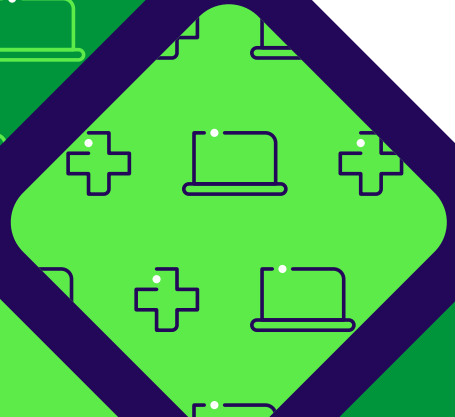


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# Alumni UK

British Council





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A special commendation is reserved for the dedicated team who developed the research. We extend our deepest thanks for the collaborative spirit and cooperation demonstrated by all involved parties. This publication stands as a testament to the collective efforts that have culminated in a comprehensive and insightful exploration of the international education landscape in the Americas region.



**Joanna Burke**  
Regional Director

# Introduction / Foreword

This research delves into the landscape of international education from two distinct perspectives: that of the student or alumnus and that of the educational agent. It offers a mapping of key stakeholders and networks in the Americas connected to both audiences, providing information and analysis on international education in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru.

This report not only supplies benchmarks but also provides resources to better understand the diverse local contexts and respond effectively to market needs. The first part of the publication maps agents and agent networks across the four countries, offering an overview of the services and programs they provide along with details of their current partnerships in the UK, with a particular focus on higher education.

The second part presents the socio-economic profile of students and alumni interviewed by the research team. It covers their academic background, current and future areas of interest, preferred study programme formats, and communication channels. Additionally, it includes their views on the UK as a study destination.

Finally, the third part examines the primary funding mechanisms for student mobility from Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. This includes national government scholarships and loans, as well as various private funding sources. It outlines the engagement of UK universities and governmental entities with key stakeholders in these countries.

The overall outcome of this study is an updated landscape for the involved countries and their links with the UK, highlighting potential opportunities, under-explored areas, and barriers that need addressing. Importantly, it emphasises the significance of local and international actors working strategically for more inclusive, supportive, and successful international education experiences in the UK.

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To build a list of UK alumni in Latin America and the Caribbean, an online survey was run regionally, and all alumni groups and individuals identified on behalf of the British Council in late 2022 were invited to participate. Completion of the survey was optional, and email recipients were provided with key messaging regarding the #AlumniUK global network, and provided with a link to join the platform immediately if they did not wish to participate in the survey.

Two alumni focus groups were conducted in the region in February 2023; one in Brazil, and another with UK graduates in Mexico and Colombia. The feedback from these group interviews is important to understand the personal journey of Latin Americans, as they chose a country and institution to study in, and made their way to the UK.

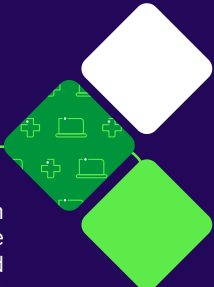
Results should inform key recruitment messaging for the region with real experiences providing data that can be used in communications campaigns in Latin America to increase alumni network participation and to stimulate interest in study in the UK. Challenges faced by Latin American students travelling to the UK may help to identify potential areas for improvement.

# Overview

A number of UK alumni networks were identified in Latin America and the Caribbean on behalf of the British Council in late 2022, but many were inactive, due to the recent global pandemic, and alumni representatives were slow to respond to email contact. Several groups plan to restart activities in 2023, making this an opportune time for the British Council to engage.

An alumni survey was run through January and February 2023 using the Survey Monkey platform to investigate graduate opinions regarding their experience studying in the UK; any challenges they wished to highlight; their advice for prospective students, and the type of alumni activity they would like to see in their locality. All survey participants were asked for their consent for the British Council to contact them regarding the alumni initiative, and just 26 of 402 (6%) did not give permission. These alumni are not included in the contact list provided with this report.

As well as reaching out to alumni groups through email campaigns embedded with #AlumniUK messaging (gleaned from the British Council website and in dialogue with colleagues in the British Council Education and Insights Hub), individual alumni were also contacted by email and via LinkedIn. Private schools, universities and university networks (in Latin American, the Caribbean and in the UK), regional funding agencies that have supported mobility to the UK, and education agents were also contacted in separate email campaigns, along with United Kingdom diplomatic offices in the region. Paid campaigns were run on Facebook and LinkedIn to further disseminate messaging and invite as many alumni as possible to share their views and join the platform.



Lists of alumni that gave their permission to be contacted by the British Council are provided with this report. Personal data collected is for the sole purpose of recruitment to the British Council alumni network, and participation in student recruitment initiatives and should not be used for any other purposes. SOS Education Consultancy and team members will delete all personal data gathered for this study, once it is delivered to the British Council.

# #AlumniUK Exclusive Survey

“Alumni UK Survey for the British Council” was conducted in the region during January and February 2023. The 26-question study, hosted on the Survey Monkey platform, aimed to collect information from Latin American and Caribbean alumni who had completed at least one academic semester in a UK university. Respondents were asked about their UK experience; what alumni initiatives they would like; whether they wished to join the #AlumniUK platform; and their interest in presenting experiences to prospective students. None of the questions were obligatory, and respondents were not obliged to provide personal information.

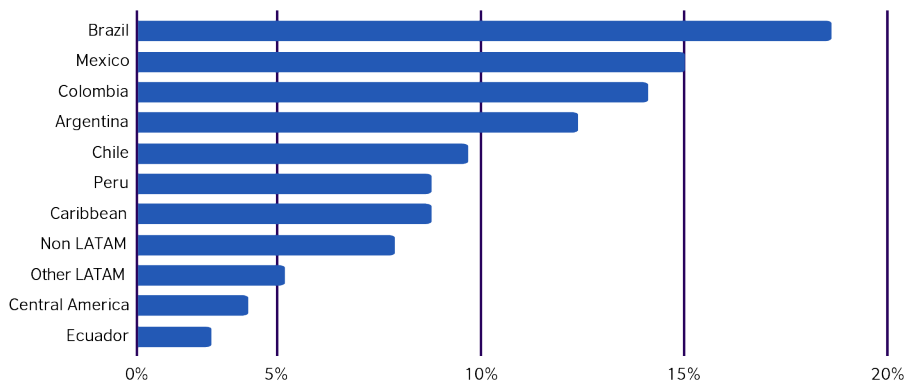
This report analyses responses received between 9 January 2023 and 2 March 2023, during which time 403 people responded from 34 countries. One respondent who gave a non-UK university was removed, reducing the dataset to 402. Fifty two respondents gave their locations as outside of the target region. SOS Education Consultancy contacted them by email to verify their country of origin, and survey data was updated to reflect

responses from twenty eight alumni. Brazil, Mexico and Colombia were the most represented countries in survey responses, accounting for 19%, 15% and 14% of respondents, respectively. A further 65 alumni (16%) did not indicate their country.

Most respondents (99%) provided details of their most recent UK university. The University of Leeds was the largest alumni group, representing 35% of respondents; followed by the London School of Economics and Political Science, with 10%. After Leeds, London was the second most cited city by 115 alumni (29% of those that provided their university). Four Leeds alumni and seven that studied in London were online students, so it is not clear if they actually lived in the UK. While the survey captured some alumni that studied in the UK as far back as 1969, most (75%) were more recent graduates, completing their courses in or after 2010. Sixty-three (16%) completed their studies in or after 2020, and 5% are still studying.

	UK University	Responses	% of Provided
1	University of Leeds	141	35%
2	The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)	39	10%
3	University College London	18	5%
4	King's College London	11	3%
5	University of Oxford	9	2%
6	University of London	9	2%
7	University of Glasgow	9	2%
8	University of Cambridge	8	2%
9	University of Warwick	8	2%
10	University of Sussex	8	2%





**Caribbean** = Trinidad and Tobago (11); Jamaica (5); Barbados (3); St. Lucia (2); Dominican Republic (1); The Bahamas (1); St. Kitts and Nevis (1); Turks and Caicos Islands (1); St. Vincent and the Grenadines (1)

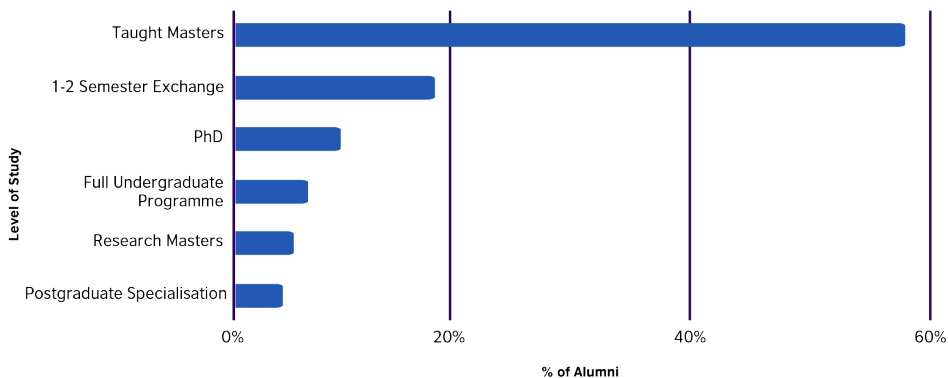
**Central America** = Costa Rica (5); Guatemala (2); Panama (2) Other LATAM = Uruguay (4); Guyana (3); Paraguay (3); Venezuela (2); Bolivia (2)

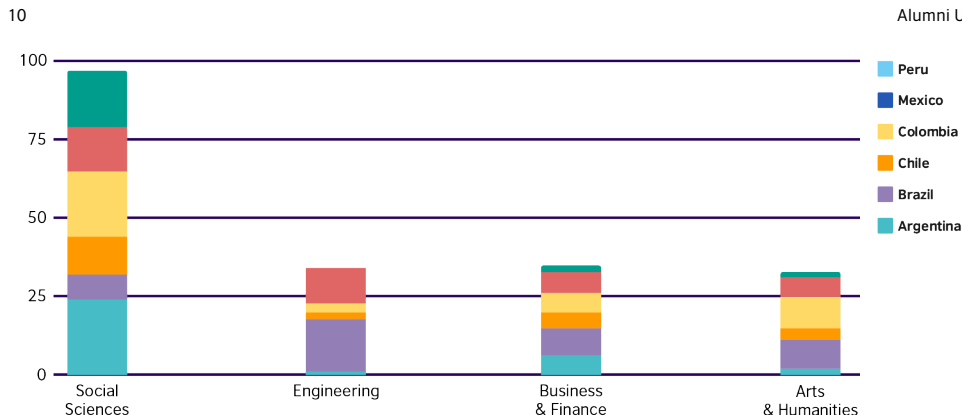
**Non LATAM** = UK (12); Sweden (3); US (2); Canada (1); Portugal (1); China (1); Germany (1); Netherlands (1); Belgium (1); Central African Republic (1)

Most alumni (80%) did not complete any language foundation programme before commencing their UK studies, although 5% said they wished they had, as it would have helped a lot. Fifty-three alumni (13%) completed a foundation programme, and 60% of those said it provided them with an excellent base, while 30% of the subset said completion of a foundation programme was a prerequisite for their UK university entrance, without giving details of their experience. A further 9% of the

same subset said their experience of the foundation programme was not positive.

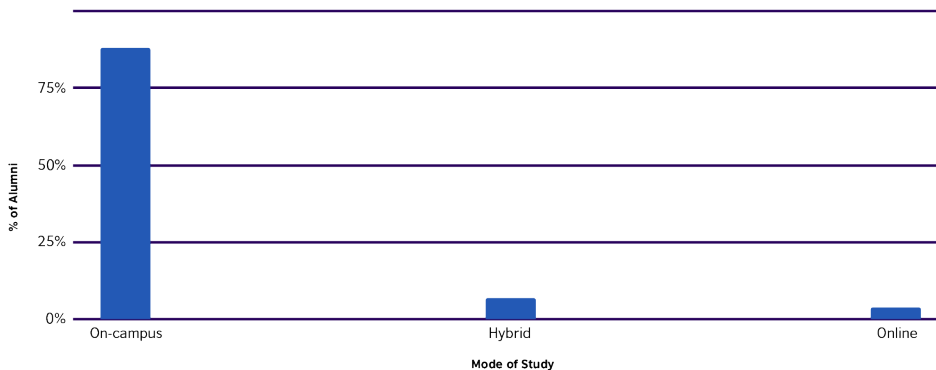
Social sciences was the most popular area studied by 36% of alumni respondents to the survey, followed by Engineering, Business & Finance, and Arts & Humanities, representing 15%, 13% and 12%, respectively. Computer Science only accounts for 2% of alumni respondents.





Most alumni (88%) completed their UK studies on campus, while 7% reported that their course was hybrid, and 4% completed online programmes. The vast majority (76%) of survey respondents had completed postgraduate studies in the UK, with 76% of those having completed a taught Masters programme.

Semester exchanges were the second most cited level of study, accounting for 13% of those that gave this information. Brazilian alumni represented 56% of those that listed semester exchanges, presumably ex- Science without Borders scholarship students.

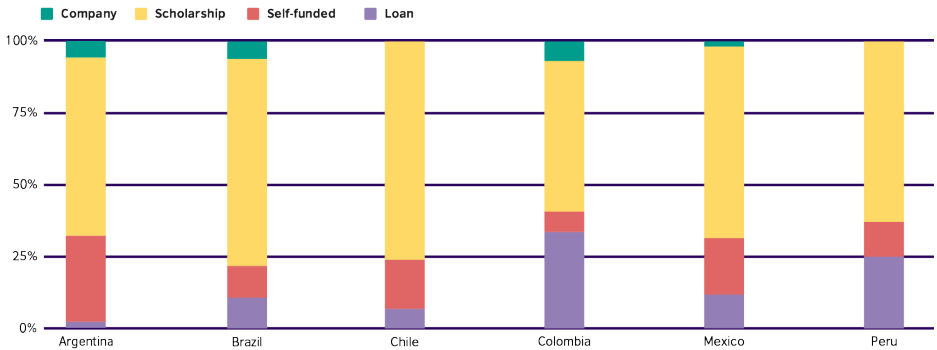


All respondents replied to a question regarding the funding for their studies, and it emerged that 61% were scholarship holders; 22% were self-funded; 15% had funded their studies in the UK with a loan; while 3% were supported by their company.

their UK studies, along with 30% of Colombians, while 12% from Mexico secured a loan to study in Britain, as did 11% from Brazil.

Of those that acquired a loan to study in the UK, 56% got a government loan, 34% accessed funding through an education credit institution, 7% took a bank loan, and 3% did not provide details of their loan source. For alumni from Peru and Colombia, loan rates were higher, with 31% of Peruvians receiving a loan to support

Meanwhile, 22% of scholarships received were partial, while 78% were given full scholarship support for their studies in the UK. Three quarters (73%) of Brazilian alumni respondents were in receipt of scholarship support, with 80% of these receiving 100% financial support. Meanwhile, 77% of survey respondents from Peru were scholarship recipients, along with 68% from Mexico and 45% from Colombia.



## Snapshot: University of Leeds

University of Leeds engaged with researchers during the dissemination of the #AlumniUK survey, and 141 alumni responses were recorded. A brief snapshot of results are presented here.

Nearly one quarter (23%) of University of Leeds survey respondents were from Mexico; 13% from Brazil; 8% from Chile, and 5% respectively from Chile and Colombia. Nearly one-fifth (18%) did not indicate their nationality, while 16% were from Central America and 7% were from the Caribbean. More than half (53%) of those that provided their level of study had completed taught Master's programmes; 15% had completed their PhD or a 1-2 semester exchange; while 7% were full undergraduate students. Across the region, 23% of University

of Leeds graduates completed engineering programmes; 18% studied in the area of social sciences; and a further 16% were graduates in the area of business and finance.

Only 13% of University of Leeds alumni said that their study in the UK did not impact their career, while 38% said their salary increased with the qualifications they earned. A further 56% reported that their professional confidence grew; 47% said their qualification allowed them to apply for better jobs; and 14% were promoted in their jobs. Personal and professional growth was a main benefit to their time in Leeds for 80% of alumni; while 45% pointed to amazing infrastructure in the university, and the same proportion (45%) said they met world class academics.

## > Why the UK?

Alumni were asked to select three responses from a list to describe what influenced them to study in the UK, and a total of 1,325 responses were received, signalling that some gave more than three answers. The strong reputation of the UK education system was the main driver for Latin American and Caribbean students to study in the UK, and this option was selected by more than half (52%) of respondents. A perception that UK qualification would be recognised internationally was another strong influencer, chosen by 42% of alumni participants in the study, while 41% said they chose the UK as they were awarded a scholarship (it is not clear if they had options to study in other destinations), and 40% chose

Britain for personal interest reasons. Rankings of UK universities were the driving force for 36% of the survey sample, while 30% stated that they felt a UK qualification would be strong on their resumé. Meanwhile, 28% studied in the UK to satisfy their desire to know British culture, while a quarter of respondents (25%) went to the UK in the belief that this would improve their job prospects.

What influenced your decision to study in the UK? (select three most applicable)	LAC	ARG	BRA	CHI	COL	MEX	PER
Strong reputation of UK education system	53%	45%	48%	53%	55%	51%	62%
UK qualifications are internationally recognised	41%	36%	42%	40%	35%	37%	35%
I was awarded a scholarship	41%	43%	51%	53%	25%	41%	35%
Personal Interest	39%	33%	48%	33%	55%	39%	23%
University Rankings	37%	24%	34%	40%	55%	39%	46%
I felt a UK qualification would be strong on my resumé	28%	24%	43%	23%	18%	22%	35%
Desire to know UK culture	27%	33%	45%	23%	31%	20%	12%
To improve my job prospects	26%	26%	29%	33%	20%	33%	27%
UK lifestyle	20%	17%	22%	27%	29%	12%	23%
Friends	6%	2%	8%	3%	2%	14%	8%
It was affordable	4%	0%	3%	3%	8%	6%	4%
Education Agency	4%	7%	6%	7%	6%	2%	0%
Online Information	2%	0%	2%	0%	6%	2%	0%
Weather	1%	0%	2%	0%	0%	2%	0%

## > Finding Information

Alumni were asked where they looked for information when they were searching for their course, and invited to choose up to three responses. However, just 684 responses were received, indicating that many did not select three options. UK university sites were the most popular source of information for alumni in Latin

America and the Caribbean, and this was cited by 64% of survey respondents, while one-third of alumni (32%) got their information from someone that had already studied in the UK.

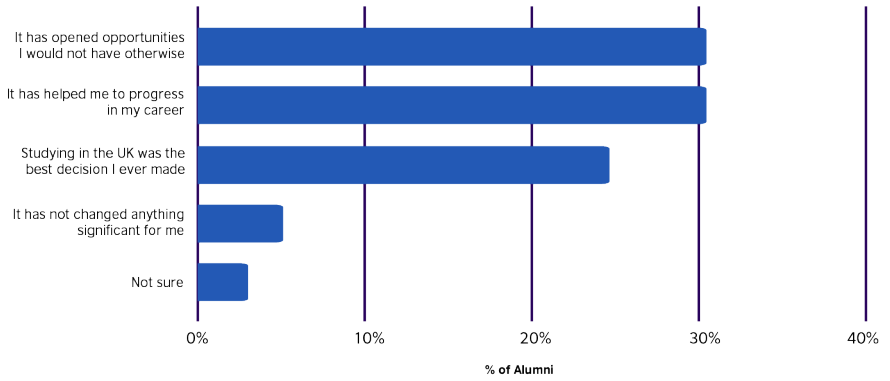
Where did you find information when searching for your course? (choose up to 3)	% of Alumni
UK university website	64%
From someone that studied in the UK	32%
From my university	20%
On a UK government website	11%
I met a university representative at a student fair	9%
On social media	9%
From an education agency	8%
It was really difficult to get information	6%
From my school	5%
Webinars	4%

## > UK qualification - value & recognition

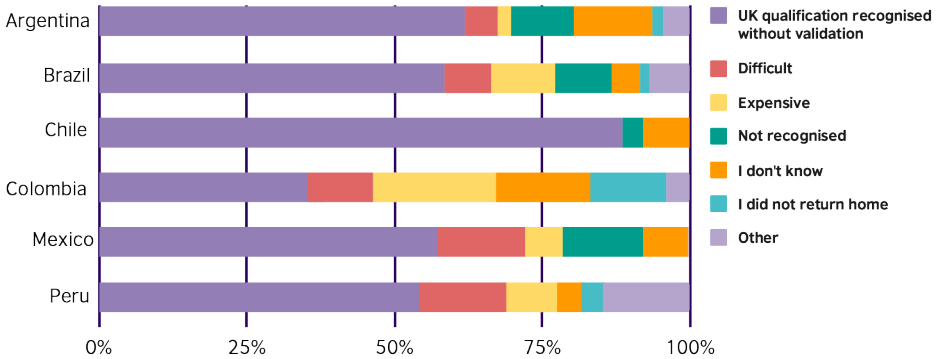
Alumni were asked to indicate what their UK qualification meant to them, and all but one of the survey respondents replied to this question. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and only 5% said that their UK university qualification had not changed anything significant for them, while another 3% were unsure. A quarter (25%) of all alumni respondents said studying the UK was the best decision they ever made, while 62% said it had either opened opportunities they would not otherwise have had, or helped them to progress in their career.

All but one survey respondent responded to a question regarding UK qualification recognition in their home country, and of these, 75% of responses were affirmative, once all “other” answers were reviewed. More than half (55%) of

those that responded to this question said: “Employers recognise the qualification, I did not need official validation”; 14% stated that it was either expensive or difficult to have their qualification recognised; and 9% did not know. Some variation can be noted between countries, and 86% of Chilean respondents said employers recognised their UK qualification without needing official validation. In Argentina, 63% of alumni said the same, as did 58% in Brazil and Mexico, respectively. Only 39% of Colombian alumni said their qualifications were automatically recognised by employers, with 22% reporting that the validation process was expensive, and 9% that said it was a difficult process. One in ten respondents in Argentina (10%) and in Mexico (12%) said their UK qualifications were not recognised; while 8% in Brazil said the same.



Is your UK qualification recognised in your country?	Total	% of Alumni
Employers recognise the qualification, I did not need official validation	238	59%
I don't know	35	9%
It was expensive to have my qualification recognised in my home country	34	8%
It was difficult to have my qualification recognised in my home country	30	7%
I did not return to my home country since studying in the UK	24	6%
My qualification is not recognised in my home country	22	5%
Other	18	4%



## > UK evaluation & career impact

Survey respondents were asked to identify up to five aspects that were positive about their studies in the UK, and a total of 1,707 responses were received, the most popular relating to personal and professional growth, selected by 80% of UK alumni. Half (50%) of the overall alumni population said their UK qualification allowed them to apply for much better jobs, and 38% said their salaries increased as a result of

their UK qualification, with 48% of these stating their salary 'increased significantly'. Most alumni (59%) said their study in the UK helped them to become a much more confident professional.

What was the best thing about your studies in the UK? (choose top 5)	LAC	ARG	BRA	CHI	COL	MEX	PER
I grew personally and professionally	80%	81%	89%	80%	84%	82%	73%
I met world class academics	45%	36%	37%	47%	51%	43%	62%
My professional confidence grew a lot	40%	43%	42%	50%	45%	41%	42%
Amazing infrastructure in the university	38%	33%	54%	30%	39%	35%	19%
I had great networking opportunities	35%	36%	22%	27%	35%	25%	31%
Excellent teaching quality	33%	40%	28%	40%	25%	27%	42%
Career relevant content	29%	26%	31%	37%	31%	24%	38%
I became a better problem solver	21%	10%	28%	7%	16%	33%	31%
I became a better communicator	18%	10%	35%	20%	16%	14%	12%
Opportunity to work in my industry	17%	7%	18%	13%	24%	25%	4%
My creativity developed	12%	12%	17%	7%	18%	12%	12%
I am much better able to work under pressure than I was before	12%	10%	17%	7%	8%	14%	12%
I learnt how to find better professional opportunities	11%	7%	14%	10%	14%	8%	4%
I developed strong leadership skills	11%	2%	15%	10%	16%	12%	4%
Support from the university	10%	7%	20%	3%	12%	18%	0%
Post study work opportunities in the UK	10%	10%	9%	13%	12%	6%	8%

How did your study in the UK impact your professional career? (select all that apply)	LAC	ARG	BRA	CHI	COL	MEX	PER
I became much more confident as a professional	59%	64%	62%	73%	63%	45%	58%
I could apply for much better jobs	50%	50%	49%	57%	55%	49%	54%
I was able to build a global network of professional contacts	38%	36%	26%	30%	47%	31%	65%
My salary increased somewhat with this qualification	23%	14%	14%	13%	39%	20%	46%
Mi salario aumentó considerablemente con mi título británico	18%	7%	14%	23%	22%	20%	35%
It did not impact my career	12%	17%	15%	0%	4%	10%	4%
I got a promotion in my job	9%	5%	5%	13%	12%	8%	12%

## > Challenges

Alumni were invited to detail any challenges they had to overcome to study in the UK, and only 7% indicated that they had not faced challenges. The biggest challenge that emerged was a perception by 39% that the UK does not offer long term opportunities for graduates. Accommodation was another major issue for students that travelled to the UK from Latin America and the Caribbean, and this was cited as a challenge by 36% of alumni, while more than one quarter (26%) said the visa process was 'stressful, time consuming and confusing'. Colombian alumni were the most likely to have difficulties with the visa process, as reported by 38% of survey respondents; along with 34% of Mexicans; 28% of Chileans; 24% of Brazilians; 23% of alumni from Peru; while just 10% from Argentina noted such immigration difficulties.

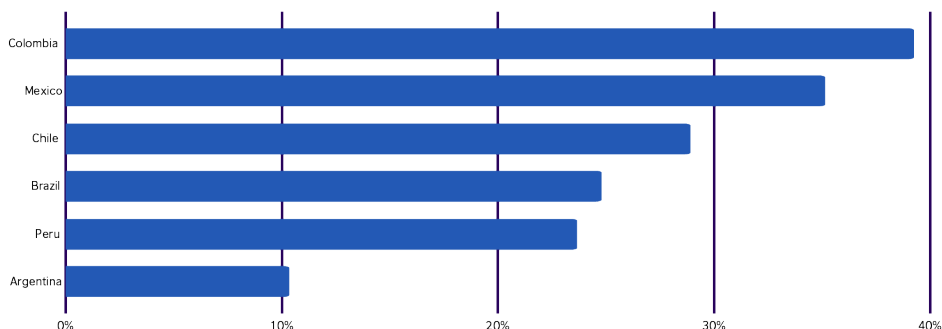
Nearly one in five (17%) from the region reported that they would have benefited from

additional language support and training, while 16% respectively said they found it difficult to make friends and that UK culture made them feel like an outsider. Another 12% felt that student support services were not good enough.

An analysis of the 'other' responses showed that 6% related to cost and finance; 4% were about language or culture; 3% referred to mental health issues; 2% were about employment and academic issues, respectively; while 1% listed challenges relating to immigration, scholarships and loans, or the weather in the UK.



What were the main challenges to overcome to study in the UK? (select three)	% of Alumni
The UK offers no long term opportunities for graduates	39%
Accommodation was a big challenge	36%
Getting a visa was stressful, time consuming and confusing	26%
I could have benefitted from more language support and training	17%
UK culture made me feel like an outsider	16%
It was hard to make friends	16%
Student support services were not good enough	12%
It was difficult to keep up with the pace in the university	10%
Government agencies took too long to reply to queries	5%
It was really difficult to get accurate information	5%
Universities took too long to reply to queries	4%
No challenges	7%
Other	28%



"Getting a visa was stressful, time consuming and confusing"

## > Advice to prospective students

Alumni were invited to offer advice to prospective students from a list, and given space to offer further advice not included in the survey responses. Most alumni felt that new students should take advantage of the support available in their UK university (67%), and network with other international students (66%). While 62% of alumni said prospective students should 'Go for it, this is the best decision you can make', 49% advised them to

reach out for support when needed; 42% told future students to focus on their English before travelling, and one fifth (20%) said new UK students should continue with English classes for their first few months in the UK. Only 3% said that students should 'go somewhere else to study.'

What advice would you give to other students thinking of going to the UK to study? (select all that apply)	% of Alumni
Take advantage of university support networks and societies	67%
Network with other international students when you arrive	66%
Go for it - this is the best decision you can make	61%
Reach out for support when you need it	49%
Focus on improving your English before you travel	42%
Do lots of research before you go	38%
Bring warm clothes	28%
Continue with English classes for the first few months in the UK	20%
Go somewhere else to study	3%

## > Alumni Activity

Networking is important to UK alumni, and 55% said they would like regular in-person events that would allow them to meet with fellow graduates; 39% would like to meet with prospective students (in a separate survey question, 27% said they would love to present their experiences to would-be UK students; 42% would consider it; and 22% would be interested in knowing more. Just 9% said would not be of interest to them). More than half (52%) of alumni respondents said would

appreciate masterclasses in their professional area as an alumni activity and 46% would enjoy thematic webinars. Meanwhile, 47% would like a special alumni discount should they return to the UK for further studies; and 43% would like special alumni prices on short online programmes. In-market career support was a preference for 42% of survey respondents, while a similar proportion (44%) want jobs fairs.

What kind of alumni activities would you like to see in your country? (select all that apply)	LAC	ARG	BRA	CHI	COL	MEX	PER
Regular in-person events so I can meet with other alumni	55%	55%	63%	60%	55%	69%	58%
Masterclasses in my professional area	52%	57%	62%	63%	65%	51%	50%
Alumni discount if I decide to return to study in the UK	47%	45%	58%	53%	59%	41%	58%
Webinars on different themes	46%	45%	51%	30%	75%	47%	38%
Jobs fairs	44%	43%	49%	47%	51%	43%	46%
Special alumni pricing on short online courses	43%	48%	38%	40%	59%	33%	46%
Career support	42%	43%	48%	37%	49%	37%	31%
Meeting with students that are considering study in the UK	39%	36%	43%	43%	33%	61%	46%

# Additional alumni comments

## > Immigration

*“Visa process is really complicated, slow and stressful.”*

*“Studying in the UK changed my life and I am so thankful I had the opportunity. Unfortunately, I am part of the generation of students that did not benefit from new student visas after graduation – I only had a couple of months to find a job as a recent graduate, which was impossible. I wish I had postponed my studies for a couple of years, and then I could’ve had access to the new visa.”*

*“LATAM students have a hard time when applying for a visa.”*

*“I loved my time in the UK. However the visa process, especially the “showing enough funds” part, can be stressful. Many people have scholarships or plan to pay over time, so this kind of “step” can be difficult for a lot of people.”*

*“After successfully completing their programme, students should be given a work permit that can be used when it is convenient to them. Some students may have to return home for a period of time to work due to their scholarship obligations, thus, they may not be able to use the work permit immediately after completing their studies.”*

*“We need more opportunities to keep working in the UK or the EU. Qualifications are great, but countries like Colombia do not have vacancies for high profile professionals in the arts.”*

## > Quality of Education

*“Research the program you want to enter thoroughly and probably avoid those that are very new.”*

*“I was impressed by the quantity and quality of information and theory that were offered in my area that wasn’t available to me back home.”*

*“Choose your course wisely. Some industry sectors are really hard to find work in, even if you have qualifications. Choose a course where there are plenty of job opportunities after. Research the job market, don’t rely on what university tells you about job prospects.”*

*“After graduating, and due to my UK degree, I had wonderful opportunities in the multinational pharmaceutical industry. I graduated in 1994 and came to live in the US in 2015. Here, my UK degree was not accepted by employers, hence I changed my career. This is a flaw of the US system because UK education is superior to US education. I have studied in the US in an Ivy League school (one of the top US universities) and my education in the UK was far better. Studying in the UK was the best decision I ever made and I am planning to go back for a specialty.”*

## > Information and Support

*“It would be better if the UK focused on promoting the reputation of universities in Latin America. Although there are many well ranked universities, they are not widely known in Latin America. US universities have a better reputation.”*

*“Unfortunately my home university did not have much information to give me about the UK university, nor about the process involved in enrollment. I believe it would be of great value if more information were available to Latin American students about all the steps needed from acceptance to enrollment and arrival at campus. The information provided about the application was very nice, but information about the next steps after being accepted was a bit confusing.”*

*“It was a great experience for me. I made friends from all over the world and grew as a person. The university counselor helped me a lot through tough times. I am forever grateful for the opportunity.”*

*“I had great support from one of the teachers, but the rest of the academic body was not helpful, no matter how brilliant they were.”*

## > Language and Cultural Issues

*“The staff could be more understanding with the difficulty in speaking a second language and dealing with a different culture.”*

*“It would be great to offer more and better services to deal with the cultural shock”*

*“Studying in the UK has been one of my best decisions. To make the most of it, you must have a good level of English, not just the IELTS band 7. You have to practise your speaking to a high level to integrate with your colleagues. Otherwise, you’ll feel like a dumb outsider.”*

*“The UK and EU classmates were not very welcoming, except for a few, and the curriculum was not geared to an international class. The perspectives were very narrow and “first-world”, which excluded the experiences of me and other persons from the global South.”*

*“The demands of the courses themselves were not a big challenge. Adapting to the weather and getting integrated into the community was.”*

# #AlumniUK Exclusive Focus Groups

Two separate online focus groups were run by professional moderators in February 2023 with a selection of survey respondents. One was held on 3 February 2023 in Portuguese with six UK alumni from Brazil, while the second focus group was conducted in Spanish on 9 February 2023 with seven participants from Mexico and Colombia. The second group had five participants from Colombia, and just two from Mexico (two of the Mexican participants cancelled at short notice, and two others did not show up on the call). One alumni from Colombia also cancelled last-minute, as did one from Brazil. For the purposes of this analysis, the groups will be referred to as the Brazil group and the LatAm group, understood as the Spanish speaking focus group, with participants from Colombia and Mexico.

There were four men and one woman in the Brazil focus group. They studied at University of Leeds (4), London South Bank University, and University of Manchester. Four of the alumni had studied in the UK on 100% scholarships, one on a partial scholarship, and one had paid with personal savings. Four had studied at undergraduate level, one at Masters level, and one had pursued their PhD in the UK. One Brazilian group member completed their UK studies in 2006, another in 2010; while four others finished their studies in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2022, respectively.

The second focus group consisted of three women and two men from Colombia, and two women from Mexico, who studied at the University of Leeds (3), University of Reading, University of Hertfordshire (this student had previously studied at University of Surrey),

University of Sussex, and University College London. Five had completed taught Masters programmes in the UK, with one of these studying in hybrid mode; while another completed a hybrid postgraduate specialisation. Three were awarded 100% scholarships for their study in the UK; two received partial scholarships,

one received financial support from their place of work, while the final participant got a loan from their government. In the Colombian group, two participants completed their UK studies some years ago, in 2002 and in 2005, while three others finished studying in the UK in 2017, 2020, and 2023, respectively. The Mexican participants completed their UK studies in 2003 and in 2012.

Graduates reported spending up to two years planning and researching before they travelled to the UK, although this was not the case for all. Overall, alumni in both groups were very positive about their experience in the UK. They were impressed with the accessibility of world

renowned professors and felt supported by international office staff. Most found the academic system very different from what they were used to in Latin America and would like to have been better prepared for the format and the pace. It was difficult for many to make friends with local students and there were some reports of xenophobic experiences. Scholarship fellows noted that there was little follow-up or support offered after their studies were complete and they returned home.

## > Choosing the UK as a study destination

Focus group participants chose the UK for study due to positive perceptions regarding the quality of teaching, and for cultural reasons, including the English language. While rankings were of great importance to students when considering where to study, the extracurricular activities offered by universities and the wider cultural offer in specific cities were often central to final decision making.

One Brazilian alumnus had a shortlist of the US, the UK and Canada, but dropped the US as an option when considering cultural aspects, and what he perceived as an impersonal application process. On reflection, he feels his experience was much richer having chosen the UK as he had access to several UK universities during his doctorate. “I was in a different university every week.” Another alumni that studied in both Canada and the UK remarked that student support was far superior in Britain. “The United Kingdom is much more advanced in terms of reception, student support and the continuity of connections.”

Alumni testimonials were a focal point of decision-making for two of the Brazilian alumni who chose their UK university based on the fact that friends had studied there and could offer support. A Brazilian that studied arts and humanities in the UK in 2005 continues to reap the benefits of the time he spent studying in Britain. Another completed an MBA programme in the UK, having sought a qualification that would be valid outside of Brazil. He originally considered studying in the US, but considered the UK a “much better fit” due to his European lineage. His experience in the UK expanded his “global vision”, largely due to the multiculturalism of classmates. An extremely intense course forced him into a positive learning curve, and he would like to study more in the UK.

Flexibility in UK universities to choose from a wide gamut of modules during exchange programmes was highly appraised by Brazilian alumni, and the availability of lab technicians in the UK was highlighted positively. Students could focus on their practical experiments without having to deal with bureaucratic processes, as was the case in Brazil.

All LatAm (Spanish-speaking) focus group participants pursued postgraduate studies in Britain, and their choice was largely led by perceptions of the UK being considered a leader in areas like public health and transport, and a huge level of course choice in the UK. Specific programme content and format was a deciding factor when choosing between universities in the UK and other countries.

Rankings were important for students that travelled to the UK with support from Colfuturo in Colombia.

## > Searching for information

Several of the Brazilian focus group participants travelled to the UK under the Brazilian Federal Government Science without Borders programme, and reported that information was well-organised and easy to access. However, one alumni that travelled to the UK as part of a cooperation programme between Brazilian and British universities noted a lack of practical information available from her home university, apart from the contact of another student that had studied in the UK. Support was excellent when she finally connected with the international office of her UK university, but the experience was very confusing before this contact was made.

Alumni in Mexico and Colombia specifically mentioned the role the British Council played in their search for information. A Colombian alumnus said the British Council website was her first port of call when searching for Masters programmes, before she referred to UK university webpages. She applied to ten UK universities, before deciding to study at the University of Surrey. Meanwhile, a Mexican that completed UK studies in 2003 said British Council fairs were very helpful. She had narrowed her options down to the US, Canada, England and Australia. "The United Kingdom was more approachable because of the British Council. They had fairs and they went to the universities. (...) There was a lot of information compared to other countries."

Another Mexican (2012 graduate) remembers attending a fair with university representatives, which she thinks was organised by the British Council. "I also remember an event at the British Council here in Mexico City, with graduates that had studied in the UK." She was concerned about post-work study opportunities, and appreciated the opportunity to ask graduates "how was their job search and how they were inserted into the labour market."

## > Life in the UK

Alumni were extremely positive in their feedback regarding support from the international office, in terms of reception and orientation, including visits to off-campus points of cultural interest. Clubs and societies were highly valued as a way of making friends while studying in a new country, especially for those leaving home for the first time.

One Brazilian architecture graduate said that she felt her learning in Brazil was incomplete, and that studying in the UK would expand her horizons. However, she struggled to cope with a university system that was very different from Brazil. UK learning was project-based, with academic disciplines introduced as they became relevant to the evolution of projects, whereas learning in Brazil was largely theoretical. "It was like we were doing another course, starting from zero." While she reflects positively on her learning, she wishes she had understood the different format before she travelled.

A Colombian graduate also commented on structural differences between home and the UK. An Engineering student, he never had to write essays in Colombia, and was taken aback when asked to write 2-3 essays within the first weeks of term. "I had to go online to understand the structure. (...) It was a shock of reading academically, learning to write academically." He noted that his host university in the UK offered classes to support this initial learning process. However, he felt that around one-fifth of the disciplines he studied were a waste of time. "I had some teachers that were terrible. (...) The ones that were good were very good, but there were some that were very bad."

In terms, alumni were positive about the independence and autonomy in UK university life, although this was seen as socially limiting. Alumni in both groups were especially impressed with their access to world-renowned academics, who were very approachable. The availability of tutors in the event of difficulties was viewed positively,

## > Student welfare

although one Brazilian noted that her tutor was on the verge of retirement, and not really engaged. LatAm graduates were very positive in their appraisal of the mix between theoretical and practical learning in the UK, noting that many lecturers came from industrial backgrounds and that regular guests were brought to address their classes.

A 2003 graduate from Mexico said her UK university was not well prepared to receive her, and described her arrival as a “logistical nightmare.” However, her overall experience was positive and due to skills shortages in her area, she had three job offers by the time she completed her studies. She remained working in the UK for nine years after her Masters. A 2020 Colombian graduate did not have the same experience, and wished she had the chance to do an internship as part of her university programme: “Finding work in my area was very difficult. My Master’s degree was in marketing, and it’s a very competitive area. It was very difficult for a foreign person to be given a job over a local person.”

One graduate travelled to the UK during the pandemic, reporting that she was under pressure to travel or risk losing her place, requiring her to reapply. “The experience was horrific. (...) There was no certainty about how they were going to handle the classes. (...) They pressured us to travel and once we got there, they had no certainty.” Another Colombian was surprised and disappointed with the timetable for his programme. “When you enrol in a full-time Master’s degree of 13 months, you imagine you will have classes all of the time. In England, I had days with only one or two classes.”

Alumni praised cultural activities offered by the international offices, which gave them access to people from all over the world, but noted a lack of connection with their classmates, due to large lecture halls and a tendency of students towards independent study. Living away from home for the first time and spending Christmas alone were challenges noted by Brazilian alumni.

Some noted that it was easier to befriend faculty members than fellow students, unless they had to complete group work as part of course assignments. Some alumni reported feeling depressed and isolated, overwhelmed by a very different education system in the UK, and reported that the international office in their UK university was very helpful and recommended a counselling service.

A Colombian graduate emphasised the importance placed on mental health in UK universities, which she said does not exist in Colombia. Her mother was terminally ill and died around the time of her UK thesis deadline. “The university was very understanding, they gave me one more year to deliver the thesis and told me: ‘The important thing is that you are well’. (...) In the United Kingdom, you can raise your hand and say you are having a hard time, and in Latin America you can’t.”



## > Prejudice

Some alumni experienced attitudes of xenophobia and prejudice, with subtle but frequent comments made regarding their Latino origins. One referred to a college lecturer who commented to Brazilians in an architecture class: “now you have the chance to get to know civilisation.” Another graduate from Colombia remembers a highly-esteemed professor in her UK university that referred to her running a company in the future. “X is going to be director of this company, and since X is from Colombia, this company will be exporting cocaine.” She said she felt powerless to do anything about it, due to the

high profile of the professor. “It is truly unforgivable that in the middle of a class they tell you that you are the director of a company that takes cocaine out of Colombia. At the time I only shared it with my thesis supervisor, who was very offended and wanted to take it to the ethics committee.”

## > Returning home

The LatAm group reflected on a lack of follow-up or support after their studies were complete. For a 2005 graduate from Colombia: “The government had made a significant investment in me, but they didn’t bother to see if that investment had been really well made. I’m done, I’m back, and that’s it.” Another graduate complained of difficulties validating her UK qualification in Colombia: “It is very complex, because you have to send all of the papers to the United Kingdom or go personally to a Consulate to get some stamps and then do a super bureaucratic procedure. I think that the British Council could have an intermediary role in this so that it is not so complex.”

# Analysis and Recommendations

The findings in this report offer food for thought with regard to messaging for prospective students; support and initiatives that UK alumni in the region would like to see; and areas in which improvement may be warranted. While the findings of the alumni survey are significant, it would be better to have a wider overview of alumni opinions in the area, with a broader dataset for use in communications campaigns in the region. An extension of the survey, with buy-in from UK universities, is recommended.

Data regarding funding may be skewed by the fact that some alumni groups are populated primarily by scholarship holders, like Chevening groups in different markets and Science without Borders scholars in Brazil. A wider scope of the research will provide more accurate and in-depth information regarding the UK experience of students from Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as the post-study experience of using their UK-earned qualifications.

When disseminating the survey, a wide range of UK universities were contacted, and invited to share the questionnaire with their alumni in this region. However, there was very little engagement, possibly as some UK universities are not aware of the British Council alumni network. One exception was the University of Leeds, who engaged with SOS Education Consultancy regarding messaging, etc. A large number of University of Leeds responses were received on the day that the university sent out messaging, and Leeds graduates make up 35% of this survey cohort.

## > #AlumniUK Platform

Attached to this report is a list of alumni that are either interested in joining the #AlumniUK platform immediately, or are interested in knowing more about the initiative. The British Council should engage with this latter group, perhaps in the form of webinars, to let them know more about the value proposition of the platform, and to invite them to join.

Continued effort should be made to engage with alumni groups identified for the British Council in late 2022. While many chapters are currently dormant, several indicated a hope to reinstate activities in 2023, so it is a good time for the British Council to engage with them, and offer support for their in-market initiatives.

High potential alumni should be engaged to deliver thematic webinars for students interested in specific fields of study in the UK. The contact list provided with this report allows for the selection of further alumni ambassadors, based on their location, and stated interest in participating in recruitment activities.

## > UK University Engagement

The findings of this report should be presented to UK universities as a preliminary view of alumni attitudes. As follow-up, universities may invite their LAC alumni to respond to an extended iteration of the survey, or to join the #AlumniUK network. An extended survey would represent a quick and cheap way for universities to gather data for their own communications uses, as well as feeding into a larger UK communications campaign for the region.

A high level discussion is recommended with UK universities to investigate whether alumni discounts can be offered on a sectoral level to returning students, even for online programmes. Seeing as many universities engage with education agents and offer commission for placed students, it is suggested that the equivalent amount be offered as a special #AlumniUK discount to members of the alumni platform. This ‘feel-good’ initiative can be launched through the #AlumniUK platform, and accompanied by national media campaigns in each target market, accompanied by some positive data that has emerged in this report (or better still, with a larger dataset).

Furthermore, alumni discounts on short online courses, for example, offers an ideal way for UK universities to test out market demand for non-award courses that are currently in their portfolio, as well as offering potential for alumni testimonials for such programmes. Non-award courses are suggested as an initial offer, as they do not require any validation, and can redress specific skills shortages in the regional employment market.

Universities that have partnership agreements with universities in Latin America and the Caribbean, or that are connected with funding or loan agencies, should ensure that adequate and easy-to-understand information is available to all partners and students, and that marketing campaigns align with important

launch dates for scholarships, etc. Ideally, a representative either in-market or on-campus should be available to respond quickly to any queries or doubts that arise.

## > Pre-Departure Support

Most alumni (64%) accessed information about their programme on the websites of UK universities, highlighting the importance of easy-to-navigate sites with pertinent (and search friendly) information available, to include time-table structures and assessment types. Universities and government agencies should ensure that information is up-to-date, and that students’ queries are responded to in a timely nature.

It emerged that many alumni were overwhelmed by the structure of the UK system, which is quite different from what they are used to in Latin America. Many wished they had known more before they left home, so that they could prepare themselves better. While UK universities offer good support for international students, that includes academic writing workshops, etc., it may be useful to engage with students before they arrive, so that they can mentally prepare for a different system and access available support before reaching crisis point.

Pre-departure support should include practical information regarding accommodation, briefing students that this may take some time to organise, with a realistic idea of the costs involved, deposits that may need to be paid, etc. Clear information regarding immigration procedures should also be made available.

## > Living in the UK

Several alumni pointed to a culture shock when they moved to the UK, difficulty making friends (particularly with local students), and identified feelings of sadness, loneliness and depression. When they accessed services, many felt positively supported, but wished they had availed of such services sooner, suggesting that perhaps they were not initially aware of availability.

Reports of racism and xenophobia were related during this study, worryingly coming from university professors at times, and many alumni reported feeling like outsiders in UK culture. It is important that university personnel are sensitive and mindful when addressing international students, avoiding stereotypes and hurtful comments. International students, likewise, should be aware of access to redress in such cases.

## > Recognition of Qualifications

There was a wide variety of experience regarding the recognition of UK earned qualifications, and the current status of mutual agreement for credit recognition between the UK and Latin American countries is not clear. Clarity and communication is recommended around this, so that each returning graduate does not have to face a long and lonely battle to have their qualifications recognised. British Council workshops for returning graduates are recommended.

## > Funding Agencies

Increased engagement with funding agencies in the region is indicated, not just to stimulate further engagement with UK universities in a bid to increase student numbers, but also to investigate ways in which returning scholars may utilise their international learning to bring a value-added to their nation.

## > Post-Study Employment

Post-study employment is a top concern for alumni, and this is certainly not unique to this region. The potential for engagement with British companies that are operating in the region should be investigated, to potentially develop a career-starter paid internship programme with mentoring. This represents a high-potential means of bringing a value-added not only to the alumni that avail of such an opportunity, but also may address some skills deficits faced by UK companies in Latin America and the Caribbean. An #AlumniUK graduate career-starter programme may also represent a opportunity to engage on a deeper level with specific funding agencies in target markets. Furthermore, such a programme would provide rich real-life case-study examples to illustrate the strength and benefit of the UK higher education system.

## > Alumni Activity

UK alumni in Latin America and the Caribbean want in-person events so that they can network with fellow graduates. As well as organising stand-alone #AlumniUK branded events, the British Council should seek to engage with existing existing alumni groups, offering support to events that they wish to plan.

All alumni were asked whether they would consider presenting their experiences to prospective students, and just 9% were not interested. The LAC alumni contact list gives the British Council details for 109 alumni who would 'love to' present their experiences; 170 who would 'consider it'; and 87 who would be 'interested to know more'. This data may be used to identify alumni ambassadors in specific locations when the British Council is planning outreach initiatives.

Career support is important to alumni and a selection of workshops and Masterclasses may be promoted through the platform to guide and support graduates that have recently returned to their home country. Such workshops should include information and advice regarding the recognition of UK qualifications.

Invite 'high profile' alumni to speak to prospective students at recruitment events, and to record

short testimonial videos in their current workplace, reflecting on the value and differential that a UK study experience brought to their personal and professional lives. These videos may be used in communications and marketing campaigns locally.

## > Communications Campaign

Communications campaigns should be planned and delivered in target markets, using the high profile alumni voices and data that has emerged from this report. Buy-in from the UK university sector would likely lead to increased engagement with alumni in the region, and presents an opportunity to create a richer dataset that will be more appealing to media outlets. Some preliminary data can be used as a means of promoting the #AlumniUK in the region, preferably with some announcement of distinct advantages, like an alumni discount. However, data sets for individual countries are small, and such campaigns would have a greater impact with more data.

Some sample headlines for communications campaigns:

- British universities offer special discount for UK graduates
- 62% of British alumni in Latin America had unique opportunities or career progress with UK qualification
- A quarter of UK alumni in Latin America and the Caribbean say study in the UK was the best decision they ever made
- 82% of Mexican graduates grew personally and professionally after studying in Britain
- 89% of Colombian graduates grew personally and professionally after studying in Britain
- 89% of Brazilian students say they grew personally and professionally after studying in Britain
- 81% of Peruvian graduates from UK universities had their salaries increase on their return
- 59% of Chilean graduates could apply for better jobs after studying in the UK.

