

International Student Mobility and After-Study Lives: the Portability and Prospects of Overseas Education in Asia

Francis L. Collins^{1*}, Kong Chong Ho², Mayumi Ishikawa³ and Ai-Hsuan Sandra Ma⁴

¹*Geography, School of Environment, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand*

²*Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, Singapore*

³*Department of Anthropology, Osaka University, Osaka, Japan*

⁴*Department of Sociology, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan*

ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, international student mobility has come to be increasingly viewed in both scholarly and policy discourse as a valorised pathway to personal development, career success, and class reproduction. This framing of international study has been particularly prominent in accounts of mobility to Anglophone universities that have dominated the literature to date. Yet, despite these claims, most research has been undertaken with current students, and hence, the significance of international study has remained speculative and caught up with dominant discourses that tend to valorise this form of mobility. In this paper, we subject these claims to critical examination by analysing the narratives of alumni who have studied overseas in three leading universities in East Asia. We focus, in particular, on the ways in which international student mobility articulates through after-study lives in terms of the forms of situated learning and cultural capital expressed by alumni, the geographical configurations and circulations that shape the portability of education, and altered sensibility and onward mobilities that are generated through international study. Through this discussion, we demonstrate that international study often does have value in after-study lives, but that this value is highly situated in the networks and spaces that alumni move through and enact. Our paper then demonstrates that

there is nothing automatic about the portability of overseas education, and that there is a need for scholars to examine not only student mobility itself but the way this unfolds into after-study lives.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, many scholars have examined the increasing globalisation of higher education and the growth of international student mobility (Brooks). Within this literature, an overseas degree or education is claimed to enhance the cultural capital of international students (Waters, 2008), augment post-graduation opportunities (Ong, 1999), and draw students into social networks that enable further mobilities (Collins, 2014). Yet, most claims about the significance of overseas education rest on research with international students themselves. Where graduates have been included (Waters, 2008), the samples have been relatively small or limited to alumni of one university. While such accounts tell us much about the student experience, and the globalising character of universities, it is only a cross-section of alumni who are able to provide insight into the longer-term value of international education.

In this paper, we address this significant literature gap through an exploration of the portability of overseas education for graduates of Asian universities. We focus on two dimensions central

*Correspondence to: Francis L. Collins, Geography, School of Environment, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.
E-mail: f.collins@auckland.ac.nz

to the value of overseas study – the ‘situated’ learning generated in universities and the social network capital established as individuals study and live together. We draw on the analysis of interviews with 58 alumni from three leading universities in East Asia (Osaka University, National Taiwan University, and National University of Singapore). We begin by exploring literature on the value of situated learning and social networks before examining how these values emerge in alumni biographies and the capacity to make these values mobile in the period after-study. Our findings highlight variation in the ability of alumni to make overseas education portable – for some, opening up access to new opportunities, while for others, the overseas degree can hinder access to locally embedded networks. This variation in portability hinges on the recognition of overseas credentials and their social and instrumental values in specific urban and national contexts. The paper then highlights the geographical contingency of international study, in terms of where a degree comes from as well as the complex assemblage of actors and institutions involved in the mobility aspirations and opportunities generated through overseas study.

SITUATED LEARNING AND SOCIAL NETWORK CAPITAL

A key premise underlying the growth of international student mobility has been the claim that an overseas degree serves to distinguish international students from those who attend domestic institutions (Brooks and Waters 2011). This is particularly evident in parts of Asia where the massification of education has made university study more common, raising the stakes for aspirant middle-class students and families. The distinction of overseas education occurs through the cultural capital that is generated around a degree from particular universities (Findlay *et al.*, 2012). At the same time, international study is also associated with particular kinds of knowledge, acquired formally and tacitly in situated contexts (Collins, 2014). Similarly, study abroad is viewed as a time to develop social networks, which form the basis of important life relationships and channels for advancement later in life (Beech, 2015). Such networks include those amongst co-nationals or

co-ethnics but also relationships built on more cosmopolitan sociabilities (Jones, 2013).

At the heart of student mobility, then, is the claim that it has tangible outcomes in after-study lives. There remains, however, surprisingly little scholarship exploring the outcomes of international education for graduates. What research is emerging suggests a need for nuanced accounts of the way that student mobility and graduation are tied up in life opportunities. It has been found, for example, that when returning home, international graduates are more likely to be employed in jobs that include opportunities for international mobility than their locally educated counterparts (Wiers-Jensen, 2012). Other studies find a higher propensity to internationally oriented positions (Van Mol, 2014), but the overall success of the internationally educated is uneven as recognition issues mean that employers may prefer applicants with local degrees (Brooks *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, international graduates who remain in the host country may have difficulty finding employment, or find themselves in jobs they are overqualified for, as employers prefer local candidates (Waters, 2008; Cai, 2013). The completion of an overseas degree itself, then, does not secure a particular life course trajectory but rather represents a ‘vital juncture’ (Johnson-Hanks, 2002) through which further transformations and mobilities are generated.

We seek to drill deeper into the value of an overseas education by drawing attention to two key facets that influence portability: situated learning experiences and social network capital. We argue that these features of an overseas education are likely to be significant in the graduate outcomes of international students. Our study also contributes to a more geographically nuanced understanding of student mobility within and across Asia. As the region’s leading universities go global through proactive internationalisation policies, Asia and the Pacific have become significant destinations for internationally mobile students, with an extra 5% global market share between 1999 and 2007 (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011). Asia is thus no longer just the largest sending region for international students but a rising host region of mobile talent (Ishikawa, 2011; Collins & Ho, 2014). Scholarship about student mobility, however, has primarily been concerned with Asian or other international students in Western universities. What we demonstrate through the after-study accounts

of graduates is that education and mobility are not only about cultural capital of Asian elite with Western degrees (Ong, 1999; Waters, 2008) but also manifest in variegated prospects for intra-regional student and after-study mobility.

Situated Learning

The premise of 'situated learning' is that learning is a social rather than individual process generated through culturally valued collaborative practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning is not simply about accumulating specific codified 'knowledge' but rather about the acquisition of skills within specific social contexts through communication with peers and experts. In this regard, a focus on situated learning is important to understanding the value of international education and its role in shaping the graduate trajectories of students given that this necessarily involves studying across educational and also cultural borders.

Much of the literature on international student mobilities supports this emphasis on the learning that takes place in overseas study (Findlay *et al.*, 2012). Mobility is said to expand student horizons by exposing them to different approaches to learning, alternative perspectives, new languages, and intercultural skills that cultivate capacities to operate in the world. Ong (1999: 90), for example, suggests that 'the American college degree' 'guarantees that the holder has acquired the cultural knowledge, skills, and credentials that enable the transportation of social status from one country to another'. What credentials represent, then, are a range of non-institutional forms of social and cultural capital accumulated while abroad. Bourdieusian accounts offer similar insights, which 'embodied cultural capital' manifest 'in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' is important to international students as they graduate, shaping their capacity to engage with potential employers (Waters, 2008).

This framing of international education relies on a conception of knowledge as more than calculable information. Knowledge becomes the sense that people make of information; it is embedded in our practices, beliefs, and discourses – it is never static, rather always located or 'situated'. In everyday life, 'if knowledge is the sense that people make of information, that "sense" is a practice that is distributed

through relations between people, objects, and environment, and is not simply the property of individuals or groups alone' (McFarlane, 2011: 3). In international education, knowledge is generated not only in specific educational contexts but also in the manner in which individual students encounter and interact with a particular place (city/country of education), its people, practices, and environment (Baláz & Williams, 2004). 'Situated learning' emerges in this process of encounter and interaction, as individual students become more accustomed not only to education settings and to their practices of knowledge production and dissemination but also to the everyday life of places, the affective dimensions of independence abroad, and to cultural difference, encounters, and experiences.

Situated learning is very place reliant – it cannot be acquired equally at a distance (Waters & Leung, 2013) – and requires significant personal investment in social relations. Hall and Appleyard (2009) offer a useful example of this in their account of business education in London's financial district, where they emphasise the geographical contingencies of education and its role in both facilitating trans-local circulation and embedding individuals within places. They argue that while education enables transnational mobility, it 'also serves to societally and territorially embed' students and then graduates 'in particular organisational cultures and places' (Hall & Appleyard, 2009: 598). The portability and value of education cannot be extracted from the institutions and places where it is generated and their extant and emerging relational connections with other places. Situated practices of learning cannot, then, also be separated from the social networks that they rely on – either amongst co-nationals, with other international students, or in relationships with domestic students. It is to this issue that we now turn.

Social Networks

Social networks play a critical role in processes of international student mobility (Beech, 2015). Connections with friends, family, and others influence the places where students study, shape their experiences while abroad (Collins, 2008) and, as we demonstrate here, channel mobilities after-study. International students can be conceived as archetypal 'trans-migrants' with

frequent mobility and often multiple attachments to place (Waters & Brooks, 2012). They are embedded in what Goss and Lindquist (1995) call a 'migrant institution', which operates across borders in imaginative, embodied, and material ways. Their mobility through different educational spaces is mediated by actors and organisations ranging from friends and family members, to profit-making recruitment agencies, educational institutions, and nation states. International student mobility, in this respect, needs to be understood as more than just an individualised phenomena. Rather, a focus on networks highlights the manner that mobility can be socially reproductive, not only drawing in more students or migrants but also enhancing the 'mobility capital' of those already on the move.

A focus on highly skilled migrants also demonstrates the significant role of social networks in employment success. Harvey's (2008) study of British and Indian expatriate scientists, for example, suggests that migrants utilise both 'strong' and 'weak' ties in seeking out employment. At the same time, Harvey (2008) emphasises the importance of the different roles that social networks play, with family and co-ethnic contacts significant for settlement but not job prospects and friends and business contacts important in seeking employment. In the case of graduates seeking employment, the influence of social capital generated through classmates/peers and seniors/alumni in job-seeking practices is well known (Burt, 2005). For international students, such relationships often also have to be maintained transnationally, and the specific spatialities of graduates' social networks will then influence the geographies of employment opportunities that are opened up to them.

The influence of social networks in the after-study trajectories of international students is a key component of the ways in which educational migration is entangled in broader migratory processes (Raghuram, 2013). International education is only one point in ongoing geographic or imaginative migration patterns as graduates seek out new careers, further experiences, or seek to build on what they have learnt in returning home. As part of these different processes, international students are likely to be channelled into particular employment opportunities and cities by their social networks. As Shen (2010) notes, this is not the end of the migratory journey but rather needs

to be understood as part of the ongoing development of transnational business and personal networks. His study of Chinese returnees from Parisian business schools demonstrates that they maintain strong professional links with French businesses as well as personal relationships with friends and alumni that enhance their present occupations. One of the key questions then is how social networks not only shape individual instances of graduate mobility but also how they contribute to the ongoing social reproduction of educational migration.

This reproductive dimension of social networks and their role in migration draws attention to their co-constitution with experiences of situated learning. Social networks are not simply generated because two or more people are co-present in one place. Rather, social networks are built through shared interests and experiences and feelings of trust and reciprocity that require significant investment during study but also as networks become less proximate (Ryan & Mulholland, 2013). Situated learning emerges as students then graduates operate within these social networks in specific places, in the social process of being at university, and the wider experiences of international student-hood. These can often involve co-ethnic networks, but international students also encounter and learn with domestic and international students of other backgrounds. Jones (2013), for example, discusses Tamil international students in the UK in terms of those who are 'cosmopolitans', seeking out a diverse range of social opportunities, and those who remain within 'cliques', largely focused on co-ethnicity. While this is significant for student experiences, it also influences the shape and direction of graduate flows (see also Collins, 2014). This does not mean that cosmopolitan students will have more opportunities (they may not have built up enough social capital in co-ethnic networks that are crucial to employment 'back home'), or that 'clique-ish' students will have fewer opportunities (they may have strong ties that generate reciprocity in the form of employment or recommendation). Rather, it means that we need to pay careful attention to the connection between student practices and learning experiences, the social networks that are developed and the influence this has on the portability of education and the shape of after-study lives.

THE STUDY

This paper is based on interviews carried out as part of a project on university globalisation, international student mobilities, and after-study lives in East Asia that ran from June 2009 till December 2012.¹ We draw on 58 semi-structured interviews with graduates from three universities: National Taiwan University (NTU), National University of Singapore (NUS) and Osaka University (OU) (Table 1). Participants were recruited through alumni associations and snowballing. At the time of the interviews, participants were based in Bangkok (OU), Hanoi (NUS), Hong Kong (NTU and NUS), Kuala Lumpur (NTU), and Shanghai (NUS and OU).

The time since participants graduated ranged from 1 to 41 years, and this varied considerably across universities; the median number of years since graduation across the sample was nine. As NUS expanded its international student programme only recently, the interview sample contained respondents with 15 years or less after-graduation experience. By contrast, OU and NTU samples, which have longer histories of accepting international students, included several respondents who had graduated more than 15 years prior. In the analysis in the succeeding texts, we have focused on individual narratives across these temporal periods to capture the changes that occur in the years and decades post-graduation. We have not, however, drawn explicitly on individuals who had less than 3 years since graduation ($n = 6$, all NUS), as their shorter experiences draws attention to more immediate concerns rather than the deployment of learning and networks in after-study lives.

Of the alumni we interviewed, 25 were from Science-related, Technology-related, Engineering-related, and Medicine-related disciplines while 33 were from the Humanities and Social Sciences (including, Architecture, Law, and Business). The interviews were conducted by the authors in English, Japanese, or Mandarin. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and translated before inductive analysis that involved the identification of common themes involved in the biographies of participants, their after-study experiences, and their outlooks for the future. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms. In what follows, we focus on three issues that emerged as significant across these after-study lives: embodied cultural capital, geographical configurations and circulations, and the link between sensibilities and mobilities.

SITUATED LEARNING AND EMBODIED CULTURAL CAPITAL

International student mobility is bound up in the idea that it not only provides opportunities for education at the 'best' institutions but also exposes individuals to social and cultural differences. While the degree earned through mobility is important, it is also the wider social and cultural capacities of living in place that are critical to the value ascribed to that qualification. The graduate is expected to display some of these capacities as 'embodied cultural capital' (Waters, 2008), the aptitudes for certain types of behaviour, communication, taste, and relationships. International education then involves the learning of other cultural perspectives and norms and their application after-study in careers and personal life.

Table 1. Profile of respondents from the three universities.

Name of university	Number of alumni interviewed	Gender		Discipline		Years after graduation (Range)	Median years after graduation
		Male	Female	Science	Non-science		
Osaka University (BKK, SH)	14	9	5	6	8	2–20	10
National Taiwan University (HK, KL)	17	12	5	8	9	3–41	13
National University of Singapore (SH, HK, HAN)	27	14	13	11	16	1–15	6
Total	58	35	23	25	33	1–41	9

Participants placed considerable emphasis on their experiences abroad, the value they carried, and their portability after-study. They described how study at OU, NTU, and NUS provided opportunities to expand horizons and learn about how problems or challenges are addressed in different contexts:

[O]nce my professor scolded me for spending too much time [part time work] and told me to 'Aim to do research superior to Microsoft's.' He said 'if you invent one product, it may get copied by others. But the creation of artificial intelligence cannot be imitated. We can be number one.' I did not understand what he meant then, but I do understand him now. (Guo Ming, Shanghai, OU Engineering, male, 12 years)

This emphasis on work ethic was pronounced for OU graduates who described exposure to diligence, collaborative strategies, discipline, and fairness. While such accounts were often articulated through essentialised narratives – 'Japanese are diligent and hardworking' – they nonetheless demonstrated situated learning in the classroom and in broader life. Others emphasised learning languages and the value ascribed to this by employers:

I would have some advantage in the professions related to culture and education. There is one plus in my credential [...]. Because I graduated from NTU, my Chinese language skills and literal expression are better than local graduates (Hou Kang, Hong Kong, NTU Social Science, male, 6 years)

Language serves as a form of distinction here but one that relies on the particular configurations of education in place. While students in Hong Kong undertake university in English, study at NTU provided opportunities to reach advanced levels in Chinese, which is becoming important as economic links with Mainland China grow.

Situated learning was particularly notable in the social context of technical knowledge. For some science and engineering graduates, technical competency needed to also be accompanied by approaches to problem solving and the ability

to apply systems and models in multiple contexts. Sam (Shanghai, NUS Engineering, male, 15 years) provides a good example. He emphasised the value of his education in distinguishing himself as both technically competent and also fluent in English and hence able to serve as a mediator with overseas interests. He also noted the value of the problem solving approach he learnt at NUS and as an employee of a Singaporean firm:

I had acquired an understanding of wastewater treatment through research and work experience. [...] Both research and work experiences were important at my present company in Shanghai. [...] When a problem surfaced, my senior engineer was unable to solve [it]. [...] They told me this problem cannot be solved. [...] Based on the past process, [I got] inside the problem, [the] mechanisms [were] all analysed thoroughly. [...] I was able to find a solution because of my experience.

Sam's account highlights the ways that international study and work experience involve learning different ways of addressing socially situated technical problems. His response, to seek a solution through systematic analysis of the issue rather than accept that it cannot be solved, reflects his internalisation of these approaches through his experience in Singapore.

For many participants, embodied cultural capital was articulated as geographically specific – the work ethic of Japan, the cultural and linguistic potential of Taiwan, and the systematic approach in Singapore. Many also made distinctions with western and Anglophone knowledge systems and styles. Pam, a Thai graduate who studied both in Japan and the US, was in a particularly strong position to explain this:

In America, classroom lectures and theoretical studies are very strong. Japan is about lab skills and processes. [...] America taught me brave heart, confidence and leadership. But what I learned in Japan was more about modesty, kindness and consideration for others. Japanese culture is not very different from Thai culture. (Pam, Bangkok, OU Engineering, female, 10 years)

For Pam, her post-graduate degree and strong hands-on research skills acquired through training in OU led to a post-doctoral fellowship in an Ivy League university, where she learned bravery, confidence, and leadership. Her Japanese and American experiences have provided added distinction, enabling her to secure a faculty position in a leading Thai university while maintaining cultural attributes that smooth her articulation into Thailand. As we found with other participants, however, the geographical particularities of cultural capital can also be problematic.

Those who returned from Taiwan generally have difficulties in immersing themselves to the life in Malaysia. [...] I think the language [was an issue]. [...] After we returned, Malaysia became a foreign country. We did not know the business activities in Malaysia, we lost the sense of the basic Malaysian cultural elements. For a long time we spoke in Mandarin Chinese. After we came back, we needed Malay in official settings and English in the business environment, and we could have a good handle on neither language. (Kai Shan, Kuala Lumpur, NTU Engineering, male, 18 years)

This account of *the limits to portability* of cultural capital was particularly pronounced amongst graduates of NTU in Malaysia who struggled to receive recognition for their education. As we detail in the next section, a considerable component of this inertia relates to the official recognition of their degrees. However, as Kai Shan points out, there are broader cultural and linguistic challenges that can emerge for graduates returning from overseas study. When the embodied cultural capital accumulated through overseas education is not valued in mainstream society at home, then returned graduates are likely to be excluded from opportunities that local graduates receive. It is to these uneven geographical configurations and circulations that we now turn.

GEOGRAPHICAL CONFIGURATIONS AND CIRCULATIONS

The portability of higher education relies on recognition in different contexts, the value ascribed

to qualifications and experiences, and their capacity to provide distinction (Waters, 2008). 'Recognition' of this kind is geographically uneven with some credentials and experiences – those from Oxbridge or Ivy League institutions – providing scope to circulate widely, whereas others might provide more variegated opportunities. More specifically, recognition is also generated in and through connections between places, in transnational economic and social linkages that in themselves reproduce, diminish, or amplify the value ascribed to qualifications.

The mobility of participants occurred through these geographical configurations and the opportunities and limits to circulation they generated. Many graduates were situated within the growing transnationalisation of economic activities in Asia and argued that their education experiences and cultural awareness provided access to a unique occupational niche. Wei Hwa studied Japanese after diplomatic normalisation between China and Japan and completed a Masters in Law at OU in 1992. After graduation, he worked for a consulting firm in Japan for 10 years before establishing his own legal office in Shanghai:

What I do is much broader than just giving legal advice to my clients. [I show my clients that] what protects activities of Japanese companies in China is not "kone" [connections] as often considered so in China, but laws and rules. I want to use Chinese laws to assist Japanese companies. I also want to expand the alumni network of Osaka University in Shanghai. [...] The degree from Osaka University is highly appreciated by Japanese companies. (Wei Hwa, Shanghai, OU Law, male, 20 years)

As this narrative suggests, the portability of education is situated not only in particular contexts but also in their uneven historical or temporal development: diplomatic normalisation and the growth of Japanese firms in Shanghai. Within this evolving transnational context, a legal degree from OU provided prospects for translating and bridging this transnational space. Indeed, as he has become established in these networks after-study, Wei Hwa is now actively cultivating and

extending these connections in ways that not only benefit him but also have wider implications. Mike (Bangkok, OU Engineering, male, 20 years) highlighted the way these configurations involved specific trans-local connections between *regions* of education and *regions* of after-study life:

Japanese in companies or factories in Thailand trust me immediately when they learn that I am an Osaka University graduate. Many Japanese companies in Bangkok have headquarters in western parts of Japan, and the Osaka name helps. You may lack network that local Thai university graduates have, but other than that, study abroad gives you more merit than disadvantage.

Like Wei Hwa, Mike's discipline is important in the portability of his education, but his engineering degree is clearly valued because of the 'Osaka name' and the specific connections between the Kansai region of Japan, famous for its industrial prowess, and emerging manufacturing hubs like Bangkok. The regionalisation of economic networks that has been particularly amplified in Asia in the last decade relies on relationships between institutions, urban and regional settings, and corporations and the ways that 'local embeddedness' can be generated through inter-personal networks (Yeung, 2009). In their after-study lives, graduates move through these networks, but these accounts also demonstrate that graduates are key in their reproduction and extension.

The reputations of universities generate variant symbolic qualities such that not all degrees and educational experiences are equally portable. Indeed, our interviews revealed quite complex regimes of recognition constituted through the trans-local economies identified earlier alongside regulatory systems, labour market hierarchies, and social networks. The impact of these regimes was particularly pronounced amongst graduates from NTU. Participants described difficulties in employment, lower salaries, and fewer opportunities for promotion. Yen Yi (Hong Kong, NTU Bio-Resources and Agriculture, female, 6 years) explains:

When I first looked for jobs, a lot of people did not know about NTU and had doubts about

my degree. They very often asked me why I went to Taiwan to study and not stayed in HK. [...] Approximately 70% did not recognize NTU. [...]. However, though they did not know about the universities in the UK and the US either, but they recognized these countries well and that was enough.

These limitations on portability reveal the geographical particularities of recognition for higher education. While qualifications from regional institutions may become portable through certain social and economic networks, they rarely carry the same levels of recognition as credentials from hegemonic knowledge centres in the Anglophone world.

Regulatory settings are notable in shaping the value and recognition of education. In Hong Kong, for example, respondents described struggling for accreditation with the Institute of Engineers, only partially granted in 2007. The Malaysian government, through its Public Service Department (PSD), has also not recognised the degrees and diplomas granted by NTU and other Taiwanese institutions (except medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy). While this policy was modified for academic employment in 2012, Taiwanese degrees remain unrecognised by PSD. Although this affected only employment in the government sector, some respondents pointed out that the lack of official recognition created other barriers:

When I returned, only the degrees granted in medicine, dentistry, and veterinary medicine were recognized by the Malaysian government, and only those offered by NTU and some other few universities. We had to accept this fate, because we knew that it was political. (Shih Min, Kuala Lumpur, NTU Bio-Resources and Agriculture, female, 12 years)

You have to study abroad again to get an officially recognized degree, then you would be able to join the professional association that is recognized by the government. (Hung Chun, Kuala Lumpur, NTU Bio-Resources and Agriculture, male, 13 years)

In addition to issues specific to the recognition of certain disciplines, these limitations reflect internal and external politics that position Malaysia in relation to its Chinese minority. Many Chinese–Malaysian interviewees highlighted the quota system in higher education as a reason for overseas study and other regulatory systems and norms as undermining their career prospects. Others noted the Malaysian state’s maintenance of diplomatic relations only with the People’s Republic of China under its one-China policy. Chinese–Malaysian educational mobility to Taiwan reflects their limited opportunities in Malaysia, but as these accounts demonstrate, unlike qualifications from Anglophone nations, degrees from NTU do not automatically enable the after-study opportunities that individuals aspire for.

In the absence of formal recognition across the labour market, graduates are often channelled into positions that are relatively marginal or seek opportunities through alumni networks. In both Hong Kong and Malaysia, NTU alumni networks are significant in providing support for graduates, advocating for degree recognition, and generating employment and business opportunities. Li Ying (Hong Kong, NTU Engineering, male, 34 years), who held a senior position in the Hong Kong NTU Alumni Association for Civil Engineering and Geology, described their involvement in accreditation:

For a while Taiwan was harshly isolated politically, so Taiwan wanted to get out of this situation. At that time some people from the Examination Yuan² came to see me and the then former chairman and discussed how to do the accreditation. [...] After they returned they did the Washington Accord thing. [...] Now NTU has no problem with accreditation [... but the] degree would be recognized depending on what year you graduated. [...] We later negotiated with them. [Now] if NTU acknowledges that they are the same, then they would recognize it.

These alterations in the recognition of qualifications contribute to enhancing the portability of education. They demonstrate that recognition and portability are not only geographically contingent; they can also be modified through international processes like the Washington Accords,

the aspirations of nation states like Taiwan, and the mediation of groups like alumni associations.

Because social networks of alumni are shaped around specific educational connections, they can also contribute to strengthening the recognition of universities. This was evident in the narratives of NUS alumni in Shanghai who placed considerable emphasis on the value of their association for employment, promotion, and addressing common interests.

So maybe work or life [we] will have some conveniences [because of the alumni association]. [...] I feel that because do you know that in China, which is to say relationship actually is extremely important [for] work contacts, maybe even more [important in] life assistance. [... We] will have some work related or life issues, everyone will be somehow able to help. (Chang Ying, Shanghai, NUS Public Policy, female, 4 years)

Such organisations extend the value of degrees by building on the critical mass of graduates in key employment and business positions. A subset of alumni in public policy has created their own association and has concentrated their influence in Shanghai government. Such connections reveal the geographical particularity of the trans-local connections that enable portability of overseas qualifications; they result from very specific configurations of institutions, disciplinary groups, nationalities, employment, and urban proximity. Anna (Shanghai, NUS Public Policy, female 3 years) explains through the counter example of the Beijing association:

Beijing alumni association, until now, they are not I can’t say officially launched. Why? They are in Beijing. I think they are also about fifty or sixty members. [...] But in Beijing, the [...] government level is different. [Some are] from the central government Ministry. Some [are] from the Beijing local Ministry.

The value of alumni networks in after-study lives and the portability of education and mobility of individuals are aptly demonstrated in Da Gung’s (Kuala Lumpur, Engineering, NTU, male, 6 years) narrative. Despite facing a much lower

salary than he could earn in Taiwan, Da Gung returned to Malaysia after his engineering degree because of 'family issues'. He worked in one firm before being made aware of a better opportunity at a Taiwanese company:

I found out about that company on the Internet, and there was a senior graduate, a Taiwan-educated returnee, who also worked there. It was a Taiwanese company. This senior graduate and I knew each other; we were both NTU graduates.

After working for half a year, Da Gung was sent to Taiwan for training in LCD technology and began travelling regularly between Taiwan, Malaysia, and Europe:

I had the opportunity to be an expatriate to explore the world. In the last two years I was in charge of the clients in Europe and South-East Asia. [...] They needed us to take care of the clients, because the Malaysian passport was very handy. The company making LCD really needed people to visit clients, take care of business in terms of quality and things like that, and with a Taiwanese passport it is more complicated.

This example points to the very geographically specific and socially contingent way in which education and experience can be made portable. Like other NTU graduates, Da Gung faced marginalisation in the Malaysian labour market because his qualifications were not recognised. It is only through alumni connections and the value of his particular engineering expertise for a Taiwanese firm that his education becomes more portable and generates new opportunities in after-study life. Portability and mobility, then, are enabled by geographical configurations that contribute to the recognition of education and the circulations that it can enable – from trans-local economies, formal government policies, accreditation schemes, and the work of alumni associations.

SENSIBILITIES AND MOBILITIES

These accounts of participants' after-study lives demonstrate that international education is not

an end-point. Rather, studying abroad and after-study life are 'vital conjunctures' (Johnson-Hanks, 2002) that articulate with longer-term uneven mobilities and transformations in identity. The participants in this research undertook study abroad at different points in their lives and at different historical junctures over the last three decades. Yet, they all described how education shaped their lives, their view of study abroad, and their future aspirations. International study, in this respect, is articulated into multiple temporalities (Cwerner, 2001) – from the temporality of past, present, and future in individual lives, the emergence of transnational relations, to wider geo-historical transformations. This is significant for understanding educational portability because it relates to subjective positions but also because these experiences frame the ways in which future educational mobility is reproduced, particularly for the next generation.

Many participants completed their qualifications several years prior to the interview and had reflected on what their educational experience had enabled. They noted instrumental employment and business concerns but also reflected on connections they could build between their home country and country of education. A number described themselves as 'mediators', 'facilitators', and 'bridge builders'. Noi (Bangkok, School of Letters, OU, female, 7 years) explains:

I stayed almost ten years in Japan studying and working. Half of my life I dealt with Japan and Japanese people. My life hereafter will also concern with Japan and that is the only way. I will continue my work as a business coordinator who bridges Japan and Thailand. I want to establish long-term relationship with my clients not as an interpreter but as a mediator.

These capacities to bridge different environments have been established through extended periods in the home country and the country of education. They rely on awareness and skills that are generated through situated learning rather than just the acquisition of technical knowledge. As Hanh (Hanoi, Law, NUS, female 13 years), who works for a Singapore Law firm, explains, such mediating positions involve being flexible and able to move between different contexts:

I have what the Singapore lawyer has. I may not have all of them but I'm have quite a bit of that as well. And I have everything that a Vietnamese lawyer has. Because you know in Hanoi, the bar association here has about 2000 lawyers registered. But only 50 can practice international law like what I do

Being in a position to bridge places offers opportunities to advance careers by capitalising on international study. This was unevenly experienced by our participants, and as a result, there were others in the group whose after-study experiences were more localised. This was the case for NUS graduates in Shanghai, for example, whose public policy degrees, alumni association, and their positions in government tended towards internal rather than external concerns. Amongst NTU graduates too, notwithstanding exceptional cases, marginalisation in labour markets meant that opportunities for geographically expansive lives were relatively limited. In both cases, however, alumni associations remained important and served as an ongoing bridge connecting institutions of education and local graduates – in the visits of university officials or indeed of university researchers such as ourselves exploring after-study lives.

There was also evidence of new sensibilities and identities. Even amongst those who were less mobile and perhaps less successful, a sense of attachment to the country of education and altered identities was pronounced. Li Shui's (Kuala Lumpur, NTU Business, male, 3 years) narrative is indicative. After completing his Bachelors degree, Li Shui wanted to work in Taiwan. However, because of the high salary threshold for work permits, he was obliged to return to Malaysia. He described how he stayed till the last day of his student visa and that during his 8 months in Malaysia, he was 'a bird in a cage' and that he yearned to return to Taiwan. Within a year, he found the only solution and returned to Taiwan to pursue a Masters degree:

I wanted to get away from this environment. I like Taiwan; it has the resources for me [to pursue] my self-goal. I could find what I need for self-fulfilment in that environment, and it offers a different perspective. I grew up here, I

cannot possibly say [this place is] terrible. After all, it nourished me. [...] Between these two choices, I would choose the nutrient from Taiwan.

Similarly, for Hou Kang (Hong Kong, NTU Social Science, male, 6 years), place reverberates through after-study life and the ongoing sense of connection and acculturation with Taiwan.

Our lifestyle has been assimilated, and [study] has even brought a tremendous impact on us. [...] Although we are NTU graduates, our campus gate is not on Roosevelt Road, our campus gate is at Chiang-Kai-Shek International Airport. ...What I mean is that we start learning as soon as we step in Taiwan. [...] Every single Taiwanese we meet, they are all our teachers.

For others, whose educational portability generated opportunities for mobility, their identities and lives started to be oriented around multiple destinations:

[During my] NUS time [...] I spent quite a lot of time in the arts faculty library, to read the Hong Kong newspaper! Because I [was] quite interested in the Hong Kong economic, politics, these kind of thing. Because immediately after graduation, my parents do not really want me to go back. So after one year, then at least I tried something in Singapore, then I'm not really that, I won't say I'm not happy, but then I think I should try to do something that maybe, to satisfy myself it's really the identity that I think, as a Hong Konger. (Tak Cheung, Hong Kong, NUS non-science, male, 12 years)

As Tak Cheung suggests, identity influences mobility trajectories, in this case in relation to desire and obligation to be with family and attachment to Hong Kong as home.

Lastly, participants reflected on the value of their education and how this influenced their aspirations for their children's future trajectories. While this sometimes included a hope that children would follow their pathways, more often participants envisioned mobility beyond Asian institutions. Bing Wen (Shanghai, OU, Social

Sciences, male, 12 years), for example, viewed a Japanese education as the bare minimum:

I want my children to have basic Japanese education. Because I trust in education that emphasizes the development of humanity [moral and character development]. But in the future, I would like to send them to American universities.

For participants from NTU, these aspirations were complicated by their difficult experiences after-study. Some NTU graduates in Hong Kong had children already attending NTU or other Taiwanese institutions but often for financial or academic reasons. Others expressed affection for NTU and Taiwan but made it clear the limitations of these qualifications. Chang Yu (Hong Kong, NTU Engineering, male, 34 years) who sent children to Canada and UK explained:

I should say I never consider[ed sending my children to Taiwan]. I feel that in terms of language, English is still more in demand. My two kids grew up in Hong Kong so they don't have much problem with Chinese. They can speak Mandarin Chinese, and on holidays they can visit Taiwan[...] I emphasize on language a lot, and I think it would be better [for them] to go to English-speaking.

These accounts demonstrate the involvement of parents not only in the reproduction but also reconfiguration of international study as a normative and desirable future. The re-direction of their children away from the regional institutions points to their own reflection on the portability of qualifications. Overseas education has, as we have shown here, provided significant opportunities to many but not all participants. Yet, in many cases, these opportunities are constituted in particular geographies and temporalities; they are enabled by specific trans-local connections and social networks and are sometimes limited by governmental regulations. Participants were cognizant of these dynamics and often sought to direct their children elsewhere, usually to hegemonic Anglophone destinations, which they believed would enable more expansive portability of education and experience.

CONCLUSION

The portability of education constitutes a foundational component of international student mobility. The consensus has been that the credentials, situated learning, and social networks generated in international study facilitate entry into labour markets (Cai, 2013), class reproduction (Waters, 2008), and sometimes access to the transnational capitalist class (Findlay *et al.*, 2012). Whether viewed through Bourdieusian accounts of accumulation (Waters, 2008) or post-structural readings of desire (Collins *et al.*, 2014), such arguments hinge on the claim that the anticipation of successful after-study lives is a driver of international student mobility. Our paper demonstrates that for many international graduates, their overseas education has indeed supported after-study mobility as well as subjective transformations. Yet, our findings also demonstrate that there is nothing automatic about the portability of overseas education, and that there is a need for scholars to examine not only student mobility but also the way this unfolds into after-study lives. Three points are particularly significant from this analysis.

Firstly, there is considerable unevenness in mobility after-study, in terms of graduates' ability to achieve the careers they desire and in terms of geographical location. On one hand, graduates of OU in both Shanghai and Bangkok demonstrate the ways in which educational credentials can enable upward mobility and prospects for mobile life as part of new transnational connections in Asia. Their credentials and experiences from a university that is embedded in the industrial prowess of the Kansai region and the significance of Japanese companies have been pivotal in enabling their mobility, career success, and after-study sensibilities. Similarly, the mobility of many NUS alumni in this study has been part of the emergence of Singapore as a knowledge hub in Asia, and for public policy graduates, a model for many regional governments, which has served as a platform for after-study life. The experience of NTU graduates, by contrast, demonstrates that alumni can also face significant barriers in their after-study lives as their degrees are not recognised or their cultural skills do not support successful negotiation of the local labour market.

Secondly, our findings demonstrate that international student and after-study mobilities are entangled in a wider assemblage of actors and processes. There is no free movement of degrees and educational experiences. Rather, portability is situated in governmental, economic, and social connections and limitations. This resonates with Williams and Baláz (2008: 1926) work on the conditions of skills portability and the shaping of the 'exchange rate' in the movement from one habitus to another. The alumni narratives from NTU graduates in particular, demonstrate the significance of regulatory settings around degree recognition as well as the normalised practices of employers. Yet, as NTU engineering graduates in Hong Kong demonstrated, in some situations, these regulatory settings can be reconfigured by social networks and the desire of nations and universities for recognition. Similarly, NUS alumni in Shanghai urban government highlighted the significance of localised social networks in quite specific after-study prospects. There is also a narrative of economic regionalization here where students and graduates are key actors. This was pronounced across the interviews, where individuals spoke of success in relation to specific trans-local activities of businesses, their own investment in extending or reconfiguring regional economies, or through the way in which their situated learning allowed them to make their mark.

These two points have particular significance for the literature on situated learning and cultural capital in international study. To date, these literatures have rightly drawn attention to the specificities of place in the experience of learning, the attributes of different institutions, and the perceived distinction that can be generated through international student mobilities. In looking specifically at the after-study lives of international students, our study demonstrates the much more transnational dimensions of these phenomena. As we have shown, an overseas degree is not simply a socially and culturally infused credential but one whose value is articulated through a whole range of other geographical connections and disconnections. This includes historically situated geopolitical relations between nations, the transnationalisation of production and consumption in Asia, and the formation of social networks of graduates from particular universities. In a context where international study is becoming more common and seemingly accessible

to more people, the variations generated in uneven connections between places are only likely to increase. The focus for future research, then, needs to include not only more accounts of the experiences of students but a wider agenda that examines the conversion and portability of learning and capital in after-study lives.

Lastly, in relation to Asian student mobilities, we observe that while overseas education has a reproductive dimension, it is not necessarily repetitive. The alumni we interviewed have spent significant periods overseas and through these experiences have encountered the transformative dimension of globalising higher education in Asia. This has resulted not only in greater social mobility but has also highlighted the wider possibilities of international study. While all of our interviewees harboured feelings for their country, city, and/or university of education, their aspirations for their children were for mobility beyond Asia. Indeed, where finances and qualifications permitted, our interviewees were imagining futures for their children in the major higher education centres of the Anglophone world.

Paradoxically, then, while alumni are enactors of new regional connections, they also recognise limits to Asian cultural capital and often desire global mobility beyond these circuits for their offspring. This last reflection troubles the claim made by scholars like Ziguras and McBurnie (2011) that we may be seeing an introvert trend in educational mobility, particularly in Asia, as the region's economies become more interdependent. While our study does not outright refute this claim, it does suggest that intra-regional student mobility may lead to inter-regional student mobility across generations, particularly for those who find financial success through educational portability. Rather than heralding a new Asia-centred era of international education, then, we envisage a more complex landscape of internationalising higher education. The growth and diversification of student mobilities in Asia intersect with desires for greater portability that articulate through knowledge that remain centred in existing western hegemonies of international education. The challenge is to account for these geo-economic and geo-cultural shifts in ways that recognise the active production and negotiation of hierarchies of knowledge and recognition not only in institutional reputation but also in educational portability.

NOTES

- (1) One interview discussed in this paper was drawn from a related project conducted by one of the authors.
- (2) The Examination Yuan is a special branch of government in Taiwan that is responsible for validating the qualifications of civil servants.

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International Student Mobility and After-Study Lives

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