment to find out why. And if you still think it's a good idea, talk also to a Principal who is active abroad, and ask them why. Then have a good think about it".**

5.20 This is about business planning, in a high reward / high risk market, with a number of peculiar features. Like any business manager, this Principal was looking for ways to reduce his risk, and would be keen to hear from the British Council about which sectors in which countries offered good prospects. He was complementary about the advice received from the British Council on business planning for the college's substantial IELTS business, and would also welcome advice on, for example, managing overseas recruitment agents, and on the minimum number of overseas students required to make them a viable business proposition (he dismissed tiny numbers as ‘vanity projects’).

5.21 Much of this is advice and support which the British Council or its partners could offer to colleges and other skills sector providers, and to an extent they already do.

5.22 The British Council runs “Intercultural Fluency” courses, for example, for which it charges £275. One Principal said he was unclear when the British Council works for the wider public good, and when it is operating commercially.

5.23 Would it be compatible with the Council's commercial ambitions for it to provide at least some headline material free? Perhaps that's a ‘10 Top Tips’ distillation from the cultural training courses, or headlines from labour market reports, for which a typical price is \$240.

5.24 The British Council has taken steps to provide free as well as paid for support, information and briefings to the sector. For example, although the British Council charges for its Intercultural Fluency courses, it also includes some of this content in a free online course, How to succeed in the global workplace. Through its Services for International Education Marketing, the British Council provides a limited free service to institutions, which includes face to face market briefings and details of new opportunities. Its paid for services cover more intensive activities such as exhibitions, direct marketing, consultancy and

bespoke reports..

5.25 AELP runs a Special Interest Group (SIG) for members who are working internationally, and the larger group who are exploring the possibility. Typically those independent training providers who are active overseas are entrepreneurs who have grasped a commercial opportunity they have come across, perhaps in the Middle East, but they are seldom working within a broader strategy for international business.

5.26 AELP reports that members are particularly interested in 'culture'; it is the item they most want to see on the agenda for the SIG. As much as anything, that seems to be a wish to reduce the risk of working overseas, for example the risk that a promising opportunity will be spoilt through lack of appropriate cultural sensitivity. That is a solvable problem, and a good example of the kind of practical help which could easily be made available in some way to AELP members.

5.27 Other interviewees talked about capacity issues in the senior leadership team, meaning primarily that international business could so easily take up time and effort which would be better spent elsewhere.

5.28 We spoke to someone working within the Department for Education who was particularly exercised on this point. They commented that whilst there were tremendous opportunities available for students there were also concerns the colleges working overseas might become bogged down in resolving difficulties.

5.29 Hence their overall caution:

**“We’re with you, but ...Our focus would have to be the core business. If we can get a win-win, that’s great, but there’s a lot to do”.**

5.30 By contrast the British Council collaborated with the Scottish Government last year to produce Internationalising Social Enterprise, and the Ministerial Foreword from Angela Constance MSP is unequivocal:

**“Scotland is an outward-facing and entrepreneurial nation ... It is essential we continue to support and encourage our social enterprises to think globally, and be the good global citizens we, as Scots, aspire to be”.**

5.31 Could a UK Minister, or the new head of Ofsted, offer such clear support for ‘Internationalising the Skills Sector’?

5.32 Colleges themselves are very conscious of the balance which needs to be struck. One international director said: “You can’t neglect the everyday stuff you have to do”.

5.33 When asked whether he would recommend other colleges to be more actively internationally, one international manager said “yes”, but qualified it: “within their capacity. Getting the balance right is important”.

5.34 There is a degree of fragility about some international teams – in common with other specialist teams in colleges - which makes questions about capacity particularly pertinent. We heard that the mergers in Scotland have meant the loss of a number of staff who specialised in international matters, and we observed that one formerly very active college in England has reduced its international team to a single administrator.

5.35 AELP, too, reported a similar issue, noting that interest in its Special Interest Group for international matters has dipped recently because so many members are giving priority to apprenticeships, spending time to get everything in place for the start of the Apprenticeship Levy in April 2017.

5.36 In a related comment on capacity-building and support, the UK Skills Federation said that it is building a database of consultants and could potentially include colleges’ exportable expertise on it. Knowing which colleges are active overseas, and what they specialise in “would be extremely useful”.

## University parallels

5.37 Last, it is worth a look at how the university sector is dealing with internationalisation.

5.38 Sheffield University has recently instituted a high profile campaign, now supported by more than a hundred universities across the UK, called #WeAreInternational. Its aim is to protect the UK’s international opportunities, by demonstrating how important they are to the country, to students and to individual

institutions. The skills sector is not involved in the campaign.

5.39 In Scotland, Universities Scotland has published “Richer For It”, with the similar aim of explaining exactly how valuable their international links are to Scotland’s universities. In his introduction Professor **Sir Ian Diamond, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Aberdeen University** says this:

**“The comprehensive internationalisation agenda that is sweeping through our institutions ... is a pre-requisite for a truly global and competitive higher education sector in Scotland”.**

5.40 The paper acknowledges that the benefits are hard to quantify, but asserts that they are real nonetheless:

- the enrichment of the learning experience
- development of an international outlook amongst home students
- positive impacts in the wider community
- creation of a vast network of alumni.

5.41 The last of these applies much more obviously in a university environment at the moment, but all the rest work just as well for colleges and the rest of the skills sector as they do for universities.

## 6. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The heart of the matter is this: internationalisation in the skills sector is about changing lives.
- 6.2 A fortunate few, students and staff, get to go abroad, so the change for them is direct and personal. Students build their confidence and their CVs; they broaden their horizons and raise their aspirations; they learn. Staff learn, too, commonly that they have more to offer than they thought they had, so they come back reinvigorated.
- 6.3 Much larger numbers, of both students and staff, benefit indirectly, through the application of lessons learned overseas, through contact with incoming students and staff, and through increased spending made possible by successful commercial ventures overseas.
- 6.4 Colleges themselves benefit too, in profit earned, in funding secured to cover costs, in better results and enhanced competitive advantage, in raised reputation and in deepening excellence. Ultimately those benefits get passed on to students because benefits for the college are a means to that greater end.
- 6.5 The exact benefits vary between different types of opportunity, and in the complex world of UK skills provision almost any case will appeal to someone somewhere. The core of the argument for internationalisation, however, is that it changes students' lives. There are benefits too, important benefits, for staff and for colleges themselves, but both of those are ultimately means to the end of providing benefits for students.
- 6.6 In the 'Benefits Matrix' over the page we match each of the six themes we identified originally (plus 'reputation' as it came up so often in the research) against eight different types of international activity (using the same list offered in the survey, which was itself copied from the 2012 survey). We have added a ninth to that second list, too – "internationalising the curriculum" – not because it was raised in interviews, but more because it was not raised much; it feels like a missed opportunity.
- 6.7 It would be possible to allocate some of the scores differently, but the matrix indicates something of the range of options open to skills providers.
- 6.8 It also indicates where a link is possible, but where it may not currently be a reality. A good example is the opportunity for students to benefit from the presence of overseas students who have come to the UK to study. Some colleges go to a good deal of trouble to encourage contacts between the two sets of students (Isle of Wight College, for example, has run a 'mini-Olympics'), but contact will not necessarily happen automatically. The British Council and its partners could, for example, promote a "Pound Plus" initiative, show colleges how to add value for international students, and from them to home students, even though their prime motivation is financial.
- 6.9 This fits with the work being done for the British Council by Marguerite Hogg to look at how an international perspective can be brought into the work colleges do around 'student voice', i.e. listening to their students. It is another part of a thought process which sees taking an international view as normal, rather than an exotic bolt-on.
- 6.10 Similar thoughts apply to teaching and learning. The possibilities are obvious, but making the links is likely to require focused effort, for example to de-brief staff after a visit, and to encourage them to report back to colleagues what they have learned, so that the learning is shared, not solely personal.
- 6.11 The Matrix potentially offers a tool which can be used in talking through the opportunities for internationalisation. And also a tool on to which could be hung links to supporting resources, such as case studies and toolkits, particularly if it was presented online.



## Is internationalisation the only source of these benefits?

6.12 It is important to be clear though, that little of this is unique to internationalisation. If a college wanted to give students a high impact opportunity which might well change their lives it could run an Outward Bound programme, or provide a week at sea on a Tall Ship.

6.13 Many students and staff could broaden their horizons by undertaking exchanges within this country, rather more cheaply than flying overseas. Inner city students and their teachers could spend a week in a college in the country, and vice versa. There is increasing difference between each of the four countries in the UK and lots of opportunity for staff in one country to learn from what happens in another.

6.14 Similarly, many colleges find other ways to earn a margin through commercial opportunities. 'International' is one such opportunity, and for some, rather riskier than alternatives back home.

6.15 None of this is a problem. It is an opportunity. It enables the British Council to point to shared objectives – like changing students' lives, broadening their horizons, or earning a margin to spend on other things – and promote internationalisation as another means by which colleges can achieve them.

6.16 Indeed, it is probably counter-productive to claim that internationalisation is uniquely capable of securing results. Colleges are more likely to accept a case which shows how internationalisation is one of a number of ways of doing what they want done, and a case which goes on to set out the particular contribution which internationalisation can make. Why would a college send students to Latvia rather than to the Lake District? What else would they gain? What is the extra benefit of seeking commercial opportunities in Indonesia rather than your own inner city (and how do the extra benefits outweigh what look like extra risks)?

6.17 In the final chapter we offer our recommendations.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 The brief asked us to “recommend ways to enhance the effectiveness of internationalisation in TVET at a practical and policy level”. Our report points to two roles for the British Council within a strategy to promote the internationalisation of the sector:

- promoting the benefits
- reducing the barriers.

7.2 A word first about the nature of the Council’s strategy.

- **We recommend (1) that the British Council’s strategy for promoting internationalisation of the skills sector should set specific goals.**

This is about defining success and aiming for something more specific, and more ambitious, than ‘more than now’. Taking the matrix set out above, how many colleges does the British Council want to see recruiting hundreds of overseas students to study in the UK? And how many in each region, and in each country within the UK? How many colleges does it want to see running exchange programmes? And so on.

Targets can be a trap, and the Council would need to take into account the reality that a number of levers are outside its control, but it does have a good deal of influence, directly and through others, and setting clear goals should enable it to focus effort better.

### Promoting the benefits of internationalisation

7.3 The starting-point for promotional work should be the creation of resources which the Council itself, and others can use:

- **We recommend (2) the British Council to set out the scope of ‘internationalisation’.**

7.4 The Matrix in the previous chapter provides one means of doing that, both to show the range and scope, and to promote supporting case studies and other resources.

- **We recommend (3) the British Council to create a number of case studies showing how students and their colleges have benefitted from different forms of internationalisation. These should be available online, and perhaps also in printed format (eg to support presentations to college staff). Some of the stories which colleges and their students have to tell are really compelling. Sceptics might be particularly interested in case studies which follow up students who benefitted from some international opportunity some time ago (e.g. 10 years), showing what difference it has made to them subsequently.**

7.5 With good resources available,

- **We recommend (4) the British Council to undertake an active programme of promoting the benefits of internationalisation to colleges.**

7.6 We suggest the programme should have the following features:

- it should be a programme of work, not just one or two workshops;
- it should include all colleges (and all independent providers), not just those which believe already that they are in the international fold;
- it should be undertaken in partnership with allies who share the Council’s ambitions, such as the

Association of Colleges and their counterparts throughout the rest of the UK, the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, and the UK Skills Federation. Working in partnership will extend the resources available, and increase the chances of success.

## Reducing the barriers to greater internationalisation

7.7 As to reducing barriers, we offer three quite different recommendations.

- **We recommend (5) the British Council, working with the Department for International Trade, to identify ways in which it can help to reduce the commercial risk which those involved face when they consider the more demanding opportunities in the international student market.**

7.8 Many colleges undertake commercial ventures, and all commercial ventures carry some risk. That there are risks for colleges in working internationally is clear to everyone, but that those risks can be reduced and managed more effectively is also clear. The British Council has expertise of its own which it can pass on, and it can introduce colleges to others who can pass on their expertise. Doing both would reduce the risks for colleges which seek commercial opportunities overseas.

7.9 Colleges told us that they were keen to get detailed advice, for example on what sectors in which countries appear to be good prospects, and on the best way to work with recruiting agencies in different markets. That may go further than the Council wishes to go, in which case there might be something to do around clarifying for colleges exactly how far its role goes when commercial considerations are in play.

7.10 One of the Ministers at Department for International Trade (DIT), Mark Garnier, has ‘education’ in his portfolio, but colleges were keen to see more and better support from DIT. The Department has a range of resources to support export promotion, and a strong relationship between the British Council and DIT should both enhance the offer, and raise its profile with colleges. Brexit provides an immediate opportunity for a joint initiative with a “Beyond Europe” theme, encouraging colleges whose international work has been dominated by EU partnerships to explore other options outside Europe.

7.11 DIT also runs “New Exporter” roadshows, for which it charges businesses just £15. None of its material appears to be tailored for the skills sector - but it could be. Colleges may not see themselves as being in the export business, but that is exactly what this form of international activity is.

- **We recommend (6) the British Council to make the case for continuing access to the Erasmus Plus programme after Brexit.**

7.12 The UK’s colleges – and, more importantly, their students – benefit greatly from the UK’s participation in the Erasmus Plus programme, but the opportunity to participate is likely to be lost when the UK leaves the European Union unless action is taken to prevent that loss. The British Council is well-placed to make the case for continued access, and we understand that work is already in hand behind the scenes.

7.13 We suggest that the Council goes a step further in joining with others in making the case, and in saying so openly to colleges, so that they all know that the British Council is behind them. The focal point might perhaps be to have the UK recognised as an “adhesion state”, one which the remaining members of the EU want to stick with, just as the EU recognises “accession states” which are being considered for membership.

7.14 Too energetic a campaign may be inappropriate for the British Council given its status as a Government body, but a campaign will be more effective if it involves a broad coalition with others who also want to preserve access to Erasmus Plus.

7.15 There is also a wider opportunity in being seen to be campaigning to save access to the Erasmus Plus programme because a campaign would be an opportunity to make the case more generally to



colleges for 'internationalisation'. A campaign would bring profile for the wider case, and reinforce the Council's legitimacy in making the case for internationalisation.

- **We recommend (7) the British Council to seek support for internationalisation from both the Government and Ofsted, on the record.**

7.16 (By 'Government' here we mean all four governments within the UK. Similarly, we use 'Ofsted' as shorthand for college inspection bodies throughout the UK).

7.17 We set out above the rather equivocal position of both the Department for Education and Ofsted. It is unlikely that the British Council could get an endorsement from either as unambiguous as that which the Scottish Government gives to the internationalisation of the social enterprise sector, but ambiguity is unhelpful and undermining. Indeed, given our advice that the term "internationalisation" is an unhelpful one in promoting the Council's ambitions, a simple endorsement of "internationalisation" is unlikely to be wholly helpful anyway.

7.18 It is probably realistic though to aim for a joint statement, perhaps using the logic behind this report to say that they share an ambition to achieve X, and that working internationally / adopting a more global approach, is a good way to do so. The process of agreeing such a statement would also enable the British Council to make the case directly to Government and to Ofsted for more energetic internationalisation.

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