

# Internationalisation of education: focus on Central Asia and the Eastern Neighbourhood

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**What is the evidence on approaches to support education in lower and upper middle-income countries (focusing on Central Asia and the Eastern Neighbourhood) to achieve broad development outcomes, bolster UK influence and counter mis/disinformation?**

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# 1. Overview

This rapid review looks at the role of education in achieving various development and diplomatic outcomes. The focus is on middle income countries and, where literature is available, Central Asia and the Eastern Neighbourhood. It provides a brief overview of literature on the effectiveness of education in promoting general development outcomes, primarily human capital and economic growth. The key focus of the review is on the internationalisation<sup>1</sup> of higher education. It explores how country and regional strategies to attract international students, and/or to promote the competitiveness of their national students, affects individual learning and cultural outcomes, opportunities for 'soft power'<sup>2</sup> influence, and the potential for economic development. English language learning and English-medium instruction is an important component in this trend towards internationalisation. The review also briefly surveys educational initiatives designed to counter misinformation and disinformation, which have become increasingly difficult to address with the rise of online information.

## Investment in education and broad development goals

While intermediate and secondary educational enrolment is high in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA), compared to global averages, there have been declines in the quality of education, and enrolment in higher education (HE) remains low (Berde & Kurbanova, 2023; UNFPA, 2015). The main outcomes of tertiary education (TE) (universities, trade schools and colleges) are economic growth, enhanced earnings of graduates and skill enhancement that contributes to productivity (Howell et al., 2020). Social inequality persists in accessing HE, including based on socio-economic status, gender, disability, geographic location, race and ethnicity (Ambasz et al., 2023; Chankseliani, 2022; Reinders et al., 2020). At the primary and secondary level, children with disabilities in post-Soviet countries have generally been excluded from mainstream school systems (UNESCO, 2021a).

Many studies on education in low- and medium- income countries (LMICs), including in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia, emphasise that increasing enrolment is unlikely to improve development outcomes if the quality of education is poor. Quality of HE remains a major issue in Central Asia, due in part to inadequate public funding, poor infrastructure, and ineffective teaching approaches (Ambasz et al., 2023; Chankseliani et al., 2021). Much research on the region emphasises that poor alignment of educational programmes with the needs of the local labour market (skills mismatch) raises the appeal of studying abroad (Ambasz et al., 2023; Chankseliani, 2016; UNFPA, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> The HE sector has attached diverse definitions and practices to internationalisation, from recruiting international students to globalising the curriculum and research. Internationalisation as practice is conceptually reduced to the recruitment of international students or international research partnerships (Lomer et al., 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment. See: Nye, J. (2017). Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept. *Palgrave communications*, 3(1), 1-3.

## **Internationalisation of British education**

There has been a significant rise in students from Russia, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia studying in the UK (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016). The global importance of English contributes to the attractiveness of the UK (Riotte, 2022; Lomer et al., 2018). Various research finds that the potential soft power impact of education is greater for international alumni who have studied in the UK than for students partaking in transnational education programmes (distance learning or in-country branch campuses) (Mellors-Bourne, 2017; Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016). Research on prominent British academic scholarships converge on the goal of creating sympathetic ‘opinion leaders’ who can help to foster better relations between the students’ home countries and the UK, and spread British culture and values (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016; Wilson, 2015).

While very limited, there is some evidence of actual changes in political views stemming from mobility schemes (Lomer, 2017). Empirical data reveal a connection between higher numbers of students from post-Soviet countries studying in Europe and the US and higher levels of democratic development in the home country. The view is that studying abroad results in democratic socialisation and development of civic consciousness (Chankseliani, 2018). Similarly, most students from countries governed by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)<sup>3</sup>, taking part in the Erasmus student exchange programme, felt more interested in EU politics and culture and closer to the EU’s fundamental values (Perilli, 2016). Research on UK soft power claims, however, that there is no guarantee that international alumni will support British policies and/or that they will hold positions of influence (Lomer, 2017).

## **Internationalisation strategies of the Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia**

Russia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan are the three most popular destinations among the post-Soviet countries for regional students (Chankseliani, 2016). Research on the rise of transnational HE institutions in Kazakhstan finds that educational policy is driven not by the desire to project soft power or to be influenced by another country’s culture, but rather by the aim of increasing the competitiveness of Kazakhstani students; and replicating the economic success of the other country (Varpahovskis & Kuteleva, 2023).

### English language training and English-medium instruction (EMI) <sup>4</sup>

Countries in Central Asia are not only establishing campuses of foreign HE institutions, but local universities are also implementing EMI to attract international students, gain international prestige, and improve student’s English competencies and employability (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022; Linn et al., 2021; Curle et al., 2020; Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). Research on EMI in Central Asian countries finds, however, that the absence of special EMI training and materials for students and teachers has undermined the quality of teaching (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022). Successful EMI also requires subject

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<sup>3</sup> The ENP governs the EU’s relations with 16 of the EU’s closest Eastern and Southern neighbours.

<sup>4</sup> EMI can be defined as ‘the use of the English language to teach academic content in places where English is not the first language of the majority of the population’ (Curle et al., 2020, p. 10).

teachers who are proficient in English, but they are often in short supply in LMICs (Simpson, 2017). Research on the introduction of EMI in Central Asia finds that although it adversely affected academic performance, negative effects did not persist (Eusafzai, 2022; Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). Improvements in learning materials and teacher training, and private tutoring, can contribute to more effective learning in English (Milligan, 2022; Hajar & Karakus, 2023; Akimenko, 2017).

### **Internationalisation and digitalisation of information**

Developing media literacy competencies to counter the global spread of mis/disinformation can be supported through the integration of media literacy in school curriculums (Karanfiloğlu & Sağlam, 2023; McDougall et al., 2018). Teacher training and continuous professional development is considered essential to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively teach media literacy (Buehler et al., 2021; McDougall et al., 2018). IREX's evaluation of the long-term impact of Learn to Discern (L2D) media training in Ukraine revealed that L2D participants had higher levels of disinformation news analysis skills and critical thinking abilities; and were better at identifying facts and opinions, and false stories (see Haigh et al., 2021; Murrock et al., 2018a and 2018b).

Much of the research on information literacy in EECA focuses on libraries and librarians (Haigh et al., 2021). Library spaces have also been recommended as spaces to allow for the practice of English (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022). IREX's L2D programme in Moldova, which supports librarians to develop media corners (with various print media and computers) and trains librarians to help citizens access online information, finds that many librarians continue to offer free online training sessions after the programme's conclusion (Järvinemi, 2021; Haigh et al., 2019; Palamarciuc, 2017).

Fact-checking<sup>5</sup> websites are one of the most used technologies to debunk fake news and reduce its spread (Kanozia et al., 2021). Research on Central and Eastern Europe finds, however, that it is inadequate to effectively counter mis/disinformation (Bokša, 2019). Gaming is another digital literacy tool to help counter the spread of mis/disinformation (Frolova et al., 2022). Videogames can require players to actively think about how one can be deceived (e.g. exploitation of emotions) and how misinformation techniques could be refuted (Maertens et al., 2021). A study of the 'Bad News Game' reveals that after playing it, participants find fake news headlines significantly less reliable (Maertens et al., 2021).

### **Gaps in research**

This review draws on a mixture of academic and grey literature that cover LMICs, generally, and where possible, the Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia, specifically. Literature on post-secondary education cover higher education (undergraduate and postgraduate studies) and tertiary education (universities, trade schools and colleges). There have been a growing number of academic studies in these fields in recent years. Many scholars highlight ongoing gaps in the literature. Despite the significant growth in the numbers of mobile students from

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<sup>5</sup> Fact checking is an increasingly common and prominent activity in which journalists take a controversial claim and evaluate its truth using publicly available data and the opinions of experts (Haigh et al., 2018).

post-Soviet countries and the rise in transnational HE institutions (THEIs), research in these areas remains limited, including on the benefits of THEIs to host countries as an instrument of soft power (Varpahovskis & Kuteleva, 2023; Chankseliani, 2016). The field of EMI is also relatively new, with inadequate systematic documentation and analysis on the practice of EMI policy in multilingual classrooms and effects on academic outcomes (Choi & Poudel, 2024; Amanzhol et al., 2023; Veitch, 2021; Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020; Simpson, 2017). There has also been inadequate attention to the widespread phenomenon of private tutoring to support EMI (Hajar & Karakus, 2023; Akimenko, 2017). In addition, there are few studies on education interventions to counter mis/disinformation, particularly with regard to EECA (Roozenbeek et al., 2023; Kanozia et al., 2021; Scheibenzuber et al., 2021).

## 2. Investment in education and broad development outcomes

### The role of education in achieving development outcomes

**Global findings: Education can play an important role in promoting economic growth and reducing global poverty by improving the quality of human capital** (Berde & Kurbanova, 2023). Much of the research exploring these connections focuses on primary and secondary school education. A recent quantitative study on the role played by education in global poverty, spanning 1980-2022, finds that education has been a key driver of improved living standards for the world's poorest individuals (Gethin, 2023). It estimates that education accounts for 50 percent of average economic global growth, which increases to 70 percent if focused on the world's poorest individuals (Gethin, 2023, p.26-27). The study also finds that education explains 40 percent of extreme poverty reduction (Gethin, 2023, p.29).<sup>6</sup> Education has also reduced gender inequality, accounting for over half of the rise in the share of labour income accruing to women (Gethin, 2023, p. 54).<sup>7</sup>

**Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Research centred on Eastern Europe and Central Asia finds that equipping young people<sup>8</sup> with education, skills and health can produce a significant boost in per capita gross domestic product.** Educational enrolment and literacy are high in the region, compared to global averages, stemming from universal intermediate and secondary education from the Soviet era (Berde & Kurbanova, 2023; UNFPA, 2015). **However, there are ongoing issues with the quality of education and enrolment in HE remains low** (Berde & Kurbanova, 2023; UNFPA, 2015).

**The region also suffers from problems with inequality and inclusion in relation to education,** undermining the fulfilment of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 (UNFPA,

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<sup>6</sup> Education explains 40 percent of global poverty reduction at \$2.15 per day, 56 percent at \$3.65 per day, and 73 percent at \$6.85 per day. (Gethin, 2023, p. 29).

<sup>7</sup> There has been a decline in global gender inequality, albeit small: women received about 29% of labour income in 1991, compared to 32% in 2019 (Gethin, 2023, p. 54).

<sup>8</sup> Ages 10-24, approximately 23 percent of the region's population.

2015).<sup>9</sup> The UNFPA reports that there are large disparities in access to and quality of education, and employment opportunities, between and within countries, including among different ethnic and cultural groups in some countries (UNFPA, 2015). A recent report from UNESCO also notes that children with disabilities have been excluded from mainstream school systems in Central and Eastern European, the Caucasus, and Central Asia (UNESCO, 2021a). This is due to the legacy of the medical model during the socialist regime that placed students identified with special needs in special schools; and to ongoing shortfalls in the ability of mainstream schools to provide high-quality support to children with special needs (UNESCO, 2021). Such exclusion tends to intersect with exclusion of other minority groups (e.g. Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian youth in the Balkans) who are disproportionately diagnosed with intellectual disabilities (UNESCO, 2021a).

## The importance of quality education

**Global findings:** Various research emphasises that increasing access to education may not improve development outcomes if learning is poor (Angrist et al., 2023). Teacher training is mentioned frequently in the literature as necessary in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) to improve the quality of learning (Popova et al., 2022). At the same time, few professional development programmes are evaluated, undermining the ability to garner best practice (Popova et al., 2022). A recent mixed-methods study finds that teacher training and development is more likely to be positively associated with student test score gains (a key measure of learning) if teacher participation is linked to incentives such as promotion or higher salary; if training sessions have a specific subject focus; and if there are consecutive face-to-face sessions (Popova et al., 2022).

A recent systematic review finds that interventions **targeting the management skills of school leaders (e.g. principals) are also positively associated with student test score gains** (Anand et al., 2023). Their improved practices should translate to benefits for the entire school (Anand et al., 2023). The review identifies three key factors that can limit programme effectiveness: low take-up; lack of incentives or structure for implementation of recommendations; and a lengthy causal chain between improved management practices and better student learning (Anand et al., 2023).

## English language learning in primary and secondary education

While the term English-medium instruction (EMI) has tended to refer to the practice in HE and TE (see s.3.2.2), its usage has expanded more recently to include pre-primary, primary and secondary education (Choi & Poudel, 2024). The rise in teaching of English to young learners is attributed in part to the aim of providing a foundation for EMI in secondary school and higher education (Simpson, 2017). EMI operates within the state sector and private education, the latter ranging from low-cost, uncertain quality to high-fee institutions working to international standards (Simpson, 2017).

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<sup>9</sup> SDG 4 to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" envisions inclusive education as encompassing all children, youth and adults.



There is inadequate systematic documentation and analysis of EMI in multilingual classrooms (Choi & Poudel, 2024). Most studies of EMI are descriptive or offer perception-based evidence (Choi & Poudel, 2024; Simpson, 2017). Evidence available on the Global South indicates that **children may struggle to access content across the curriculum and to learn English, particularly when first transitioning to EMI during primary school** (Milligan, 2022). The research finds links between EMI adoption and low learning outcomes and reading and writing ability; high failures, grade repetition and drop-out rates; and low learner self-esteem (Milligan, 2020). In several Sub-Saharan African and South Asian countries, many children demonstrate limited ability in reading and understanding basic texts, an essential skill for learning through English (Simpson, 2017).

EMI can also produce inequalities, evident from a case study on the introduction of EMI in three secondary schools in Nepal (Choi & Poudel, 2024). The study finds, similar to other literature on EMI, that **while adopting EMI is seen to benefit those who are proficient in English, it can negatively affect learning for students who are not as proficient, undermining their self-esteem** and making them feel inferior. It may discourage the latter's active participation in class, with more English-proficient students dominating classroom interactions (Choi & Poudel, 2024). Teaching in English can also limit many parents' opportunities to support their children's schooling; and/or to take part in parent-teacher associations and parent-teacher committees (Simpson, 2017). The Nepal study finds further that schools did not actively institute a support system to address the learning needs arising from diverse linguistic and socio-cultural identities (Choi & Poudel, 2024).

Quality of programming: Introducing EMI into public education systems that suffer from poor quality (see s.1.2.), due to resource constraints, large classes, and/or untrained and unqualified teachers, can also adversely affect the quality of EMI (Simpson, 2017).

**Successful EMI requires subject teachers who are proficient in English, yet such teachers are often in short supply in LMICs** (Simpson, 2017). Another study on Nepal, focusing on primary school English teacher preparation policies and practices finds that **teachers also need to be knowledgeable about diversity and inclusion**. They should be able to create an equal space of learning for diverse students, such that students do not feel inferior if they are not proficient in English and feel their own languages and cultures are valued (Sah, 2022). The study points out that **while the British Council has been valuable in training teachers and equipping them with English language proficiency and pedagogic skills, their initiatives have not incorporated attention to issues of diversity and inclusion** (Sah, 2022).

**Improvements in learning materials can contribute to more effective learning in English**. In Rwanda, exploratory observation, interviews and learner language tests, after students transitioned from learning in Kinyarwanda to English, revealed significant issues with learners' engagement, English proficiency, and grasp of curricular content. In addition, almost all learners in rural and remote schools had no access to English outside the classroom (Milligan, 2022). The study looks at the introduction of primary four textbooks to support teachers and students, designed to enable language development through a range of reading, writing, and speaking activities, and finds that it contributed to improvements in learner participation, engagement, and test scores (Milligan, 2022).

## International development higher education<sup>10</sup>

International development higher education centres on the view that higher education can be a catalyst for international development (Chankseliani, 2022). However, international development funding for higher education has not been systematically studied (Chankseliani, 2022). A study on the links between TE and development in low- and lower-middle-income countries (LLMICs) finds that **the main outcomes of TE are economic growth, enhanced earnings of graduates and skill enhancement that contributes to productivity** (Howell et al., 2020). While poverty reduction is not considered a direct outcome, there is some evidence that participation in TE may increase lifetime earnings or entrepreneurial activities of groups who were born poor (Howell et al., 2020).

**Research on Central Asia finds that prior investment in human capital, through proper education and an appropriately absorbed labour force, increases productivity and economic growth** (Berde & Kurbanova, 2023). Countries in the region are experiencing a significant demand for HE, but limited capacity and resources in TE has made it difficult to meet this demand (Ambasz et al., 2023; Berde & Kurbanova, 2023). **While participation in HE is gradually increasing, Central Asia still lags global averages** (Ambasz et al., 2023; Berde & Kurbanova, 2023).

There are notable variations in enrolment and completion rates across the region (Berde & Kurbanova, 2023). The enrolment rate ranges, for example, from 71 percent in Kazakhstan to 16 percent in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Berde & Kurbanova, 2023). Kazakhstan has consistently increased enrolment in TE, surpassing not only other Central Asian countries but also global averages (Berde & Kurbanova, 2023).

Inequality in higher education: There is evidence from LLMICs which indicates that the **income benefits of participating in TE tend to go to groups that are already in dominant political and economic positions** (Howell et al., 2020). Poorer students are less likely to access HE, and when they do, inadequate financial resources undermine retention and performance, with many students needing to work long hours alongside, which limits their focus on pursuing HE (Reinders et al., 2020). A study on HE institutions in LMICs also finds that they are rarely fully physically accessible to persons living with disabilities (Reinders et al., 2020).

**Social disparities in accessing and completing HE are also observed in Central Asia** (Ambasz et al., 2023; Berde & Kurbanova, 2023). Despite achieving close to universal enrolment in upper secondary education, significant social inequality persists in accessing HE (Ambasz et al., 2023). These include disparities by socio-economic status, gender, geographic location, race and ethnicity (Chankseliani, 2022). Higher education remains a 'social privilege', with limited public support, particularly evident in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where students with higher socio-economic status are five times more likely to

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<sup>10</sup> International development higher education is a distinct space in the field of higher education studies. The key assumption behind international development higher education is that 'the world can be made better by the human effort invested in higher education' (Chankseliani, 2022, p. 457)



attend university compared to peers from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Ambasz et al., 2023). Gender inequality also persists in HE in Central Asia, most significantly in Tajikistan, where the completion rate is more than two times higher for men than for women (29 percent vs 13 percent) (UNESCO, 2021b). Access to HE for women is also much lower in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, compared to in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Berde & Kurbanova, 2023). At the same time, female labour force participation has been shown to be a key element of growth, indicating that countries can benefit economically from the education of women (Berde & Kurbanova, 2023).

Quality of HE and skills mismatch: Research on the contribution of HE to development finds that inadequate quality of TE has led to severe shortages of competitive workforce to meet labour market requirements (Chankseliani et al., 2021). Many studies also highlight a 'mismatch' between the skills and knowledge of TE graduates and labour market demand in LLMICs (Howell et al., 2020).

**Quality of HE remains a major issue in Central Asia, stemming in part from poor infrastructure, low teaching salaries, overworked faculty members**, and the absence of transparent financial incentives linked to staff performance (Ambasz et al., 2023). **Many faculty lack modern teaching and research skills, often relying on passive learning approaches**, such as lectures and rote memorisation (Ambasz et al., 2023). A perception-based study, conducted in Georgia and Kazakhstan, finds that academics were concerned with scarce public financing for education (both countries); a lack of good teachers (Georgia); limited opportunities for developing critical thinking and generic skills (Kazakhstan); and insufficient use of innovative teaching approaches (Kazakhstan) (Chankseliani et al., 2021). Limited investment in infrastructure renewal in Tajikistan, and failure to invest in new equipment in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, has limited opportunities to develop effective research centres (Ambasz et al., 2023).

**Research on HE in Central Asia finds poor alignment of educational programmes with the needs of the labour market** and weak industry-university linkages, placing countries in the region at the bottom of international rankings in terms of the ease of finding skilled employees (Ambasz et al., 2023). Over half of HE graduates obtain a diploma in social sectors, such as education and healthcare, although these sectors account for only 10 percent of total employment (Ambasz et al., 2023). The research also finds that **higher educational programmes in the region do not focus on the acquisition of 'soft' skills, such as digital competencies or international language skills**, which can negatively impact their employment prospects (Ambasz et al., 2023). Firms in EECA consider lack of necessary skills to be one of the most important constraints to growth (see UNFPA, 2015).

Brain drain and outward mobility: **Skills mismatch can limit potential economic growth through 'brain drain'**, referring to high-skill migration or the 'export' of human capital to other countries (Chankseliani, 2016; UNFPA, 2015). Some scholars argue that brain drain may result in permanent reduction in income and growth for 'sending' countries; whereas others find that these countries can benefit from remittances, return migration and knowledge transfer (see Chankseliani, 2016 for further discussion).

**Research on outbound student mobility from post-Soviet countries finds that countries with lower tertiary enrolments and lower labour force participation rates are more likely to have higher proportions of students studying abroad**<sup>11</sup> (Chankseliani, 2016). This indicates that the attraction in studying abroad may not be due to the pull of the 'host' country, but more from the push of the limited places at HE institutions and/or employment opportunities in the country of origin (Chankseliani, 2016).

Across the post-Soviet states, Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan have the highest proportions of students studying abroad; whereas Russia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan have the lowest proportions of students who choose to pursue HE outside their home countries. (Chankseliani, 2016). There is concern in the case of Moldova that the country is facing a dramatic decline in the country's student population (Wetzinger, 2021).

Recent research on HE in Central Asia finds that countries in the region (except for Kyrgyzstan) have net deficits in international students' mobility (with more students leaving the country than students from other countries entering), e.g. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are losing 7 percent of their students (Ambasz et al., 2023). There have, however, been changes over the years, e.g. from 2016 to 2020, Kyrgyzstan increased the net mobility of students by seven times (Ambasz et al., 2023, 58). See also section 3.2. on Internationalisation of HE in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia.

**Retention strategies that encourage young people to return to their home countries after HE abroad could help to minimise the negative effects of brain drain** (Chankseliani, 2016). Improving HE quality, accessibility, and collaboration with industry is also essential in Central Asia to enhance human capital and resolve the skills mismatch (Ambasz et al., 2023). This requires better infrastructure and quality assurance mechanisms at HE institutions, which are currently uncommon in the region (Ambasz et al., 2013).

### 3. Internationalisation of higher education

The increasing internationalisation of higher education has brought together more direct connections between education, international relations, and foreign policy (Wetzinger, 2021). Many foreign policy experts and scholars, including Joseph Nye, have long emphasised the role that education can play in projecting soft power (Varpahovskis & Kuteleva, 2023).

**Higher education has become a way to enhance the international prestige and influence of a country** (Wetzinger, 2021). Research on Moldova finds, for example, that HE policy is viewed by the EU and Russia through a geopolitical lens – to bind Moldova closer into its sphere of influence (Wetzinger, 2021). Despite significant growth in the numbers of mobile students from post-Soviet countries, research on this topic remains limited (Chankseliani, 2016). Further, the effectiveness of soft power policies remains difficult to measure and compare (Wetzinger, 2021).

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<sup>11</sup> Controlling for the population size and the GDP per capita.

The internationalisation of education has been supported through scholarships to study in donor countries, which comprise the bulk of international aid for post-secondary education (Chankseliani, 2022). In 2018, scholarships amounted to around 50 percent of all aid for post-secondary education globally, falling from 70 percent in 2015 (UNESCO figures, cited in Chankseliani, 2022). **While scholarships offer important opportunities to individuals to study abroad and contribute to their home countries, it is also crucial to invest in HE within LMICs** (Chankseliani, 2022). See s.3.1.2. on mobility schemes.

## Internationalisation of British education

**UK HE institutions experienced an almost twenty-fold increase in the number of degree-mobile students from Russia, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia** from 1994-2014 (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016). In 2021, 452,225 students paid international/non-European Union fees<sup>12</sup> in the UK (HESA, 2022; cited in Lomer et al., 2023, p. 1044). Europe and the US are popular among students from Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Belarus; whereas they are less popular for students in Central Asia and Azerbaijan (Chankseliani, 2018).

**The global importance of English contributes to the dominance of the UK**, the US and Australia in international student recruitment (Lomer et al., 2018). Text analysis on UK policy documents finds support for the view that education – and attracting significant proportions of international students – can help to project the UK’s soft power (see Lomer et al., 2018; Lomer, 2017). **Branding to promote UK education is linked to branding of the nation itself – in particular, the promotion of the UK as a country that can compete in the global marketplace**, allowing for better career prospects (Lomer et al., 2018). The British Council, the UK’s international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities, has also sought to transform the attractiveness of the English language into attractiveness of the UK (Riotte, 2022). It emphasises the role of English language acquisition in cultural diplomacy, claiming to contribute to the creation of ‘friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries’; and to unlocking ‘a whole new world of opportunities’ (British Council, 2020; cited in Noack, 2021). A systematic analysis of the British Council’s role in British cultural diplomacy finds that the UK government works through the British Council to deliver prescribed messages that are consistent with the country’s broader political goals (Zhou, 2022).

A literature review on English medium instruction in HE (see s.3.2.2), commissioned by the British Council, finds that **the adoption of EMI is closely related to increased recruitment of international students and staff, transnational education programmes and the assumption that EMI can provide access to intercultural learning opportunities for students** (Curle et al., 2020). The British Council aims to provide support to teaching of English abroad, in addition to within the UK itself (Noack, 2021). With a view to increasing future student exchange or intake, it supports some countries in improving the level of English teaching on a bilateral basis, e.g. promoting the study of English in China and the

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<sup>12</sup> Since then, EU students began to pay international fees and the EU/non-EU distinction loses relevance.

study of Mandarin in Britain (Noack, 2021). The British Council also offers paid online courses in English, tailored to different audiences and age groups (Noack, 2021).

## **Transnational higher education**

**Democracies and autocracies alike strategically use THEIs and programmes to support their national brands** (Varpahovskis & Kuteleva, 2023). Transnational education can comprise online distance learning or an in-country model, such as international branch campuses (Tran et al., 2023; Varpahovskis & Kuteleva, 2023; Curle et al., 2020). Transnational education has increased exponentially in recent years (Tran et al., 2023). In the case of the UK, for example, records indicate that 52 percent of international students enrolled in UK qualification programmes in 2016 took some form of transnational educational provision in another country without going to the UK (Tran et al., 2023). In 2018, over 650,000 international students studied at a British university using English while based outside of the UK – contributing to rising use of English on transnational campuses (HESA, 2019; cited in Curle et al., 2020, 19). Students engaged in these programmes considered study in the UK as more prestigious, yet this was not feasible for many due to financial and other practical constraints (Mellors-Bourne, 2017). The transnational programme was a way to still obtain a UK degree qualification, which was seen to generate better career prospects than many local alternatives (Mellors-Bourne, 2017). In turn, international graduates of British education are thought to be more knowledgeable and appreciative of ‘British values’ (see Lomer et al., 2018; Lomer, 2017).

There is limited research on the benefit of THEIs to host countries as an instrument of soft power (Varpahovskis & Kuteleva, 2023). A report on the wider benefits of transnational education to the UK finds that **the UK’s profile as a HE provider is greater in countries where it runs transnational programmes** (Mellors-Bourne, 2017). Recommendations from alumni have led not only to further participation in similar transnational programmes but also in enrolments of international students in the UK (Mellors-Bourne, 2017).

At the same time, **the potential soft power impact of transnational education programmes appears to be markedly lower than for international alumni who have studied in the UK** (Mellors-Bourne, 2017). Interviews with students suggest that study involving mobility to the UK is more effective in terms of developing a strong understanding of the country and/or strong emotional ties to it than is the case with transnational alumni who have spent little or no time in the UK (Mellors-Bourne, 2017). While many transnational interviewees had broadly positive views of the UK, they were not as highly positive as those of international alumni (Mellors-Bourne, 2017). Transnational cases with positive affinity for the UK were often from branch campus-type environments with UK staff in senior positions – allowing for some semblance of study at a UK campus (Mellors-Bourne, 2017).

A systematic review of transnational HE finds that **without proper management, entities involved in both countries can suffer from loss in reputation and income** (Tran et al., 2023). The lack of quality assurance guidance and difficulty in collaboration of staff from both countries due to cultural, language and time differences, contribute to challenges in maintaining and promoting quality assurance (Tran et al., 2023). Inadequate training in

transnational education and ability to incorporate and adapt to different cultures, teaching styles and curriculums – and low English proficiency of local students and staff – can also negatively affect the quality of transnational education programmes (Tran et al., 2023).

## **Mobility schemes**

A key finding in the study of wider benefits of transitional education to the UK is the recognition that **many graduates left the UK with a positive view of the UK and its culture and values** (Mellors-Bourne, 2017). This could contribute to international alumni acting as advocates for the country – **fostering educational, cultural, social, developmental or business collaborations between the UK and the country they settle in**; and embedding British values and ideas in their work, which could contribute to the UK's international development goals (Mellors-Bourne, 2017).

A study on international student mobility from Russia, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia to the UK presents similar findings. Interviews with admissions and international officers working in UK HE institutions reveal that students who came from these regions developed an affinity with the UK, which rendered them the 'best ambassadors' and 'activists' that could 'sell the UK abroad' (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016). Most interviewees viewed the benefit through an economic lens, however, whereby alumni would encourage others in their home country to study in the UK (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016). Those who were funded by their home governments were also considered to be 'strategically important' as they were most likely to work at public institutions, where they could promote British cultural values (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016).

A sub-set of mobility schemes, **research on prominent British scholarships (e.g. the Chevening scholarship) find that they converge on the goal of creating sympathetic 'opinion leaders' who can help to foster better relations between the students' home countries and the UK and spread British culture and values** (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016; Wilson, 2015). Similarly, a systematic review of HE scholarships for students from the Global South outlines the view that future national leaders are identified and sent abroad to establish relationships, gain cultural knowledge, and develop sympathy for the hosting country (micro-level impacts) (Campbell & Neff, 2020). The goal is that when they return and achieve positions of power, they will be able to influence their constituents and advance bilateral relationships or spread ideologies (at the macro-level) (Campbell & Neff, 2020).

**Despite the perceptions that mobility schemes, education exchange and scholarship programmes can produce soft power benefits for the host country, the actual effect may be limited.** Where changes in beliefs and attitudes take place, such as a more cosmopolitan outlook among students, this may be experienced as personal development rather than political change (Lomer, 2017).

**There is some limited evidence of actual changes in political views stemming from such programming** (Lomer, 2017). A study on the politics of mobility, involving students from former Soviet countries, asserts that **student mobility to countries in Europe and the US, with high levels of attained democracy, may be linked with the democratic socialisation of individuals** and development of their civic consciousness (Chankseliani,

2018). **This in turn may influence aspects of democracy in their home countries** at the macro level, such as electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, political participation and political culture (Chankseliani, 2018). In contrast, student mobility to Russia is linked with lower levels of democratic development in the home country (Chankseliani, 2018).

Similarly, a study on the effect of the Erasmus exchange programme on students from countries governed by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) finds that around 90 percent of **ENP Erasmus participants feel more interested in EU politics and culture** (Perilli, 2016). This was confirmed in a second survey focused on ENP students from Georgia, Ukraine, and Tunisia, which revealed that Erasmus students spoke about EU politics more frequently in comparison to public opinion (see Table 1) (Perilli, 2016).

The study also finds that ENP Erasmus students feel closer to the EU's fundamental values, (e.g. human rights, gender equality, democracy, and the rule of law); are more open to cultural and linguistic diversity; feel more attracted to the EU and would like their country to deepen its relations with the EU (Perilli, 2016). The view is that their international experience and socialisation through people-to-people contact is associated with the development of a European identity, which could contribute to changes in cultural and social perceptions in their home countries (Perilli, 2016). Under Erasmus+, students have also frequently been seen as ambassadors for a unified Europe (Ferreira-Pereira & Mourato Pinto, 2021). There is little research, however, devoted to the impact of Erasmus+ on European foreign policy (Ferreira-Pereira & Mourato Pinto, 2021). There has also been virtually no academic analysis of the implications of the UK's departure from Erasmus+ and replacement with the 'Turing Scheme' (Brooks & Waters, 2023). An initial examination, focusing on messages conveyed about the scheme by HE institutions, asserts that the exclusion of incoming international students weakens its ability to project 'soft power' (Brooks & Waters, 2023).

**Table 1: Comparing how often Erasmus participants and public opinion talk about the EU.**

This image has been removed due to copyright reasons the full version can be viewed at (Source: [Perilli, 2016, 157](#))

**There may also be limitations to the effects of scholarship programmes at the macro level**, as outlined in a critical analysis of the adoption of soft power as a policy rationale for international education in the UK (Lomer, 2017). The soft power benefits to the UK are assumed to be the same for self-funded students (who comprise the vast majority of students from abroad) as for those on scholarships, yet this may not be the case (Lomer, 2017). In addition, scholarship holders and self-funded students may be just as likely to form networks with other international students and co-nationals as with British people. Further, **there is no guarantee that scholarship holders will hold positions of power or that they will support British policies** (Lomer, 2017).



## Internationalisation strategies of the Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia

The top choices for study abroad destinations among students in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia are post-Soviet countries, Europe, and the US (Chankseliani, 2016). Russia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan are the three most popular destinations among the post-Soviet countries for regional students. They are also the countries with the smallest proportions of tertiary students studying abroad, suggesting that they have sufficient capacities to meet the demand for HE originating internally and externally (Chankseliani, 2016). Recent research on education policies in authoritarian contexts finds that Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan employ policies in support of transnational HE institutions, whereas Turkmenistan and Tajikistan tend to adopt more isolationist practices (Varpahovskis & Kuteleva, 2023). Kyrgyzstan has outpaced many high-income countries in terms of inbound mobility, with approximately 25 percent of university students coming from abroad in 2021 (Ambasz et al., 2023). Kazakhstan is also active, hosting many THEIs, with plans in place for more branch campuses of foreign universities (Karina, 2021; cited in Varpahovskis & Kuteleva, 2023).

**Research on the promotion of transnational HE in Kazakhstan finds that it is driven not by the desire to project soft power or to be influenced** by the culture of the country with which the transnational institution is affiliated. **Rather, the aim is to increase the competitiveness of Kazakhstani students** through HE qualifications issued domestically that are comparable in standards and quality with those offered abroad; and to replicate the economic success of the other country (Varpahovskis & Kuteleva, 2023).

### University of higher education research hubs

A recent trend in HE is the development of regional spaces (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023). Hubs comprising Central Asia and the Caucasus are still in the process of formation, with no established student mobility programme, such as Erasmus+, to date (Ambasz et al., 2023; Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023). The current internationalisation strategy pursued by Central Asian countries is primarily based on offering education with low tuition fees for neighbouring countries (Ambasz et al., 2023).

Research on regional spaces in HE in the Global South finds that there is much potential in collaborating with neighbouring countries to advance common interests (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023). Similarly, research focused on Central Asia finds that **regional integration of HE systems has the potential to generate significant benefits, including greater resource efficiency and combined investment in infrastructure to promote research and development in priority economic sectors** (Ambasz et al., 2023).

Integration could also foster student mobility, creating a more dynamic academic and research community, and contributing to the development of centres of excellence (Ambasz et al., 2023). **This could reduce brain drain and attract more investment and talent in industries that can help drive economic growth** (Ambasz et al., 2023). To foster greater mobility of students and faculties with the region, however, additional government support is required, such as grants and subsidies to support mobility (Ambasz et al., 2023).

## **English language training and English medium instruction (EMI)**

Higher levels of international student migration between countries located in the Global South, resulting in higher levels of cultural and linguistic diversity in many HE institutions has produced greater reliance on English and provisions for EMI (Curle et al., 2020). **The adoption of EMI in HE is thus closely related to increased recruitment of international students and staff and transnational education programmes** (Curle et al., 2020). Countries in Central Asia are not only establishing international campuses of foreign HE institutions, but local universities are also implementing EMI to attract international students (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022; Linn et al., 2021).

Unlike English as a second language courses, EMI does not include language learning as an explicit course objective; rather English language learning is considered incidental (Curle et al., 2020). Nonetheless, many stakeholders view EMI as an opportunity to develop English language skills alongside academic content learning (Rose & Galloway, 2019; cited in Curle et al., 2020). In addition, the growth in EMI has led to a significant increase in demand for explicit English language training classes (Curle et al., 2020). Countries in Central Asia have been implementing EMI and English language learning with government support and collaboration with relevant organisations from English-speaking countries (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022; Linn et al., 2021). In the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan, the British Council and the US Embassy have arranged teacher trainings, conferences, and short-term exchanges to support English language learning; and created spaces in libraries where teachers and students can practice English (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022).

**There are various perceived benefits of EMI at the institutional, individual, and country levels. These include higher international student revenue; higher institutional rankings and prestige; improving students' English competencies and employability outcomes; and providing intercultural learning opportunities for students** (Linn et al., 2021; Curle et al., 2020; Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). A case study of a shift to English-only education in an unnamed college in Central Asia states that the growth of such programmes may be linked to the goals of establishing world-class universities and training youth to be globally competitive and, in turn, to foster economic development (Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). Kazakhstan's EMI expansion is part of the country's strategy to boost its global competitiveness in HE, reflected in the growing presence of its universities in the QS World University Rankings (Amanzhol et al., 2023). A study on EMI practices in HE institutions in the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan suggests that students and faculty members perceive English proficiency as a means of enhancing future employment opportunities (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022).

The field of EMI in HE research is relatively new, requiring a stronger evidence base to inform better policy, implementation, and personal decision-making (Amanzhol et al., 2023; Veitch, 2021). There are limited studies that have empirically measured improvements in English language learning in EMI environments, making it difficult to draw conclusions about its effectiveness (Macaro & Curle et al., 2018; cited in Curle et al., 2020). Some scholars argue that the expectation that students' English proficiency will develop as they study

subject knowledge in English is exaggerated, calling for better support systems for students in EMI programmes (see Curle et al., 2020).

Quality and effectiveness issues: Numerous language-related challenges have been reported by lecturers and students in various global settings. These include content lecturers not viewing themselves as language instructors and thus not giving linguistic feedback to students; the lack of a common language with students; and the difficulty of using humour to build rapport with students (Curle et al., 2020). In addition, students and content lecturers using EMI have reported higher workloads (Curle et al., 2020). Further, **the imposition of EMI on students and lecturers in a top-down manner by government and university policies can be challenging and frustrating, particularly when such changes in policies are unaccompanied by adequate support** (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022).

A study on English in HE in the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan finds that, in all three countries, state universities suffered from limited funds, in contrast to international universities (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022). This shortfall in the public system resulted in the absence of special EMI training and materials for students and teachers, undermining the quality of teaching (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022). Similarly, research on EMI in Kazakhstan finds that **due to limited resources and lack of support, teachers are often unprepared to teach EMI courses**, which can result in poor instruction and learning experiences for students (Amanzhol et al., 2023). Further, instructors who are less than proficient in English may be unable to effectively deliver course material to their students (Amanzhol et al., 2023; Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020).

Academic outcomes: While various studies from a range of non-English-speaking countries have documented the challenges students and instructors experience with EMI, there is limited evidence about whether these perceptions and self-reported challenges translate into actual negative effects on academic outcomes (Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). A recent study conducted at a regional university in Kazakhstan finds that EMI courses have had negative effects when they are mandatory and fail to account for students' interest levels or language proficiency (Amanzhol et al., 2023). A key challenge is that **students most likely to succeed in EMI courses are those who are already highly proficient in English, whereas those who are less so may suffer academically and/or become detached from their studies** (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022; Curle et al., 2020).

The findings of exploratory research investigating Kyrgyz students' transition experience to EMI finds that participants felt inadequately prepared for performing in an EMI environment, which led to a decline in their academic performance (Eusafzai, 2022). Similarly, research on an institutional switch to EMI at a select university in Central Asia finds that students failed more courses and earned lower GPAs, on average, when English-only instruction was introduced, and took longer to graduate (Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). In both studies, however, **the negative effects of the language shift did not persist** (Eusafzai, 2022; Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). In Kyrgyzstan, the students were able to change the situation for themselves over time through an investment of extra effort, which led to academic achievement and improvement in their English language skills (Eusafzai, 2022).

**HE institutions intending to become English-only should be prepared to proactively mitigate potential declines in academic performance**, for example, by providing more support to instructors teaching English-only courses and offering support services to students (Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). This could include the establishment of local support units inside universities (Amanzhol et al., 2023). More generally, research emphasises that HE institutions need to have sufficient funding for EMI materials; to invest in professional development with a focus on EMI pedagogy; and to support language development initiatives (Amanzhol et al., 2023; Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022). Some studies have also indicated that the presence of native English speakers may boost students' willingness to learn and language skills (see Amanzhol et al., 2023).

Cultural sensitivity: Critical arguments have been made that internationalisation of HE prioritises Western knowledge and the English language at the expense of local cultures, knowledge, and languages (see Curle et al., 2020). There are also **mixed findings as to whether the use of English contributes to 'meaningful inter-cultural interactions'** (see Curle et al., 2020). A case study on EMI in Kyrgyzstan finds that the EMI experience and environment resulted in students becoming more aware and outward-looking individuals, adopting a more tolerant attitude to culturally and socially contentious issues (Eusafzai, 2022). Research on EMI in Kazakhstan finds instead that the absence of international students could result in homogeneity of viewpoints (Amanzhol et al., 2023).

Comparative research on EMI in Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan recommends that HE institutions consider having an explicit language policy that celebrates linguistic diversity on campus and defines the areas of English language use (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022). The British Council also states that there should be policies and practices that enable and encourage the development of multilingualism (Veitch, 2021).

Private tutoring: There has been inadequate attention to the widespread phenomenon of private tutoring, which often takes place when children approach significant transition points in the education system, including transitions to EMI and when writing university entrance examinations (Hajar & Karakus, 2023; Akimenko, 2017). Perception-based research conducted in Kazakhstan finds that **students considered private tutoring essential to improving their chances of passing university entrance exams** and getting into a prestigious university – particularly as their school teachers did not coach them for such exams (Hajar & Karakus, 2023; Akimenko, 2017).

A qualitative study, exploring the experiences of private tutors and privately tutored high-school students in Astana, Kazakhstan, finds that the effectiveness of private tutoring of English mainly depends on the personal and professional qualities of the tutor; and how the tutor organises their classes (Akimenko, 2017). All **students noted that they improved their overall level of English knowledge and ability to speak more fluently, although to different extents depending on the length of tutoring** (Akimenko, 2017). Private tutoring may be a crucial complement to the mainstream educational system, as some students may not have been able to meet school requirements without such support (Akimenko, 2017).

**Private tutoring can, however, exacerbate social inequalities** since not all families can afford such services (Hajar & Karakus, 2023; Akimenko, 2017). It is recommended that

mainstream schools improve the quality of English language learning, such that resort to private tutoring is less necessary; and that links are fostered between the private and public sectors to allow for cheaper or subsidised private tutoring and/or private coaching of teachers (Akimenko, 2017). Alternative methods of support could also be developed, such as the use of library spaces to allow for the English practice (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022).

## 4. Internationalisation and digitalisation of information

**The vast amount of information available to the average internet user has made contemporary forms of misinformation and disinformation much less predictable** (Bokša, 2019). Misinformation refers to false or misleading information that is spread, often unwittingly without the intent to mislead; whereas disinformation refers to deliberately misleading by spreading biased information or information known to be false (Priedols & Dimdins, 2023; Sanchez, 2020; Bokša, 2019). Various types of media-related literacy concepts have emerged to counter the emergence and spread of mis/disinformation, in particular media literacy (critical understanding of media messages and media systems); information literacy (skills to navigate and locate information with efficiency and accuracy); and digital literacy (adapting to new technologies, including understanding internet terms) (Jones-Jang & Liu, 2021).

Studies on countering mis/disinformation primarily adopt a qualitative approach, based on content analysis, with an absence of quantitative studies (Kanozia et al., 2022). There is little empirical evidence of the positive role of media literacies in fighting fake news (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). Literature on civil society-run media literacy projects, for example, are often limited to a description of prior and ongoing projects (Järvinemi, 2021). There are also few studies on formal education interventions to counter mis/disinformation (Scheibenzuber et al., 2021). Of the research that does exist, much of it is focused on the US, with few studies conducted in EECA (Roozenbeek et al., 2023; Kanozia et al., 2021).

### Media literacy

A common definition of media literacy is: 'The ability of a citizen to access, analyse, and produce information for specific outcomes' (Aufderheide, 1993; cited in Jones-Jang & Liu, 2021). The European Commission's definition elaborates that media literacy includes all the technical, cognitive, social, civic, and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access the media; to have a critical understanding of media and media content; and to interact with it (see Järvinemi, 2021, 5). **Such competencies can be supported in primary and secondary education, through the integration of media literacy in the formal school curriculum** and relevant teacher education to support such practices (Karanfiloğlu & Sağlam, 2023; McDougall et al., 2018). Media literacy can also be promoted through community organisations, nonprofit initiatives, and public awareness campaigns. Interventions include workshops, online courses, and informational materials that encourage



participants to recognise biases in media content and to question and challenge disinformation (Karanfiloğlu & Sağlam, 2023; Järvineniemi, 2021).

Evidence from Europe on educational initiatives suggests that students who reported high levels of media literacy learning opportunities were more likely to identify misinformation (McDougall et al., 2018). Research on media literacy programming in Ukraine focuses on the NGO IREX (International Research and Exchanges Board)'s Learn to Discern (L2D) information literacy programming that incorporates aspects of media and information literacy<sup>13</sup> (see also s.4.2). The L2D programme brings together three formerly separate strands: a focus on the development of modern library infrastructure; a distinctive Ukrainian model of information and media literacy; and debunking of misinformation by the StopFake group (Haigh et al., 2019).

L2D training focused on fostering critical thinking skills and teaching citizens to identify markers of manipulation and disinformation in the news media to help them determine what news to process and what not to consume (Murrock et al., 2018b). An evaluation of L2D (2015-16) reports that L2D reached over 15,000 people directly and over 90,000 people indirectly, with direct participants sharing what they learned with family, co-workers and peers (see Murrock et al., 2018a). IREX's evaluation of the long-term impact of L2D training revealed that **participants had higher levels of disinformation news analysis skills and critical thinking abilities; greater knowledge of the news media environment; a stronger sense of agency over the media sources they consume; and greater likelihood of consulting a wider range of news sources** (Murrock et al., 2018a and 2018b). Citizens remained better able to detect disinformation 1.5 years later (Murrock et al., 2018a). A more recent evaluation of L2D in schools finds further support for the intervention's effectiveness, with students who received L2D lessons showing greater ability in identifying facts and opinions, false stories and hate speech, and deeper knowledge of the news media sector (see Haigh et al., 2021).

Research on developing media literacy in Europe indicates that **teacher training and continuous professional development is essential** to equip teachers with the relevant knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively teach about media literacy (McDougall et al., 2018). Similarly, a study on mitigation strategies for mis/disinformation in Kyrgyzstan stresses that such a programme should first 'educate the educators', as many teachers lack the skills to spot false narratives (Buehler et al., 2021). L2D training in Ukraine provided training for teachers who would eventually train students in media and information literacy (Haigh et al., 2021). The programme also aims to repeat training annually, including school leaders (e.g. school directors) alongside teachers (Haigh et al., 2021). Media literacy interventions that include active audience involvement components, for example, creative

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<sup>13</sup> IREX operates its Learn to Discern programme around the world. The L2D approach builds resilience to manipulative information by empowering those who engage with media and information to navigate it in a safe, critical, responsible, healthy, and empathy-driven way. See: <https://www.irex.org/project/learn-discern>  
For information on programming in Ukraine, see: <https://www.irex.org/project/strengthening-media-literacy-ukrainian-education-system#component-id-1172>



productive activities or classroom discussions, have also been found to be more effective than solely passive interventions, such as lectures (McDougall et al., 2018).

## Information literacy

Information literacy is defined by the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) as ‘the intellectual framework for understanding, finding, evaluating, and using information’ (ACRL, 2000; cited in Jones-Jang & Liu, 2021). Much of the research on information literacy in EECA centres on libraries, with the view that the role of the librarian is shifting from information gatekeepers and fact-checker to educator (Haigh et al., 2021). Librarian practices can include disseminating information about fake news; source evaluation training; and raising awareness of the need to evaluate information (Scheibenzuber et al., 2021). Research on Moldova stress that libraries are important and accessible local institutions and librarians are often trusted figures (Järvinemi, 2021; Palamarciuc, 2017).

Research on IREX’s L2D programme in Moldova profiles support to librarians to develop media corners in remote areas (Järvinemi, 2021; Palamarciuc, 2017). Media corners are designed to provide local communities with access to local, regional newspapers and magazines; and to computers with internet, alongside the provision of training from librarians to help citizens access online information (Järvinemi, 2021; Palamarciuc, 2017). The programme enrolls and teaches new librarians each year, enabling them to share their knowledge with the community. **The media corners in remote areas have become effective community information centres**, which alongside public discussions, have educated and empowered citizens to become active in their communities (Palamarciuc, 2017). Research on the L2D intervention in Ukraine finds that although the official programme is over, **many librarians trained in information literacy continue to offer free training sessions in the local libraries** (Haigh et al., 2019).

**A key challenge to information literacy and the focus of interventions on librarians is the assumption on the part of librarians in some cases that patrons will naturally be drawn to higher quality sources and expert findings if they could just be made aware of them** (Haigh et al., 2021). This view lacks an understanding of the social and cognitive processes that can underly the spread of disinformation, which if not incorporated into interventions, can undermine their effectiveness (Haigh et al., 2021). Such cognitive processes are often addressed in inoculation processes (see s. 4.3).

## Digital literacy

Experts often cite low levels of digital literacy as a key reason why distorted information spreads within communities (Frolova et al., 2022; Buehler et al., 2021). Developing internet skills is in turn seen as an effective way to develop media competence, particularly the ability to resist information manipulation and to determine the reliability of an information source (Frolova et al., 2022). **Scholars call for attention to the participatory nature of digital media and the emotional and persuasive aspects of digital media that go beyond a focus on functionality and information retrieval** (see Jones-Jang et al., 2021). In the case of Central Asia, the ongoing digital transformation in the region underscores the need to develop digital skills (Ambasz et al., 2023). While the populations in some countries, such

as Kazakhstan and Tajikistan fare well in digital skills proficiency, other countries, such as Kyrgyzstan are weaker (Ambasz et al., 2023).

A review of interventions to combat misinformation finds that **fact-checking websites are one of the most used technologies to debunk fake news** (Kanozia et al., 2021). While it cannot stop the initial spread of disinformation, it can reduce the effects of its further spread (Kanozia et al., 2021). Literature on debunking sites is often descriptive, documenting work practices, rather than assessing effectiveness (Haigh et al., 2018). ‘Stop Fals!’, led by the Association of Independent Press, is a prominent Moldovan fact-checking initiative, which aims to debunk fake news by publishing journalistic reports on its platform, other websites and newspapers (Järvinemi, 2021). Research on StopFake, a volunteer organisation in Ukraine that also engages in ‘fact checking’, reports that their work was an instant international success, attracting thousands of daily visitors (Haigh et al., 2018).

**Research on Central and Eastern Europe stresses, however, that even the most systematic and methodological debunking will not be adequate to effectively counter mis/disinformation** (Bokša, 2019). This is due to the tendency for fake news in social media to vastly outperform genuine stories in terms of likes, shares and comments; and to the finding that once a misleading story has been published, the subsequent correction does not reach the full audience that consumed it (Bokša, 2019).

A recent study of an online course aimed at targeting fake news finds that **interventions are more often built on psychological ‘inoculation’<sup>14</sup> than fact checking** (Scheibenzuber et al., 2021). A review of efforts to inoculate against mis/disinformation reveals that inoculation has been effective in hampering the effects of persuasive messages on personal opinions (Zerback et al., 2020). A study of an online news literacy course for students, based on inoculation, finds that **participants developed the cognitive tools to recognise fake news more accurately by looking at how fake news is framed** (Scheibenzuber et al., 2021).

Research on ‘accuracy nudges’, which aim to prompt people to think of accuracy, finds that they can help to reduce the spread of misinformation, by increasing the ratio of true information relative to false information that they share (discernment) (see Gavin et al., 2022). These effects are contextual, however. While the initial research was conducted in the US, in relation to the spread of misinformation on Covid-19, a follow up study conducted in Kyrgyzstan finds that accuracy nudges did not significantly affect their intentions to share false information or willingness to share true Covid-19-related information (Gavin et al., 2022). Another study conducted in Eastern Europe finds that prosocial values (e.g. interdependence and family values), prominent in the region, can be a powerful motivational force to engage in critical thinking and misinformation discernment (Orosz et al., 2022). The intervention, framed around the protection of vulnerable family members, involved young

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Inoculation’ here is analogous to the medical immunisation process, whereby pre-emptively warning and exposing people to weakened doses of misinformation can help cultivate ‘mental antibodies’ against fake news (Roozenbeek et al., 2023).

people writing a letter to their elderly loved ones on ways in which to discern misinformation, which served as a tool to indirectly persuade themselves (Orosz et al., 2022).

**Gaming and video game design is another digital tool used to counter the spread of mis/disinformation** (Frolova et al., 2022). The Bad News Game, for example, is a free real-world online intervention, designed based on the principles of inoculation theory. Players take on the role of a fake news producer, with the aim of gaining social media followers while maintaining a sufficiently high level of credibility (Maertens et al., 2021). **The game requires players to actively think about how one can be deceived (e.g. through the exploitation of emotions) and how misinformation techniques could be refuted** (Maertens et al., 2021). A study on the effects of the game finds that after playing it, participants find fake news headlines significantly less reliable than before (Maertens et al., 2021). Similarly, the videogame “Mediaznayko” in Ukraine, originally produced in Armenia, requires players to create the most viral manipulative message, which makes them think about the tricks the media commonly adopts, such as using emotions and exaggerations and quoting pseudo-experts (Haigh et al., 2021).

Recent research finds that the duration effect of such inoculation interventions may be short-lived, dissipating after 2 weeks (Zerback et al., 2020) or after 2 months in some cases (Maertens et al., 2021). The positive effects can be maintained for longer (at least 3 months) if interventions are designed to be continuous, with repeated reminders, rather than one-off efforts (Maertens et al., 2021; Zerback et al., 2020).

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## Review overview

This review is based on twelve days of desk-based research. The K4DD research helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. For any enquiries, contact the author at [huma@humahaider.com](mailto:huma@humahaider.com)

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