Going global? International students, UK higher education and the pursuit of an international career

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Declaration of Authorship

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I, Jihyun Lee, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. The work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the extent to which international student mobility reinforces existing social inequalities by providing differentiated access to global higher education and, subsequently, a global labour market. Based on case studies of three universities in the UK, this research draws on interviews with 55 international students from outside of the European Union (non-EU) who were enrolled in or had recently completed postgraduate studies as well as three career staff to examine the following issues.

Firstly, this thesis investigates the process by which international students make higher education choices. The study demonstrates the socially and spatially differentiated flow of international students across the case universities in the UK. Students' experiences of choice-making are qualitatively different by access to the range of resources obtained from various spheres of their lives. This decision-making process is further complicated by their class, age, gender and race/ethnicity, as well as the intersections of these social divisions.

In addition, this thesis examines the institutional contexts which generate a divergent field of possibilities and choices for international students after graduation. It identifies variations in the effects of attending three different UK universities, whilst highlighting the ways in which individual institutions shape students' aspirations and transitions after graduation. It also finds that the institutional effects are mediated differently by students' social characteristics, indicating the complexity of post-study aspirations and pathways through UK higher education.

Lastly, this thesis analyses whether international higher education confers positional advantage in the global labour market by facilitating an international career. By looking at how an international career is understood and experienced by international students in the UK, this research empirically contests the dominant conception of an international career that centres on transnational mobility and illuminates the multiple ways of pursuing an international career which take on a circumventive or subversive potential.

Impact statement

This thesis begins with the question of how different school systems provide a differentiated access to world-class universities and, subsequently, influence the chance of individuals obtaining favourable positions in the global labour market. Drawing on 55 semi-structured interviews with non-EU international students who have completed, or were studying, postgraduate degrees in three different UK universities, this research examines their experiences before, during and after studies in the UK. Interviews with three career staff were additionally conducted to identify a variety of careers advice and support available at three case institutions. Firstly, it draws attention to the contextual complexities of motivations for and choices of higher education in the UK. The findings of this study also highlight the significant role that the individual institutions play in framing participants' possibilities and choices upon graduation. Furthermore, this study goes beyond the dominant framing of an international career that confers substantial positional advantage in the global labour market through onward international mobility.

A significant contribution to knowledge is made by this thesis by analysing international student mobility at both individual and institutional levels. Attention must be paid to the salience of individual and familial resources in projecting transnational mobility, although the fact that individual institutions play a part in shaping participants' post-study aspirations and transitions underlines the importance of socio-analysis at the meso level. Notably, this work enables a more fine-grained examination of differences between and within the case universities. In addition, this thesis extends theoretical discussions around international higher education by flagging certain questions regarding its role in (re)producing social inequalities across national borders. Transnational student mobility can provide students with conditions for transformation including 'reflexivity', as they encounter new, unfamiliar social fields. This research empirically explores the extent to which change is made possible through a Bourdieusian framework. In so doing, it sheds light on the often hidden intricacy and multiplicity of international student mobility to and from the UK higher education.

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The findings of this study are instructive for prospective and current students, career staff, policy-makers and other stakeholders in UK higher education. Particularly relevant to practices is the significance of individual institutions in shaping students' post-study aspirations and transitions. This study found that the anticipated and actual trajectories following graduation are closely intertwined with the way in which international students perceive and experience their universities. Practical suggestions may include raising awareness of various careers support and resources available at universities. Moreover, the data provided in this project have been used for several publications to allow the findings to be accessed by the wider academic community: two of them were already published in *British Journal of Sociology of Education* and in *Globalisation, Societies and Education*. I have also begun writing a joint paper with my supervisor Johanna Waters, which we aim to submit in the first half of 2021. I have presented my research at several academic conferences and seminars within and beyond the UK, including EURO Student conference, 2019; Royal Geographical Society annual conference, 2019; Comparative and International Education Society annual conference, 2020.

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List of Abbreviations

BAME	Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic
BEIS	Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy
BIS	Department for Business, Innovations & Skills
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DBA	Doctor of Business Administration
DIUS	Department of Innovation Universities and Skills
EEA	European Economic Area
EU	European Union
GMAT	Graduate Management Admission Test
GRE	Graduate Record Examination
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IGS	International Graduate Scheme
IOE	Institute of Education
IPS	International Passenger Survey
ISM	International Student Mobility
KCL	King's College London
MAC	Migration Advisory Committee
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology

MRN	Migrants' Rights Network
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NS-SEC	National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification
NYU	New York University
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ONS	Office for National Statistics
Oxford	University of Oxford
Brookes	Oxford Brookes University
RLMT	Resident Labour Market Test
SEGS	Science and Engineering Graduates Scheme
SS	Social Sciences
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
THE	Times Higher Education
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TNE	Transnational Education
UCL	University College London
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UUK	Universities UK
UUKi	Universities UK International
UK	United Kingdom
UKBA	UK Border Agency
UKCISA	UK Council for International Student Affairs
UKVI	UK Visa and Immigration
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
URBC	Unis Resist Border Controls
US	United States

USA   United State of America

USD   United States Dollar

Chapter 1 Introduction

> Social difference in the school system privileges access to world-class
> universities, while educational difference in a globalising HE system
> seems to influence the probability of an individual accessing favoured
> positions in the global labour market. […] This is represented as linked
> to a desire to engage in an international career. (Findlay et al., 2012,
> p. 122)

1.1 Research context, rationales and motivations

The expansion of higher education worldwide has been accompanied by the
salience in policy discourses of the knowledge-based economy and
'employability'. In a global knowledge economy, individuals are encouraged
to remain competitive through the continual upgrading of skills. Higher
education has been seen by governments around the world as one of the
ways to enhance the employability of its citizens. This has brought about
widening access to higher education in many countries. Increased tertiary
education opportunities have led to an excess of educated graduates and,
subsequently, 'credential inflation' where the scarcity value of educational
credentials has moved upwards from high school and undergraduate
degrees to postgraduate and specialised qualifications (Collins, 1979).
However, as Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011) have pointed out, the
promise of high-skill, high-wage jobs to those willing to invest in their human
capital through educational achievement does not match the reality of the
new global economy where there is a limited supply of such positions.
Against this backdrop, it has been argued that strategies to maintain
'positional advantage' in a labour market have taken on new significance as
they are expanded on an international scale, for example, through engaging
in international higher education and subsequently 'an international career'
(Brooks & Waters, 2011; Findlay et al., 2012, 2017; Waters, 2006).

This thesis begins with an observation made by Findlay et al. (2012) about
motivations and meanings of transnational student mobility in relation to the
stratification of the global system of higher education and the globalising

labour market. As ever growing numbers of students move across nation state borders for education and/or work, should international student mobility continue to be conceptualised as privilege? More specifically, does it confer distinct and tangible advantage to all those who are internationally mobile? These are core questions that form the central concern of this thesis. To address these questions, this research is based on an empirical study that explores the experiences of international students studying at three different universities in the United Kingdom. The UK is one of the popular study destination countries for internationally mobile students, not least because of its reputation and standing in the global field of higher education (OECD, 2019). In addition, studying in the UK is often seen as the first step towards an international career (Findlay et al., 2017; Packwood et al., 2015). However, the above portrayal of international students does not always sit comfortably with the narratives of those who I encountered during my fieldwork in 2018.

Esther, a recent graduate from the USA, was awarded a Master of Arts (MA) in Education and International Development from University College London. One of the main reasons why she chose the UK over her home country was because the period of study would be shorter, at a relatively lesser cost. Since a Master's programme in the US usually requires two years of study, studying in the UK was a cheaper choice for her. This was particularly important, as the costs attached to the Master's programme fell on her shoulders. Also, UCL was the only institution Esther applied to because she learned from UCL alumni that it has an excellent reputation for her course of study. The location of the university (i.e., London) was a plus. After completing her Master's study, she decided to work for non-governmental organisations in the Philippines and then Cambodia rather than staying in the UK or returning home. Since then, she engaged in a sequence of short-term, voluntary and low-paid jobs. Despite her sense of fulfilment in furthering her expertise and experiences, she nevertheless began to question the footloose nature of her work and look for stable job opportunities at home in the long term, partly because of her responsibilities to take care of her mom and her younger brother as a breadwinner of the family.

Similar to Esther, George had to rely on his own savings and a part-time job for a Master of Science (MSc) in Finance at Oxford Brookes University. However, this was a second Master's degree for him, with the first one obtained in Nigeria. When asked about his motivation to do another Master's in the UK, George explicitly linked it to enhanced job prospects post-graduation. Ironically, it was the very reason he decided to pursue his first postgraduate degree, although this did not translate into career advancement opportunities. One of the main reasons he chose the UK over other countries such as the US or Canada was the relatively lower entry requirements, which demanded only English language test scores without the need to take additional exams[1]. What is significant was his choice-making processes. None of the four universities he applied to were so-called 'world-class' institutions in the UK. In fact, the location and the flexible entry date were of utmost importance to his university choice. Brookes not only allowed him to start his study in January unlike the other universities. Being located in the city of Oxford was also appealing to him, as it evokes academic prestige associated with University of Oxford. George planned on having an internship in major consulting firms in the UK upon graduation, which would be equally vital for securing desirable employment and status outcomes upon return. However, he was unsure of how he could be able to obtain the internship from those firms.

Hannah also chose Oxford Brookes University for her Master's degree in Applied Human Nutrition. However, the rationales behind her higher education choice were qualitatively different from those of George. Firstly, as a graduate from a UK transnational degree programme in Hong Kong (i.e., two years in Hong Kong and final year in the UK), Hannah was more familiar with the UK higher education system than other countries. This ultimately led her to consider only universities in the UK for her postgraduate study. Secondly, given that she had to rely on financial support from her parents,

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[1] Universities in countries such as the USA usually demand the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and/or the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) scores in addition to Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

the alumni discount that she got from Brookes was particularly appealing. Hannah believed that this would help to alleviate some of their financial burdens. Unlike George or Esther, her plan after graduation was neither staying in the UK nor moving to a third country; instead, she was determined to get a job in local government at home. She believed that such a career in the public sector would be less likely to be affected by economic changes in Hong Kong and therefore much more stable than other employment. It would also offer all the fringe benefits including free healthcare for her as well as her parents. Ironically, Hannah admitted that gaining employment in the public sector did not require a foreign degree or a postgraduate qualification; nonetheless, she hoped that good English proficiency acquired from studying in the UK – rather than having a postgraduate degree from Brookes – might make a difference in the job market.

Take another example of Chris. His Doctor of Philosophy (DPhil) in Engineering at Oxford University was fully funded by a scholarship from the Chinese government. Emphasising that he had stayed all his life in China, doing a doctoral study abroad was driven by his desire to explore the world and gain international exposure. Given that Chris graduated from 'top' universities in China for his undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, 'world-class' universities in the US, the UK and Switzerland were taken-for-granted choices for him. Oxford and Cambridge were the only universities he applied for within the UK, with other universities virtually unthinkable for him. When gauging the offers he had received, he decided to take up the place at Oxford because of its reputation and recognition in China. After having achieved an unusual breakthrough in his DPhil project, he was offered a three-year postdoctoral position in another prestigious university in the UK before graduation. Central to this opportunity was the connection or, to use Chris's words, 'intervention' of his supervisor. While looking for a lectureship at the time of the interview, he indicated his plan to stay and work in the UK for a few more years in order to be eligible to apply for indefinite leave to remain. Without discarding the possibility of returning to China for work, Chris pointed out the importance of having a permanent residence in the UK to him

and his wife, not least because it would allow 'freedom' to live and work in the UK and ensure flexible accumulation of capital across borders.

These short vignettes show the complexity of international student mobility to the UK. George's and Hannah's comments about their institutional choices challenge the institutional reputation as a straightforward rationale for higher education choices amongst internationally mobile students. As I will go on to discuss in the following chapters, the *location* of the university – whether it is related to the quality of life or academic tradition – features as much in students' choices of university (see, for example, Prazeres et al., 2017) as other factors such as the length and cost of study. Also, the smooth study-to-work transition of Chris – as opposed to the lack of know-how of obtaining internships in the UK displayed by George – necessitates a discussion on the role of, and potential variation between, individual institutions in shaping students' possibilities after the completion of their studies. In addition, Esther's and Hannah's cases raise a number of questions, including the extent to which mobile international students as privileged individuals are mainly interested in reproducing their social advantage and whether they aspire to 'enter an international career and develop an internationally mobile trajectory' as described in extant literature (Marcu, 2015, p. 74). Furthermore, as shown in Chris's narrative, the need to acquire an indefinite leave to remain is another precondition – alongside international credentials – for flexible capital accumulation across borders, underlining the complexity of post-study international mobility.

If we zoom out and take an overview of the institutional and national context, these experiences start to make sense. On the one hand, the students' experiences and expectations are inevitably entangled with the entrenched hierarchical structure of UK higher education, whereby different universities are associated with differentiated prestige and power. In her cluster analysis of universities in the UK, Boliver (2015, p. 619) has identified distinctive clusters of high and low prestige HEIs. For example, the three institutions that Esther, George, Hannah and Chris attended belong to different clusters: Oxford (i.e., cluster 1), UCL (i.e., cluster 2), and Brookes (i.e., cluster 3). The distinction is made according to the extent to which institutions possess

various 'institutional capital', with traditionally elite and highly ranked institutions in the UK displaying higher levels of symbolic and economic capital than their lower counterparts (see also Cronin, 2016; Papatsiba & Cohen, 2019). On the other hand, in the context of a significant reduction in government funding, UK universities all share in common the importance of international students to their revenue and reputations. This has led to growing competition between UK universities in attracting international students as well as various internationalising efforts at the institutional level. The latter includes the expansion of transnational education (TNE) provisions, particularly amongst less research-intensive universities (UUKi, 2018).

The question then remains as to the extent to which the mobility of international students to the UK is nuanced by their social characteristics and the institutions they attend. As demonstrated above, the higher education choices of international students rest on a multitude of factors beyond institutional reputation. This may be particularly evident amongst those at postgraduate level, as they tend to have more socially diverse backgrounds and hence distinctive demands than their undergraduate counterparts (Brooks & Waters, 2010; Waters & Brooks, 2010; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Also, the reputation of a particular institution may sometimes feature more strongly in students' expectations and choices post-graduation than having a UK degree. As a result, they may or may not be able to obtain favoured positions in the global labour market. Critically, existing research into international students in the UK context has focused upon either a single nationality group (Sin, 2009; Xu, 2020b) or a whole group with little differentiation between international students (e.g., those from or outside European Union countries) (Geddie, 2010, 2013; Beech, 2019, 2015). It is thus essential to conduct a fine-grained analysis of the experiences of non-EU international postgraduate students from different universities in the UK.

1.2 Research aims and approaches

This research study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of international student mobility through the experiences of non-EU international students who were either studying or have completed postgraduate degrees from three distinct higher education institutions in the UK. This not only helps to fill a gap in the current literature, but offers insights into existing discussions about social reproduction through international higher education, to which studying in Western, Anglophone countries has hitherto been key. The analyses undertaken in this study are centred on the following issues, namely: i) international students' motivations for, and choices of, UK higher education focussed on three universities in particular, ii) their aspirations and transitions post-graduation, and iii) the conceptualisations and practices of an international career. Accordingly, my research questions are:

- Why and how do international students make higher education choices in the UK?
- To what extent, and in what ways, do UK higher education institutions play a part in shaping international students' post-study aspirations and transitions?
- How is an international career imagined and actualised by international students in the UK?

In developing the above research questions, I was initially inspired by the work of Reay and her colleagues (2001; 2005), which acknowledges the differentiated impact made by individual institutions (i.e., sixth form or further education colleges in Greater London area) on prospective university applicants' choices of higher education in the UK. I argue that the concept of institutional habitus, which the authors have drawn upon, can be equally applied to my research, as it attends to how the institutional value, belief and practices influence students' dispositions and preferences. Just as the distinct features of the respective institution are played out in the university choices of higher education applicants in Reay et al.'s (2001; 2005) research, so those characteristics too affect – as I will demonstrate in this thesis – the way in which international students imagine the range of possibilities after

graduation. However, given the diversity of educational backgrounds of international students before initiating their studies in the UK, this notion is deployed to particularly identify the influence of three UK universities on the shaping of students' aspirations and transitions after graduation. The recognition of institutional differences is crucial to this study, which would otherwise be glossed over by reference to those pursuing their degrees in the UK and hardly yield any valuable insights in terms of their differentiated experiences within the same educational context.

The work of Reay and her colleagues is largely built upon a theoretical framework developed by Bourdieu (1990b, 2010). This framework, featuring his central thinking tools of field, capital and habitus, fundamentally seeks to reconcile the binary focus of agency–structure in existing scholarship by illuminating the importance of various levels of analysis. This is crucial to the study of internationally mobile students, because it was common to assume that international student mobility was driven by either rational individual decision-making or objective structural factors. Moreover, prior research underscores spatial differences in the value of cultural capital (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Collins et al., 2014; Waters, 2018; Waters & Leung, 2013a, 2013b). The emphasis on *where* students have studied or pursued their degrees tends to obscure potential divergence at the institutional level. Underpinned by Bourdieu's framework, this study attends to the interplay between different – for example, institutional and individual – scales, whilst acknowledging the respective significance of individual and structural factors in international student mobility. In doing so, it throws light on the co-constitutive role of individual institutions and international students – albeit to a different extent – in shaping experiences before, during and after international study, and reveals the socially and spatially differentiated flow of international students across the universities in the UK.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

Having introduced the study, the remaining chapters are organised in the following way. Chapter 2 and 3 review the theories, concepts and explanations in the extant literature which provide a basis for conducting this research. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology and research design. The main empirical findings in relation to higher education choices, post-study aspirations and transitions, and the imagining of an international career are discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, respectively. Chapter 8 concludes the thesis with reflections on the contributions of this research.

Chapter 2 situates this research within broader debates in relation to international higher education, student mobility and educational (in)equality. It starts with an overview of policies and discourses circulated around the internationalisation of higher education and transnational student mobility both globally and in the UK context. The review of extant literature points to the role of international higher education in (re)producing socio-spatial inequalities at regional, national, institutional and individual levels (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Brooks & Waters, 2011; Findlay et al., 2012; Foskett, 2010; Kenway & Fahey, 2008; Marginson, 2008). Notwithstanding the differential impacts of internationalisation on British universities, there has been a relative lack of research on international students studying at different higher education institutions in the UK (cf. Beech, 2014, 2015, 2019). As a result, the outcomes of attending or graduating from different UK institutions tend to be homogenised – such that the chance of these students accessing favoured positions in the global job market is often considered to be unequivocally higher than those undertaking overseas education in less popular study destinations or their home country (Leung & Waters, 2013; Waters & Leung, 2013a, 2013b). In facilitating new discussions, this chapter highlights the need to take into account the socially diverse backgrounds of international students and the hierarchies of individual institutions within the UK and, in doing so, underlines the mediating role of individual and institutional characteristics in the transferability of a UK degree across national borders.

In Chapter 3, I present Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 2010) key concepts of field, habitus and capital as a theoretical framework for this study. After reviewing key theories that have applied to studies of international student mobility, I elaborate on why a Bourdieusian perspective is more apposite as an overarching framework than other theoretical approaches. I argue that focusing on the notion of field allows us to capture the polarity of international higher education across and within countries, and to consider a transnational social field where participants plan on working or obtain employment after graduation. The recognition of habitus advances a critical theorisation of international student mobility by paying attention to the more mundane, and hence less calculated, aspects of choice-making processes, post-study aspirations and transitions, and understanding of an international career. Crucially, in this study, habitus is applied to both individual and institutional levels in order to elucidate the respective influences of individual students and universities on transnational student mobility in UK higher education. Likewise, the concept of capital draws attention to variation in terms of positions and position-taking strategies of individuals and institutions in the field of higher education. Combined together, these theoretical concepts not only bridge across the experiences of international students in three different UK institutions but also enable the identification of subtle differences between those experiences.

Chapter 4 provides methodological reflections on the research design and methods. I firstly outline my ontological and epistemological stances and explain why it is essential to take an interpretivist approach to a detailed account of students' voices. I then introduce the research methodology, which is essentially based on qualitative case studies of non-EU international students who have studied or completed postgraduate degrees from three different UK universities. After providing rationales for why these groups of international students are of particular interest to this research, I explicate the choice of semi-structured interviews – conducted either face to face or using Skype – for the main research methods. After laying out sampling strategies, I demonstrate how I analyse the data collected from interviews with student participants and university career staff across three case institutions. In

closing the chapter, I discuss my positionality as an insider-outsider researcher along with ethical considerations which concern my research participants.

Chapter 5 unpacks the contextual complexities of higher education choices of international students. It begins by throwing light on diverse motivations for UK higher education increasingly feature in the participants' narratives which are not always limited to matters of individual advantage and social reproduction. It then draws attention to the significance of cultural capital acquired from various spheres of life – family, education and social life/work – in the choice-making process (Ball et al., 2000). It describes the multiple ways in which they obtain knowledge and experience in relation to the field of international higher education, whilst indicating how the extent to which participants make informed decisions hinges on the level of cultural capital they possess. Alongside this, the chapter explores the dispositions and preferences of individual students, which are often intertwined with social characteristics such as age, class, gender and race/ethnicity. This unsettles an ostensibly smooth and seamless transition of these students to international higher education as well as the portrait of mobile international students as a homogenous group of young and privileged individuals (Brooks & Waters, 2009, 2011; Findlay & King, 2010; Xiang & Shen, 2009).

Chapter 6 moves these discussions forward by exploring the extent to which, and the way in which, three case universities play a part in shaping the range of options international students could envisage or realise after graduation. I first examine the educational status of each institution in relation to the field of both global and national fields of higher education and how it is reflected in the geographies of possibilities post-graduation (Findlay et al., 2012; Marginson, 2008). Second, this chapter unfolds a range of organisational practices with a focus on careers resources and informal institutional connections, featuring the differential experiences of students with those provisions across the case universities (Brinton, 2000; Reay, David, et al., 2001). Lastly, I look into the cultural and expressive characteristics of the case universities, which are distinctively classed, racialised and/or place(s)-specific (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Allen & Hollingworth, 2013; Angod &

Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2019). Whilst I do not deny the confluence of familial, social and institutional factors, my intention here is to consider the influence of individual institutions on students' aspirations and transitions and identify the potential differences between institutions within the same popular study destination such as the UK.

In Chapter 7, I follow on from discussions of post-study aspirations and trajectories to consider how international students imagine and practice an international career. The notion of an international career has received some attention in recent years, particularly in academic literature. Research has suggested that the growing interest in an international career amongst internationally mobile students articulates with the conditions of neoliberal globalisation, whereby students and graduates are encouraged to make use of opportunities offered by a global economy and seek after an internationally mobile lifestyle or career trajectory across different countries (Bozionelos et al., 2015; Findlay et al., 2012, 2017; King & Sondhi, 2018; Mohajeri Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Wiers-Jenssen, 2011). This chapter interrogates this idea, focussing on how an international career is conceptualised and experienced by international students. Whilst not entirely independent of such a neoliberal understanding, it is equally understood by some participants in a way that disrupts the idealisation of onward international mobility. Importantly, this chapter illuminates how the construction of an international career is mediated by participants' social characteristics and, to a lesser extent, their institutions.

Chapter 8 closes the thesis by reflecting on the key findings and underscoring the original contributions of this study. It presents the significance of empirical research on the experiences of non-EU international postgraduate students who were studying in, or graduated from, three different universities in the UK. Here I suggest going beyond the dominant conception of *international* mobility as privilege that has become entrenched in much of the previous studies of international student mobility (see, for example, Waters, 2018). Bourdieu's framework makes visible the often hidden intricacy and multiplicity of international student mobility in UK higher

education. Through the notions of field, habitus and capital, I emphasise the importance of looking at international students' choices of higher education within the UK, aspirations and transitions after graduation, and constructions of an international career, as being embedded within a complex matrix of influences. Ultimately, this study calls for more attention not only to the increasingly diversified backgrounds of internationally mobile students, but also to the transformative potential of international higher education.

Chapter 2 International higher education, transnational student mobility and the pursuit of an international career

The role of international higher education in (re)producing social (dis)advantages has received considerable attention across different contexts. Much of the existing literature on international student mobility, however, has analysed the geographies of cultural capital acquired through international higher education on a macro scale (e.g., countries). Whether or not such unevenness is observed at meso (e.g., institutional) or micro (e.g., individual) levels within the same popular study destination, such as the UK, has been little explored. In order to address this gap, I firstly situate my research within broader issues of internationalisation of higher education, educational (im)mobilities and a globalising labour market. I then review these issues in relation to UK higher education more specifically, in which I demonstrate how international students have been constructed by the UK government to meet its own economic, political and socio-cultural agendas. This is followed by a discussion of educational equality concerns for international students at UK universities, which points to the need to probe in detail their higher education choices, post-study aspiration formations and experiences, and understandings of an international career.

2.1 Geographies of international student mobility: From global higher education to global labour market

A neoliberal view of globalisation has been thus far dominant in understanding the internationalisation of higher education. It is assumed that markets are much more efficient providers of services than are public sectors, and market mechanisms are consequently extended across all spheres of social life (Harvey, 2011). Against this backdrop, education is seen as a tradeable service and students as consumers (Robertson, 2003). Such ideas have led to a major internationalisation of the sector worldwide, which was viewed as having the potential to increase educational opportunities for students (Altbach & Knight, 2007). As education began to

be perceived as an export industry, the internationalisation of higher education has also taken on growing prominence and importance – both economically and strategically – to nation states and universities around the world. Notwithstanding the benefits, the manner in which internationalisation has evolved has not only highlighted the unequal landscape of international higher education at regional, national, institutional and individual levels. It also indicates the potential implications educational (im)mobilities have for intensifying social difference within the global higher education and, subsequently, in the global labour market. Given the recent outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19), I will elaborate further the likely impacts of COVID-19 on the internationalisation of higher education and international student mobility in particular.

Uneven landscape of international higher education

'Internationalisation' of higher education has been closely associated with the process of individual institutions responding to an unstoppable force of 'globalisation', often conflated with neoliberalism (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The spread of a neoliberal agenda, that is, the extension of market mechanisms, to higher education was epitomised by the World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations by the General Agreement on Trade in Service (GATS) in 1995 (Robertson, 2003). Its aim was to privatise a range of services including education and liberalise the market in those areas globally. Within this free-trade context, higher education is seen as a private good and a commodity to be freely traded. This process is facilitated even further in some countries such as the UK by reforms to national systems and institutions according to 'New Public Management' systems (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007). These reforms have led to the emergence of various market mechanisms as well as a significant reduction in state funding for higher education followed by a shift of individual institutions to rely on student fees. The internationalising efforts of higher education have thus been understood as a response to both a reduction in government funding and the increasing importance of the proportion of international students and staff in

institutional reputations, through which individual institutions can compensate for state disinvestment and improve their global market shares.

With a reduction in government funding certainly accelerating the internationalising efforts of higher education, this is not the only factor that has driven the process of internationalisation. In fact, international activities such as academic exchanges and research collaborations have long been considered an integral part of universities, as seen in the European medieval university and in the Arab university (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 1999; Teichler, 2004). Following the development of nation-states and colonial expansion after World War II, political rationales came to be dominant. Examples include the replication of European models of higher education in their colonies around the world as well as the establishment of area studies, foreign language training and study abroad programmes in US universities. As the Cold War ended, the political rationale has been relatively weakened by the economic one, with a greater emphasis on marketing higher education internationally. However, these different rationales are not mutually exclusive and often co-exist at the institutional level. Internationalisation has become a crucial area whereby universities can 'improve the quality and cultural composition of the student body, gain prestige and earn income' (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 294). Whether it is driven by academic, social/cultural, political and economic rationales (de Wit, 1999; Knight, 2009), or the combination of all or some of these rationales, the internationalisation of higher education has become a key strategic goal for both nations and institutions alike.

Knight (2012) suggests that the conceptualisation of internationalisation rests on two interdependent pillars – that is, 'internationalisation at home' and 'cross-border education'. The former type of internationalisation gives prominence to campus-based strategies, which entails the incorporation of intercultural and international dimensions in teaching, learning, research, extracurricular activities, as well as the integration of foreign students and scholars into campus life and activities. On the other hand, 'cross-border' education – often used interchangeably with transnational, offshore and borderless education (Knight, 2007) – centres on the movement of people

(e.g., students, faculty, scholars), programmes (e.g., courses, programmes, degrees), providers (e.g., institutions, organisations, companies), projects and services, and policies (e.g., institutional, national) across national boundaries. Importantly, the conceptualisation highlights that internationalisation in higher education is no longer restricted to the mobility of students and staff alone and extends to that of programmes and providers (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). The growth of the international higher education sector has therefore seen increased opportunities to access overseas education beyond the traditional forms of international education, in which students travel to a different country for their education.

Amongst the various aspects of internationalisation of higher education as outlined above, student mobility has received considerable attention (Kehm & Teichler, 2007; Knight, 2012). This is explained by the visible growth of internationally mobile students around the world, which increased from around 2 million to 5.6 million between 2000 and 2018 (OECD, 2020; UIS, 2019). International students usually refer to students who have crossed national or territorial borders for the purpose of study (OECD, 2018; UIS, 2020). Depending on whether they take a full degree abroad or participate in a short-term, semester or year-abroad programme, international students are divided under two broad categories of student mobility: degree mobility and credit mobility (Findlay et al., 2012). As Knight (2012) identifies, student mobility can also move beyond the mobility for coursework or programme and entail other forms of mobility, such as 'research and fieldwork', 'internships and practical experiences' and 'study tour, workshops' (p. 25). As the scope of transnational student mobility is diversified and expanded, whether the academic qualification as well as institution are recognised in home, host, and other countries where a student may want to seek further education or employment has become important as the main thrust of research in the field.

Despite its emerging importance at regional, national and institutional levels, scholars have voiced growing concerns about the internationalisation of higher education. These include, most notably, regional imbalances, stratification of institutions, and inequalities between students. As Altbach

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and Knight (2007) have suggested, the internationalisation of higher education is both spatially and socially uneven. They contend that developed countries, especially large English-speaking nations, dominate the international higher education market and provide most services for middle-income countries in Asia and Latin America, and poorer nations of the developing world. This is evidenced by the flow of international students, the franchise of academic programmes, the provision of quality assurance and accreditations among others. Whilst these patterns reflect – to some extent – colonial ties and influences, similar inequality has also been observed within regions. For example, mobility policies within Europe tend to favour 'knowledge transfer' from richer Western European nations to poorer, less powerful countries (Kenway & Fahey, 2008). Although efforts to address imbalances between and within regions (e.g., the provision of English-medium courses/programmes and scholarships) have been made, economically developed English-speaking countries still maintain their position as the major players in the international higher education landscape.

In addition, existing status hierarchies between institutions are entrenched both within and between nations, as university league tables became prevalent under the growing competition for international education and especially international students. Within national systems, there has been a concentration of resources in a small number of 'world-class' universities with the aim of enhancing the international profile of the country as a destination (and provider) for international education, as is the case in Germany with the 'Excellence Initiative' (Maesse, 2017). Such power relations within national systems are also apparent and replicated on the global scale through international university rankings. Whilst delineating the global hierarchy of institutions, Marginson (2008) contends that the global field of higher education is structured by 'an opposition between the elite sub-field of restricted production and the sub-field of large scale mass production tending towards commercial production' (p. 305). He has noted that institutions in the global sub-field of restricted production or the 'global super-league' – including the top American universities (e.g., Harvard, Stanford, MIT, Yale, Princeton, Berkeley) and a handful of universities in the UK (e.g., Oxford,

Cambridge and a few Russell Group[2] universities) – maintain their global power through the subordination of other institutions as well as nations.

A marked stratification of destinations and institutions is implicated further in international student mobility. Educational mobility has long been associated with social privilege, and it is considered more prevalent among individuals with high levels of economic, cultural and/or social capital (Brooks & Waters, 2009; Findlay et al., 2006). However, as the global market in higher education has been expanded and diversified, scholars began to argue that international student mobility is increasingly differentiated, and the benefits of mobility vary accordingly. For example, Foskett (2010) has argued that internationally mobile students can be categorised into three distinct 'tiers' along their socio-economic lines. Unlike those in the 'top tier', students in the second and third tiers tend to rest their decisions on the calculation of costs and benefits of mobility within the limited budgets, and their choices are often geographically circumscribed to neighbouring and low-cost countries. However, there is some evidence that those who choose to move to neighbouring countries may not always be concerned with the cost of study, as they may engage in 'horizontal mobility' whereby there are no significant differences in academic quality between the country of education and the country of origin (Teichler, 2004, 2017). Studies have nevertheless found that social stratification still exists even amongst this group of students, pointing to the significance of socio-economic factors in international student mobility (Courtois, 2018b).

Furthermore, inequalities play out between local students and international counterparts. On the one hand, despite the diverse backgrounds within mobile international student groups, they are often seen as a homogenous – highly privileged – group whose needs are qualitatively different from those of domestic students. Whilst efforts are typically made to widen participation from disadvantaged local students, there is no equivalent demand for equity of access regarding international students whose recruitment focuses on

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[2] The Russell Group, established in 1994, represents 24 research-intensive universities in the UK (https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities/).

economically advantaged individuals (Brown & Tannock, 2009; Tannock, 2013). On the other hand, international students are equally constructed as 'supplicants, strangers, outsiders, consumers, social isolates, and people in learning or linguistic 'deficit'' (Marginson, 2012, p. 9). Such constructions tend to prevent their integration with host students, leading to racism, discrimination and social segregation within and beyond universities (Beech, 2019; Brooks & Waters, 2011). National immigration laws and regulations around right to work or healthcare further subject international students to exploitation in various areas ranging from accommodation to work (Marginson et al., 2010). However, both perspectives – grounded on a de-humanising, reductive view of international students – exacerbate inequalities at individual levels.

In fact, the recent coronavirus pandemic has thrown into sharp relief those already existing inequalities across different scales. One of the most visible impacts on the internationalisation of higher education is international student mobility (Stacey, 2020a). As countries around the world close their borders and international flights come to a halt, both prospective and current students experience immobility, delayed mobility and interrupted mobility (Raghuram & Sondhi, 2020). Although COVID-19 uncovers the marginalisation and vulnerability of international students in many aspects of their lives from hardship funds to xenophobia (Cheng, 2020; Tran & Tan, 2020), those able to afford the costs of studying abroad will continue to prefer physical mobility and reap the benefits of engaging in international education face to face (Adams, 2020; O'Malley, 2020a; Woolcock, 2020). Similarly, institutions and nations which rely heavily on high-fee paying international students will be negatively affected, amongst which low-quality institutions catering for the mass and low-income countries are identified as most at risk (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). Globally and nationally renowned research universities and countries will not only recover more rapidly from this crisis in virtue of their reputations and economic resources. Their positions in the global field of higher education will also remain and even be bolstered by investment in research on the novel coronavirus, although the recuperation of international student numbers varies by states' border controls. This is borne out by the

impact of border closures on international students in Australia (Karp, 2020; Hurley, 2020; Zhou, 2021). Despite the uncertainty about the future of international higher education and transnational student flows, the widened disparities between individuals, institutions and countries will likely persist in a post-COVID-19 world.

International student mobility: Motivations, experiences and outcomes

Research on international student mobility, which has increased substantially over two decades, has mainly focused on questions about why, where and how students engage in educational migration. Regarding the question of why students choose to study abroad, the extant literature focuses on 'push–pull factors' (Chen, 2017; Elder et al., 2003; Lee, 2014; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Push factors are usually associated with characteristics of the home country that drive a student outward, such as limited educational programmes, expertise and opportunities or a highly competitive and stratified education system. On the other hand, pull factors are generally understood in relation to favourable conditions of the host country including the quality of education and/or the ability to work after graduation. More recently, this dominant explanatory mechanism for international student mobility has incorporated what Li and Bray (2007, p. 795) call 'reverse push-and-pull factors' – that is, the positive forces in the home country and negative forces in the country of education – to explain emerging cross-border mobility within the same region (e.g., between mainland China and Hong Kong or Macau). Crucially, this push-pull model posits student mobility as a response to neoliberalism where internationally mobile students are seen as rational and calculative subjects, making strategic decisions about where to study in relation to market forces and future returns in labour market (Lipura & Collins, 2020).

The uneven flows of international students are evident in choices of study destinations and institutions. Not only are students' choices of overseas education limited to relatively narrow geographical areas, but their

institutional choice tends to operate within a small number of universities based on academic prestige and/or attractive locations of study (e.g., cities) (Collins, 2014; Findlay et al., 2012; Prazeres et al., 2017). For example, Waters (2006) has argued that, in the face of the expansion of local educational opportunities, 'international' (i.e., western) credentials have been appropriated by Hong Kong middle-class families to step up their investments for academic recognition and distinction. Different, but yet similar, spatial strategies among those from traditional host countries have been underlined by Brooks and Waters (2009) in their study of UK students considering or having completed degrees abroad. They have contended that higher education degrees overseas are considered by their research participants to provide a 'second chance' to access elite universities whose entry is blocked at home. In both cases, 'overseas' education is limited to reputable universities from western, Anglophone countries. Against this backdrop, mobile international students have been largely framed as privileged individuals and families, (re)producing their social advantage across borders (Brooks & Waters, 2009, 2011; Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2006).

With the significant growth of other international education provisions such as transnational education, the research focus has recently shifted to regions typically sending students outward (Lee, 2017; Phan, 2016; Yang, 2018). Most research nevertheless appears to emphasise stratification within the space of international student mobility (Leung & Waters, 2013; Sin, 2013, 2014; Sin et al., 2017; Waters & Leung, 2013b). Whilst geographical diversification has opened up international education opportunities for less privileged 'locals', studying in Western Anglophone countries is usually available only to the more advantaged sectors of society due to the higher tuition fees and costs of living (Brooks & Waters, 2009; Waters & Leung, 2017). Indeed, the motivations and choices of those pursuing foreign academic qualifications in their home country are often linked to their failure to secure a local university place and the unattainability of studying abroad for higher education (Waters & Leung, 2013a). The compromised choice is also observed amongst those undertaking educational migration *within* and

between non-traditional destinations (Yang, 2018). On the contrary, the ways in which students embark on education in Western, Anglophone countries are often depicted in the extant literature as seamless, with their choice-making processes being seldom problematised.

Another strand of research on ISM is concerned with the experiences of international students during their studies overseas. This body of literature is primarily concerned with the examination of academic and cultural experiences and the identification of various factors that affect international student experiences. In their review of literature pertaining to the acculturation experiences of international students, Smith and Khawaja (2011) pinpoint a number of acculturative stressors commonly encountered by those studying abroad. Examples include language barriers, difficulties of adapting to the new educational, cultural and social environment, feelings and experiences of discrimination, and practical issues regarding finances and accommodation among others. Some of the previous studies consider those difficulties to be more prominent in specific ethnic or cultural groups of international students (see, for example, Ho et al., 2004; Rienties et al., 2012). In doing so, the extant literature assumes international students to be in deficit on the grounds that they lack adequate skills to succeed in host country environments (Lacina, 2002; Samuelowicz, 1987). Importantly, this deficit view focuses on a set of identifiable and correctable problems on the part of international students rather than any inadequacies or insufficient support structures within the host community.

With the growing recognition of the role of academic, social and cultural context in learning experiences, there has been a shift away from the expectations of international students to 'adapt' towards social support and institutional accountability (Lee & Rice, 2007; Montgomery, 2010). Aligned with earlier views which emphasise acculturalisation or assimilation, a discussion of institutional provisions has initially centred on aiding acculturative stress and adaptation of international students through institutional orientations and intervention practices (Schram & Lauver, 1988; Sherry et al., 2010). However, these types of provisions are often found to be largely underutilised by international students (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008;

Nilsson et al., 2004). Of other sources of social support, the significance of social networks and especially friendship formation in the study abroad experience has been noted by many scholars in the field, with varying emphasis on friendships with host nationals, co-nationals or fellow international students (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Montgomery, 2010; Sawir et al., 2008). Recent studies have gone further in proposing that all involved parties should share responsibility for enhancing international student experiences, including members of the educational community, administrators and faculty, and international students themselves (Madge et al., 2009, 2015; S. Marginson, 2014; L. T. Tran, 2013; P. Yang, 2019).

Notably, the significance of international students' experiences has been discussed from different angles. For example, studies have shown that the experiences of international students have important implications for institutions with regards to future enrolment, as there is a strong positive association between their experiences and institutional recommendations (Ammigan, 2019; Lee, 2010; see also Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003a). In other words, international students who have positive educational experiences are more likely to recommend their institution to prospective students. It is also suggested that these students' experiences have resonance for home students, that is, those who study in their home nation. The latter group of students can gain intercultural opportunities *in situ* provided that they form meaningful relationships with mobile counterparts (Harrison, 2015; Montgomery, 2010; Tannock, 2018). Furthermore, the experiences of international students are closely linked to the accumulation of social and cultural capital which can be converted into positional advantage (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2006). Despite highlighting the implications for subsequent life chance opportunities, there is a dearth of research that has explored in greater detail the way in which students' experiences during their studies abroad are played out in their post-study aspirations *as well as* actual trajectories.

Studies of the outcomes for international students have emerged in concert with the increased importance of their flows in developing and maintaining national/regional competitiveness within a knowledge-based economy. Given

that they are young, acculturated individuals with host-country language ability, full qualification recognition, and domestically relevant professional training, various policy initiatives have been introduced in many countries to attract and retain international students as prospective skilled migrants – particularly, those at the (post)graduate level in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Hawthorne, 2014; Hawthorne & To, 2014). Examples include immigration regulation changes intended to ease access to work, residency or settlement post-graduation (Geddie, 2015; Hawthorne, 2010). Given the economic benefits of international students, traditional sending countries such as China have made significant efforts to promote the return of internationally educated students by providing incentives and rewards which include tax breaks and grants (Han et al., 2015; Zweig & Wang, 2013). Notably, these policies tend to frame international students as footloose agents who are able to respond to these policies with their stay-or-go decisions and the economistic reasoning, and adjust their mobility strategies according to their individual career or lifestyle preferences (cf. Geddie, 2013).

This stay-or-return perspective is also prevalent in the student migration literature that has focused on the future mobility plans and/or career trajectories of international students, with their experiences after graduation situated in either the country of education or the country of origin. In the research literature, student migration is often associated with a longer term strategy to stay in the country of education. A range of topics are examined along this line, including the pre- and/or post-study migration intentions of international students (Han et al., 2015; King & Raghuram, 2013; Riemsdijk & Wang, 2017; Szelenyi, 2006; Weisser, 2016). The immediate employment outcomes for international student graduates has similarly been investigated, focussing on their labour market integration in the host country. In this largely quantitative body of research, the employment outcomes of former students are usually compared against domestic graduates and other offshore skilled migrants (Hawthorne, 2010, 2014; Hawthorne & To, 2014; Jiang, 2016; Sabharwal, 2011). Some of these studies explored the employment opportunities and barriers of international student graduates qualitatively,

although the focus of these studies has been largely on the perspectives of employers (Hawthorne, 1997; Shchegolev et al., 2016) rather than students themselves (cf. Robertson et al., 2011).

Evidence of those returning to the country of origin after the completion of studies is also prolific in the student mobility literature. It has been indicated that internationally mobile students tend to enjoy access to greater employment and career advancement opportunities on their return home (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Butcher et al., 2008; Sin, 2009). However, there is some evidence that overseas credentials are not always translated into better employment outcomes. Previous research has indicated that mobile international students from Western countries (e.g., the UK, Norway) are more likely to experience unemployment – albeit temporarily – upon return, although they are still favoured by multinational companies (Brooks et al., 2012; Wiers-Jenssen, 2011). Others have given a more provisional and nuanced account by throwing light on mixed positional outcomes for those who return to their home country and placing more emphasis on personal and transformative gains (Cannon, 2000; Collins et al., 2017; Robertson et al., 2011). Nonetheless, these stay-return portrayals, based on the rationalistic model that centres on individuals, not only confine post-study mobility geographically either to staying or returning. They also fail to link diverse mobility patterns to the rest of the life-course (Findlay et al., 2017).

Closing the gaps: Higher education choices, post-study aspirations and the pursuit of an international career

As I have described in the previous section, there has been a perceived (over)emphasis in ISM research on the privileged nature of international student mobility to Western, Anglophone countries. However, there has been growing recognition of differences within internationally mobile students. Previous studies differentiate between credit and degree mobile students. For instance, the population of Erasmus students is described as relatively more homogenous in terms of age, gender, academic performance and

socio-economic backgrounds (i.e., young, female, white and middle-class) than degree-mobile students, although academic and social selectivity equally characterises those undertaking degree mobility (Courtois, 2018a; Findlay et al., 2012; King et al., 2010). A similar distinction has been made amongst students who pursue an entire degree overseas, with postgraduate students reportedly coming from socially diverse backgrounds and having less linear educational histories than undergraduate counterparts (Brooks & Waters, 2010; Waters & Brooks, 2010; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Given the diversity within those seeking degree mobility and the range of study destination and institutional choices not being as restricted as credit mobile students, the impact of various social characteristics on their higher education choices can be more significant amongst degree mobile students particularly at the postgraduate level.

Existing empirical work has shown how different social characteristics of degree mobile international students can influence motivations for, and choices of, higher education overseas. For example, gender differences in motivations for studying abroad have been highlighted in the extant literature, with the mobility decisions of female students often relating to their desire to escape gender inequalities and discrimination in the labour market in the country of origin and continue a migration trajectory onward (Kim, 2011; Martin, 2017; Sondhi & King, 2017). Also, those who are academically less prepared and have limited financial means are relatively less selective about the reputation of their degrees than high-achieving and well-financed students, for whom the academic prestige of universities is the primary consideration for higher education choices (Choudaha et al., 2012). The determinant factors of study destination choice are equally found to vary by different age groups, with the availability of scholarships, for instance, considered more important for postgraduate students than undergraduate counterparts (Lu et al., 2009; Waters & Brooks, 2010; Woodfield, 2010). Indeed, actual student mobility is often far from 'elite practices taking place in elite spaces, and circulating through elite connections' (Yang, 2018, p. 696).

Moreover, research on student mobility has begun to underline the contextual – that is, cultural, social and economic – circumstances within

which individuals navigate their decision-making process. For example, scholars have examined the influence of networks of people (e.g., kinship, friendship, partners and romantic relationships) on students' decisions to study abroad (Beech, 2015; Brooks & Waters, 2010; Carlson, 2013). These networks, embedded in 'strong' or 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973), are considered important in terms of providing sources of information and guidance, creating cultures of mobility, and shaping 'imaginative geographies' of study destinations (Beech, 2014). Various components of infrastructure such as educational agencies (Beech, 2019; Collins, 2008; Thieme, 2017; Yang, 2018) and social media platforms (Jayadeva, 2019) have also received a significant attention in the extant literature on educational migration, together with other 'supply-side' dimensions of student mobility including the role of universities, government institutions and policies (Findlay, 2011; K. Geddie, 2015; Lomer, 2017; Lomer et al., 2016; Sidhu, 2006). Given the contextual complexities of higher education choice-making, I argue that it is crucial to take into account how differentiated access to cultural capital in the form of knowledge and experience in the field of international higher education influences the choice process.

A further weakness shared by extant research into international students is the relative neglect of the impact of educational experiences on international students' post-study mobility and especially the role of individual institutions in this process. A large portion of research has focused more broadly on familial, social and political influences in international students' aspirations and transitions after graduation. Family members, and especially parents, are influential in setting expectations for students to engage in subsequent international migration, although the cultural role that the family plays in structuring post-study mobility varies geographically (Findlay et al., 2017; Marcu, 2015; Soon, 2012). Evidence from recent studies highlights that these social networks, expanded in a new educational context, play a part in shaping international student mobility after study (Collins et al., 2014, 2017; Findlay et al., 2017). The significance of social relations is also supported by future family considerations, whereby state welfare and social policies ranging from maternity leave provision to the quality of public education for

children are deemed of importance in the mobility patterns of international students after graduation (Geddie, 2013).

Whilst highlighting the relevance of the social environment of study, there remains surprisingly little scholarship exploring the role that individual institutions could play in shaping international students' post-study aspirations and transitions. Only a limited number of studies have looked at the complexity and diversity of post-study transitions through international education in general, with their findings indicating the centrality of place and space in the value of an overseas degree. For instance, UK transnational education programmes reportedly fail to provide an 'international' experience and proffer specific skills and networks associated with degrees acquired through studying in the UK (Leung & Waters, 2013; Sin et al., 2017; Waters & Leung, 2013a, 2013b). Collins et al. (2017) have lent support to this claim that the levels of recognition accruing to credentials from the Anglophone countries are rarely found in qualifications from institutions in Asia, although they may become portable through certain social and economic networks within the region. The findings of these studies tend to homogenise the value of international credentials obtained abroad and especially in Western, Anglophone countries, which are generally perceived as commanding higher values than local or transnational education degrees (cf. Brooks et al., 2012).

Prior research has also highlighted that the post-study plans and trajectories of international students are mediated further by their social characteristics. In her study of Malaysian students pursuing or having pursued a UK university either physically in the UK or in Malaysia through the offshore and transnational modes, Sin (2009, 2013, 2016) has shed light on the significance of ethnicity alongside other characteristics in producing occupational possibilities and choices upon graduation. Her participants gauge their ethnic 'fit' to decide an appropriate sphere or site of employment for them; for instance, employment in the private sector is preferred by ethnic minorities (e.g., Chinese Malaysians) over the public employment arena

which tends to favour the *bumiputera*[3] majority. Age and gender are also found to complicate status differentiation through international education, with a young age and being female leading to positional disadvantage in the Malaysian labour market, as is also the case in other contexts (Kim, 2016). On the other hand, nationality is considered to be more significant in securing work opportunities in the UK, as it is related to the right to work. My research therefore brings to the fore variegated combinations of personal and institutional factors when exploring the ways in which those studying in a popular study destination such as the UK develop aspirations and navigate transitions post-graduation.

With the heightened awareness of social forces that generate the movement of students both before and after study, research has begun to highlight the linkage between international student mobility and life-course mobility plans (Findlay et al., 2012, 2017; Soon, 2012; Wu & Wilkes, 2017). For instance, scholars have demonstrated that international mobility for education is deployed by students and their families as a long-term strategy to fulfil their aspirations for transnational mobility through onward mobility to a third country or across different countries (Findlay et al., 2012, 2017; Marcu, 2015). Also, students are exposed to a wide range of ideas and opportunities through a diverse social network of domestic and other international students in the country of education, which leads them to reassess original future plans and sometimes consider new destinations and trajectories after study (Collins et al., 2014, 2017; Findlay et al., 2017). Furthermore, international students are shown to hold geographically diverse personal ties through the use of social media across the country of origin, the country of education or even in a third country, which pull them in multiple directions upon graduation (Gomes, 2015). Much of this literature has challenged the outcomes for internationally mobile students as a geographical binary, that is, either staying in the country of education or returning to the home country.

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[3] The term refers to indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia (i.e., Malay).

The lifetime mobility aspirations of international students are increasingly associated with the idea of an international career (Findlay et al., 2012, 2017; Packwood et al., 2015). For instance, Findlay et al. (2017) found that studying in the UK was perceived by the majority of degree-mobile students as 'the first step in launching an international career' (p. 3). King and Sondhi (2018, p. 178) have taken this further, linking the mobility of international students – albeit mainly limited to those completing postgraduate degrees – to the creation of 'an international labour elite of skilled professionals' or a transnational capitalist class (see also Findlay et al., 2012; Sklair, 2001). Although these studies commonly present an international career as one of the motivations for, and outcomes of, international study, evidence of how it is being defined remains scarce. One notable exception to this is Wiers-Jenssen (2011) who demarcates it as working in multinational companies where one's job entails international aspects (e.g., business travel, use of foreign languages for business purposes) beyond simply working abroad. Notwithstanding, previous research fails to address how it is understood from the perspective of international students. Nor is the significance of an international career extended beyond a dominant discourse that valorises transnational mobility by conferring substantial positional advantage in the global labour market.

Despite the glamorisation of an international career in student mobility literature, there is some evidence that the meanings and interpretations of transnational mobility may vary markedly by student background and destination country (Carlson, 2013; Collins et al., 2014; Mosneaga & Winther, 2013; Tran, 2016; Van Mol et al., 2020). King and Sondhi (2018), for instance, identified the differences between Indian and British degree-mobile students in terms of the importance of an international career in their decisions to study abroad. Increasing chances of pursuing an international career figures more prominently in Indian students' decisions than those of UK students. Moreover, scholars have underscored the salience of post-study international mobility aspirations amongst those studying in 'Asian' or 'semi-periphery' destinations (e.g., Singapore) or, albeit to a lesser extent, in other Anglophone countries (e.g., Australia, New Zealand) (Collins et al.,

2014; Gomes, 2015, 2017; Soon, 2012). These countries are usually perceived in the existing empirical work as pathways to other more 'global' destinations, that is, the major cities of Europe and North America. As such, I argue that there is a need to establish a more nuanced account of the pursuit of an international career by taking into account both students' characteristics and contextual factors.

2.2 UK higher education, international students and educational equality

Neoliberal reforms, as seen on an international scale, have similarly taken place in the UK higher education system. Those policy changes have developed against the backdrop of massification, and the rapid expansion of the sector has resulted in a funding crisis. Despite tuition fee reforms, other sources of revenue have been deemed necessary for complimenting reduced public funding. International education, and particularly the direct recruitment of international students, serves as 'a means of financing the government's objective of opening higher education to a larger proportion of the UK population without increasing taxes' (Findlay, 2011, p. 178). Whilst bringing economic, political, and academic and cultural benefits to the UK, the presence of international students is assumed to pose a risk of inducing illegal immigration and, more recently, spreading coronavirus (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2020). These representations not only have implications for students' lived experiences. They also point to a bigger issue of educational equality for international students. Given the principle of equality is usually delimited by the borders of the nation state, international students are often excluded from debates about educational equality (Marginson et al., 2010; Tannock, 2013, 2018). Building on these studies, I call for equal attention to be paid to the experiences of international students before, during and after their studies in the UK.

An overview of UK international higher education

Neoliberal reforms featuring reduced state intervention and a transfer of power to market forces have similarly taken place in the UK higher education system. The reforms, led by the Conservative Government since 1979, encompassed a wide-scale privatisation of public services and the promotion of increased competition with the ultimate aim of improving performance and efficiency (Harvey, 2011). Higher education was also subject to such radical restructuring, a consequence of which involved the introduction of neoliberal market and quasi-market mechanisms (e.g., accountability, benchmarking, deregulation, outsourcing) across the sector (Deem et al., 2007). These reforms were manifest in the following two key legislations: the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the Further and Higher Education Act in 1992. The former served to a cost-effective expansion of the sector through the transfer of funding from local education authorities to two funding councils, namely the University Funding Council and the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council. This was succeeded by the latter act in 1992, which eliminated the binary divide between academic and vocational studies by allowing polytechnics (now post-1992 universities) to apply for university status. This has led to not only widening access to higher education but, more importantly, greater competition between old, pre-1992, universities and new, post-1992 institutions (Beech, 2019; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

A discourse of marketisation and competition within higher education gathered pace when the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing, the then Chancellor of the University of Nottingham, published what became known as the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997). The report advocated a closer integration of higher education with the knowledge economy, with a focus on producing highly skilled graduates to meet the needs of global labour market (Peters, 2010). Critically, it suggested introducing a graduate contribution to tuition fees as a way to address a funding crisis brought about the rapid expansion of the higher education system since 1960s. As a result, top up fees of £1,000 were introduced by the Labour Government in 1999, which then subsequently increased to £3,000 in 2006 (Shattock, 2012). The calls by Lord Browne's

(2010) *Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance* (i.e., the Browne review) for removing the cap on tuition fees and limiting the role of government to providing loans for students resulted in a £9,000 cap on tuition costs for full-time, and £6,500 for part-time, students in England and Wales[4], under the Coalition Government in 2012/13. The tuition fee reforms consolidated the idea of students as consumers and education as private investment, accelerating neoliberal policies and practices in UK HEIs.

With around a six per cent reduction in universities' teaching grant in 2011/12 (BIS, 2010), accompanied by the tuition fee reform, universities in the UK were encouraged – if not pressurized – to act in entrepreneurial ways in order to obtain new sources of income within the increasingly marketised system (Clark, 2004; Jessop, 2017). Within this context, international education – that is, 'the provision of education to international students whether within national borders or abroad via campus branches or online courses' (see Courtois, 2018a, p. 8) – has become one of those funding sources where individual institutions can accrue immediate financial benefits (Waters, 2008). It is estimated that the 2015/16 cohort of international students brought approximately £20.3bn to the higher education sector through tuition fees, personal and living costs, and visitor spending (UUKi, 2019). Also, the vast majority (82%) of UK universities provide transnational education (TNE), enrolling international students on degree programmes outside of the UK (UUKi, 2018). In 2015/16, over 700,000 students were studying for a UK degree overseas, more than the number of international students studying in the UK (437,500). The contribution of TNE to the UK economy is estimated at £550m in 2014/15 (ibid.). The income generated

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[4] Following the establishment of the devolved government of Scotland in 1999, those defined as 'Young Students' (e.g., under the age of 25, without children, marriage, civil partnership or cohabiting partner) have not been charged for any fees in Scotland (see https://www.saas.gov.uk/files/447/saas-student-funding-key-facts.pdf), with tuition fees currently being capped at £4,395 in Northern Ireland (see https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/student-advice/finance/university-tuition-fees-and-financial-support-in-northern-ireland).

from their recruitment helps to offset – albeit to a varying degree – a considerable reduction in state funding faced by many institutions in the UK.

In fact, the benefits of internationalisation of UK higher education, and international student mobility in particular, are not solely discussed in economic terms. The sector's academic, cultural and geopolitical contributions have also been recognised in wider public and policy discourses (British Council, 2016; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013; Morris et al., 2016). For example, international students are considered critical to the UK's research and innovation given that nearly 45 per cent of early career researchers are from abroad and many of them take up courses in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects (British Council, 2016). Moreover, international students enrich student life by bringing various perspectives and international exposure to domestic students, which would be potentially beneficial for working in a global environment and developing a global network (HEPI & Kaplan International, 2015). In addition, geopolitical influences including international reputations and alumni networks are accrued through recruiting international students. Despite the aforementioned benefits and a recent rhetoric shift attendant with changes in visa policy (which will be elaborated below), the potential of international students staying on after completing their studies and becoming immigrants has still been recognised as a cost associated with the mobility of international students in the UK (Morris et al., 2016, p. 9; see also Waters, 2017).

Acknowledging the benefits and costs associated with international students, there have been many shifts in policies either to promote or to curb international student flows over the years. In reviewing international student policies in the UK from 1999 to 2015, Lomer (2017, 2018) has divided them into three key periods. The first period began with Tony Blair's Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI) (1999–2004). It aimed to increase the number of international students in UK higher education institutions and further education colleges by 50,000 and 25,000, respectively, within six years (British Council, 1999). This was achieved through various measures, one of which was to construct a brand for UK higher education, the 'Education UK'

in order to differentiate it from other competitor countries such as Australia and the USA (Lomer, 2017; Lomer et al., 2016). Changes were also made to visa and immigration regulations for overseas students, for example, through simplifying visa application procedures and allowing international students to take part-time jobs alongside full-time study (BBC, 1999). The expansion of the Chevening scholarship schemes, established in 1983 and run by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as a public diplomacy initiative, was another main feature of the PMI (Wilson, 2014). The PMI was considered as a policy success, with the recruitment targets exceeded by 43,000 students in both higher and further education by 2005 (Blair, 2006).

The second stage began with the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (PMI2) in 2006, which lasted until 2011 despite a change in political leadership. In the context of increasing competition and a rapidly evolving market, there was a shift in focus away from short-term recruitment targets and hence financial gains to 'a more networked, diffuse approach to policy development and implementation' (Lomer, 2017, p. 61). For instance, the PMI2 sought to double the number of countries sending over 10,000 students by 2011 in order to avoid reliance on a few countries such as China, India and Nigeria (DTZ, 2011). The Education UK brand was sustained, albeit with greater emphasis on 'the range of social, cultural and career advantages that a UK education offers' as well as the UK's positions as 'a powerful partner and source of expertise in education more generally' (British Council, 2010, p. 13). In addition, greater weight has come to be placed on a broader network of strategic partnerships and collaborations with overseas governments and institutions alongside the outward mobility of British students (BIS, 2014; DIUS, 2009). Essentially, the PMI2 broadened the scope of the PMI by diversifying key source countries, improving the international student experience, and developing distance learning and transnational higher education opportunities (BIS, 2009).

The launch of the International Education Strategy (IES) by the Coalition Government in 2013 marked the beginning of the third period. The IES, presented as the first industrial strategy, made explicit its intention to increase revenues from education exports (BIS, 2013). One of the important

changes was the development of a centrally coordinated 'Britain is GREAT' campaign, under which the Education UK brand was incorporated. The GREAT campaign, led by Visit Britain alongside UK Trade and Investment, attempted to promote tourism and industry as well as education by establishing an overarching brand identity for the whole of the UK. Notably, it privileged TNE and other education exports such as publications and technology over the physical presence of international students in a context of heated debates on international students as migrants in the UK (Lomer, 2017, 2018; Lomer et al., 2016). However, it still stressed the salience of recruiting and attracting international students in the UK, placing 'no cap on student numbers' in principle (Cameron, 2013). Other aspects of the IES attempted to address issues identified as hindering the growth of international education exports, including quality assurance in transnational education. The success of the IES was translated into increased income from education related exports and TNE activity to £19.9 billion to the UK in 2016, an increase of 26% since 2010 (Department for Education, 2019).

Across three periods, there have been significant changes in migration policy. The first two periods – PMI and PMI2 – generally witnessed a series of favourable migration policies for international students. For example, Science and Engineering Graduates scheme (SEGS) (2004–2006) was launched in October 2004 with the aim of allowing non-European Economic Area (EEA) nationals who had graduated from UK HEIs in the field of physical sciences, mathematics and engineering to stay in the country for up to 12 months after their studies. This scheme was expanded in May 2006 and applied to those who commenced a Master's or PhD degrees in any subject. SEGS was followed by the International Graduate Scheme (IGS) in May 2007. IGS increased the pool of international graduates even more including those who had completed not just a recognised UK Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, PhD or equivalent but also a postgraduate certificate or a postgraduate diploma regardless of the subject they had studied (UKVI, 2013b). As the Points-Based System was introduced in 2008, IGS was replaced by Tier 1 (Post-Study Work) visa. International graduates of any discipline and any degree class were eligible to apply for the Tier 1

without having to secure a UK sponsor to enter into the UK labour market as were Tiers 2 and 3. Only successful applicants were granted a leave of two years in the UK (UKVI, 2013a).

Whilst migration policy in the UK had been oriented towards reducing illegal migration, it was the Brown government which began tightening regulations through a reform in the Tier 4 system. This was triggered by a 'bogus college' scandal in 2009, whereby multiple small colleges were found to have provided an illegitimate access route for student migrants into the UK (UKBA, 2010). Toughening the requirements for English language, eligible institutions and rights to work was some of the measures that were introduced to tackle 'abuses' of the Tier 4 system and crack down on bogus colleges (UKBA, 2011). This process was continued by the Conservative Party-led Coalition Government which pledged to curtail net migration figures to 'tens of thousands' through a succession of changes (May, 2010). These included closing Tier 1 category to all applicants from April 2012, introducing an immigration health surcharge and border 'credibility' interviews, and increasing surveillance of international students during their studies (Morris et al., 2016). However, the evidence for the government's claim that many international students overstay in the UK after the completion of their studies was later found to be incorrect (Home Office, 2017; MAC, 2018). Following Brexit[5], the UK government announced the re-introduction of a two-year post-study work (i.e., Graduate Route) visa for international students in September 2019, which will come into effect from 1st July 2021 (Havergal, 2021; Home Office et al., 2021). An updated International Education Strategy, announced by the government in February 2021, also underlines changes in streamlining visa application processes and enhancing job prospects for international students (Department for Education, 2021).

Overall, despite the steady growth in international student numbers across all three policy periods, the outcomes of internationalisation of British higher education are rather unequal at the institutional and individual level. In line

[5] Following a UK-wide referendum in June 2016, the United Kingdom withdrew from the European Union (EU) and is no longer a member of the EU.

with the dominant understanding of quality as 'reputation' in international education policy, the number of international students has been generally higher in top-ranked UK universities than other British universities (Findlay, 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012). This also means the inequitable distribution of resources between institutions, given that financial resources can accrue from international students. Moreover, the UK policies on ISM have implications on prioritising – albeit implicitly – privileged international students from 'low risk' (i.e., wealthy) countries (Tannock, 2013). For example, students from 'high risk' (i.e., poorer) nations are not equally subject to the new regulations of streamlining visa application processes and relaxing stringent financial conditions to prove that they have sufficient maintenance funds in their bank accounts for the duration of their stay. In addition, limiting the right to work while in the UK has prevented students from lower income backgrounds from applying to and studying in the UK. Despite the differential impact of those policies on individual institutions and students, relatively little attention has been paid to the socially and spatially differentiated flow of international students across the universities in the UK.

The effects of the recent coronavirus outbreak on UK international education and student mobility also appear to vary by institution and type of provision. It is estimated that UK universities will be hit by £2.6 billion in the next academic year, amongst which more than half of the income loss will be derived from international student recruitment (McKie, 2020). Oxbridge and the Russell Group universities may be financially hit hardest as top recruiters of international students, whilst they are among the first institutions to benefit from the government investment in the coronavirus research[6]. The rapid shift to online delivery has seemed to open up new opportunities for universities to capitalise on distance education, although a digital divide[7] has been found to be a significant challenge (Higgins, 2020). The prospect of TNE is also rather

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[6] UK government grants £84 millions of funding to the University of Oxford and Imperial College London in order to develop a coronavirus vaccine (see https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funding-and-manufacturing-boost-for-uk-vaccine-programme).

[7] A digital divide refers to the inequal access to technology and internet between students.

mixed. On the one hand, TNE is seen to offer a solution to a range of challenges faced by international higher education, such as COVID-19 and climate crisis (Mitchell, 2020; Stacey, 2020b). On the other hand, its future is uncertain with a reduction of global middle-classes in emerging countries where the majority of transnational education is being delivered and the continued preference for physical mobility amongst prospective students (O'Malley, 2020a; Stacey, 2020a). Whether or not the introduction of Graduate Route visa has positive outcomes for the UK international education sector and international student flows in particular will remain to be seen.

Representations of international students in the UK

This section brings to the fore the various ways in which international students are represented in policy and media discourses in the UK. This is important, as discourse 'enables and constrains the imagination and social practices' (Sidhu, 2006, p. 27). In other words, it can affect the way international students represent themselves and see themselves represented (Lomer, 2017, 2018). One of the most dominant framings is to see international students as a means to generate income (Coughlan, 2018; MAC, 2018; UUK, 2017b). Their presence is justified on the ground that they make significant financial contributions to the UK through their tuition fees and other expenditure. For example, international (i.e., non-EU) students pay nearly double or in some cases (e.g., laboratory and clinical degree programmes) even triple the fees paid by UK and EU students (Complete University Guide, 2019). In fact, whether international students should be charged differently and treated by universities as 'cash cows' is a recurring issue in the UK (Espinoza, 2015; Tannock, 2018). However, such criticisms are often countered with the logic of global supply and demand. As Katsomitros (2013, p. 1) explains:

> In a job market that is increasingly globalised and where workers are
> increasingly mobile, having a degree from a reputable university in the

UK can significantly improve a student's career prospects, particularly in Asia, where a big chunk of international students come from. This explains, in part, why international students are willing to pay [significantly more] for a UK degree.

In this way, international students' choices of UK higher education are relegated to an economic one; that is, they pay significantly higher fees to maximise returns on their investment in education. In a similar vein, their value is measured primarily in financial contributions, with those who are unable to economically benefit the UK considered problematic.

There is also an assumption in policy discourses that international students are ambassadors for the UK. According to Lomer (2017, p. 117), such a construction 'create[s] a set of expectations about who international students are and how they will behave, while in the UK and afterwards'. For instance, these students are assumed to have positive experiences and develop lasting ties during their studies. However, studies have found difficulties of building mutual understandings and relationships between international students and local students, as non-UK students tend to form friendships more with co-nationals or other international students rather than with UK students (Harrison, 2015; Montgomery, 2010; Waters & Brooks, 2011). Similarly, when they return home, they are expected to hold influential positions and – building on their renewed understanding of British cultures, politics and values – exert influence in the interests of the UK. Whilst this may be true for some scholarship recipients (particularly, those receiving scholarships from the UK government) (cf. Yang, 2014), the majority of international students who are self-funded may not necessarily generate the same level of goodwill and political influence as the former group of students.

Another dominant narrative is to view international students as reputational and educational resources. As one of the metrics used by international rankings, numbers of international students are seen to enhance the reputation of the UK and its higher education sector. At the same time, they are useful educational resources, which help to diversify the classroom and provide home students with the opportunity to cultivate transnational

networks and globally relevant skills (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). Nevertheless, these representations frame international students as passive resources for internationalisation rather than 'complex agents who alter the academic worlds around them through their knowledge practices', with the physical presence of their foreign bodies suffice to improve quality and reputation (Madge et al., 2015, p. 686). Furthermore, when they fail to engage in or resist the role of educational resources, they are held to be in deficit. Whilst this deficit can be explained by a multitude of factors, it is mainly ascribed to students' cultural backgrounds (Leong & Ward, 2000; Ward & Chang, 1997). Indeed, with a few notable exceptions (Sondhi & King, 2017; Tu & Xie, 2020; Xu, 2020b), the diversity of international students – unlike home students – are primarily discussed in relation to nationality or national origins with little attention given to other dimensions such as age, class, disability, gender and race/ethnicity among others.

International students are also implicated in migration narratives. On the one hand, they are considered desirable immigrants, since they possess skills in demand in the workforce or have enough money to invest in entrepreneurship. These students are presumed to fill skill gaps in the British labour market and serve as a key driver of the UK's knowledge economy. However, when conflated with asylum seekers and illegal immigrants, they are perceived to exploit visa systems, add pressure to public services and seek permanent settlement. Such perceptions of risk subject international students to various monitoring and surveillance technologies, which range from evidence of English proficiency level, finance and academic qualifications when applying, to biometric residence permits and police registration upon arrival as well as attendance monitoring during their studies (UKVI, 2020). These practices essentially create a hostile environment by delegating the roles of the state border agency, a border site and border agents to the university, the classroom and the university staff, respectively (Jenkins, 2014). Importantly, constructing international students as migrants does not reflect a wide range of aspirations and trajectories of those studying in the UK universities. Nor does it extend their experiences beyond a single dimension: their border crossing (Lomer, 2017).

Since the coronavirus outbreak in early 2019, international students are also seen as potential vectors of disease. This is closely associated with how COVID-19 was initially framed in racist terms such as a 'Chinese virus' by the media and politicians (Khan, 2020; Su et al., 2020). Such perceptions have negatively impacted the experiences of international students and often led to instances of racism and discrimination towards these students on and off campuses worldwide. Mittelmeier and Cockayne (2020) have lent support to this claim through their preliminary research on public perceptions about international students in the UK. Their analysis of Twitter data suggests that despite shifting public narratives over time to empathy and condemnation of their mistreatment, international students (particularly, those from China and East Asian countries) in the UK were depicted as disease carriers in the early months of the pandemic. In this sense, as Waters (2020, 2021) notes, COVID-19 has rendered the previously invisible bodies of international students more visible. Nevertheless, international students have been relatively absent in debates over refunds of tuition fees and/or accommodation in the face of campus closures and suspended face-to-face teaching, which are primarily if not exclusively discussed in relation to domestic students at least in the UK context (cf. MRN & URBC, 2020; Stacey, 2021).

As Lomer (2017) points out, these discursive representations of international students mutually reinforce, and contradict, each other. For example, she critically asks:

> Why should a student who has been subjected to a rigorous and tedious biometric testing regime be positively disposed to the political values of a country? Why should a student who has been sent to stand in line at a police station for 3 hours to register, and paid for the privilege, turn to the police as a safe institution? Why should a student who hears and reads hostile comments about immigrants seek out and build relationships with British people? Why should a student who has been subjected to different bureaucratic regimes to their domestic peers believe it to be their responsibility to educate their classmates? (Lomer, 2017, p. 219)

Notably, the narratives from policy and/or wider media discourses are premised on certain assumptions about international students. They are commonly perceived as passive others rather than active agents, with their views, experiences and future trajectories being subject to change according to institutions or national policy. Equally, those representations rest on the homogenised model of international students. With the exception of national and/or regional origins (e.g., EU/non-EU), international students are rarely differentiated along the lines of class, gender, race/ethnicity among others. In this research, I will therefore focus on the intricacies of international students' lived experiences, which may nuance or even disrupt existing discourses and subjectification of these students.

Educational (in)equality for international students

Educational equality, or equity in the context of higher education, broadly refers to the principle that all individuals should have equal chances or prospects for educational achievement. Despite the conceptual fuzziness and disagreements over its meaning, there is a consensus that educational equality concerns 'what happens to individuals before, during and after their formal enrolment in institutions of education' and encompasses equal access to educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes after the completion of studies (Tannock, 2018, p. 20; see also Laden, 2013; Lynch & Baker, 2005). However, because the principle of equality is often defined and applied at national and/or sub-national level, educational inequalities between those living in and across different nations may be left unchallenged. International students are one of such populations which are not subject to the same equality principles as domestic counterparts. For instance, it is now widely accepted that international students pay higher tuition fees than home students. Whilst scholars have attempted to address the vulnerability of this particular student population through the lens of human rights (Marginson et al., 2010), concerns of educational equality for international students are often framed, if not sidelined, by the language and logic of marketisation (BBC, 2019; UUK, 2018).

Notwithstanding, commitments to educational equality for international students did not disappear entirely even in a highly marketized system of higher education. Drawing on the case of UK higher education, Tannock (2018) contends that growing competition between nation-states as well as amongst UK universities in part helps to persist the demand for equality for internationally mobile students. This is borne out by the UK government's move to introduce post-study work permits for international students in line with similar provisions in other countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand (Geddie, 2015). The regulation change allows international students to stay and work in the British labour market after graduation. Likewise, competition between individual institutions can sometimes work towards promoting greater equality in provision for international students. Support systems are typically more salient in lower-ranked and lesser known universities where there is a more pressing need to compete against higher-ranked HEIs and/or identify niche markets. For example, Brookes offers a pre-Master's course[8] which aims to help international students to improve their subject knowledge, study skills and academic language level prior to a Master's degree. Although the institutional difference may relate to the type of students they recruit, it is noteworthy that these various mechanisms can and did result in differentiated support provision for international students.

Nonetheless, past research has underlined the fragmentation of educational equality for international students – such that it is primarily applied to those within individual institutions and during their studies. Much of the extant literature focuses on issues relating to academic achievement, curriculum or pedagogy (Lomer & Anthony-Okeke, 2019; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2020; Tannock, 2018). Such work is promising and can support international students' achievement, retention and overall experience of their studies in UK higher education. Yet, it is also strangely silent on other concerns including before and/or after their studies in the UK. A notable exception is a study by Tannock (2013) that examines two different – yet interrelated –

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[8] Pre-Master courses (see https://www.brookes.ac.uk/international/courses/english-and-pathways/pre-masters-courses/)

debates over admission practices for international and domestic students in UK universities. Findings suggest that a proposal to allocate off-quota places to wealthy domestic students triggers criticism in 2011, with a similar demand for restricting the number of international student visas to only those who can afford and fulfil various entry requirements drawing little opposition. Whilst highlighting the striking differences in the demand for educational equality between the two groups of students, such a perspective reinforces the homogenised depiction of international students who are perceived as invariably privileged (see also Waters, 2012).

Indeed, the lack of equality concerns for international students closely relates to how these students are portrayed in academic literature, which is largely influenced by structural conditions. In the UK context, Tannock (2018, p. 170) writes:

> Thanks to a combination of high tuition fees, limited financial support, no significant overseas widening participation agenda, and an extremely restrictive immigration system, the international students who end up gaining entry to UK universities […] rather are heavily skewed towards elite and relatively well-off families in nation states that are not viewed with extreme suspicion by UK immigration authorities.

Whilst these structural factors play a significant role in shaping who these students are or represented to be, it is crucial to examine the lived experiences of international students in a rapidly changing international higher education landscape. For example, there is emerging evidence that many international (i.e., non-EU) students further their studies in the UK through British degree programmes delivered overseas or credit recognition agreements (British Council & UUKi, 2020; Yu, 2020). The latter has thus far been considered as a separate route for less privileged students to pursue international credentials (Leung & Waters, 2013; Waters & Leung, 2013a, 2013b). The growth of international higher education therefore has led to an increasingly diverse student body with varying degrees of economic, cultural and social capital. This points to the need to unpack the way in which

international students make higher education choices in the UK. Relatedly, the diversity of international students alongside the entrenched institutional hierarchies in UK higher education may have implications for their aspirations and trajectories after graduation. This research will therefore extend the focus of existing empirical work to explore issues regarding international students not just during, but also before and after, their studies.

First of all, whilst the extant literature acknowledges the impact of social characteristics on higher education choices, international students are rarely included in discussions of inclusivity and student differences in the UK higher education. The rapid expansion of higher education in the UK brought attention to the issue of access within the domestic student body. Researchers have shown that social injustices are found in the highly differentiated, uneven patterns of choice, not just in the continuing inequalities in access to higher education (Ball, Davies, et al., 2002; Reay, 1998b; Reay et al., 2002, 2005). For example, economic constraints, lack of cultural and social capital, and forms of self-exclusion are played out in the choice processes of working-class students, making their decision-making conflictual, problematic and even risky. Compounding influences of class in choice-making are those of age, gender and race/ethnicity. These studies also suggest that their institutional choices are developed in and through different arenas of students' lives (e.g., family, education, work/social life). Given that they cross borders to pursue their studies, international students are, to some extent, similar to local students who are new to the field of higher education. In line with Tannock's (2013) calls for extending the demand for educational equality beyond national borders, I argue that it is equally important to focus attention on the social diversities and hierarchies at work in the process of higher education choice amongst international students.

Also, studies of international students in and graduates of UK tertiary education rarely differentiate between institutions in terms of their value or portability albeit with a passing mention of the benefits of attending institutions of academic prestige or in an attractive study location upon graduation (Beech, 2019; Prazeres et al., 2017). Much of the previous

research in the UK only samples students from a certain nationality group or all of those under the category of non-UK students, without attending to the diversity within the international student population (Beech, 2015; Findlay et al., 2017; Geddie, 2013; Sin, 2009). Notwithstanding variegated combinations of personal and institutional factors that may affect the ways in which students navigate through the study-to-work transition process, less is known about how these forces create the field of possibilities and choices after completing their study in the UK. Research by Reay et al. (2001) has contributed significantly to understandings of the influence of educational institutions (i.e., schools) – all located in or close to London – on the shaping of higher education choices in the UK (see also Donnelly, 2015). They tease out variations in 'a school effect' by examining the institutional contexts within which students make choices of higher education. I adapt this framework to look at what impact the different UK higher education institutions have on non-EU international students' post-study aspirations and pathways.

In the UK context, there has recently been a growing interest, amongst degree-mobile international students, in an international career. Recent studies have found that whilst studying at a world-class institution is considered highly important, potential opportunities to pursue an international career also figure prominently in international students' motivations for studying in the UK. This is evidenced by a significant proportion of these students indicating their plans to move to a third country as well as their desired place(s) of residence after the completion of their studies (Findlay et al., 2017; Packwood et al., 2015). Nonetheless, there is a dearth of research that explores the way in which an international career is envisaged by internationally mobile students. Courtois's (2018c) study of Irish students returning from an exchange programme overseas is the exception that attempts to define it from the students' perspectives. She has noted that for her research participants, an international career equals 'a European career', that is, working in European countries close to their home country and ideally the European Commission (p. 15). Given the potential differences between student nationalities in conceptualising an international career, I argue that

there is clearly a need to look into how this notion is understood and experienced by non-EU international students.

Conclusion

Central to the themes and issues reviewed in this chapter is the question of the taken-for-granted relationship between the pursuit of an international education and its outcomes in terms of 'positional advantage' and status reproduction. In the context of the growing un/under-employment of university graduates worldwide, how those undertaking a UK higher education degree make sense of their place within expanding global higher education field and the positional possibilities that come with studying in the UK merits more attention. In particular, nuanced pictures of international student mobility are better understood in relation to who goes where and who studies what within UK higher education. Related to this is the question of the roles individual institutions play in shaping students' aspirations and transitions post-graduation. Just as the relative position of university in the global higher education field and other institutional features are found to inform the choice of university, so too can they serve to frame the future aspirations and trajectories of students. Another question concerns the ways in which an international career, often perceived as one of the outcomes of international study, is envisioned and actualised by international students. Depending on their interpretations and experiences, an international career can be a viable, imaginable option for some but not others. The following chapter lays out the concepts of field, habitus and capital in greater detail, which serve as important theoretical points of departure for understanding my research findings.

Chapter 3 Putting a Bourdieusian perspective into practice

Regarding the issue of international student mobility (ISM), scholars propose various theoretical frameworks to analyse the movement of international students across a range of scales. One of the assumptions frequently associated with student mobility is based on human capital theory that studying abroad is the result of rational decisions made by individual students who intend to maximise their returns on investment (Becker, 1980; Becker & Murphy, 2000). Governmentality or transnational perspectives shift the focus from an individual strategy to illuminate contextual factors, such as the influence of neoliberal states (Foucault, 1991, 2010; Rose, 1990) and the role of interpersonal or institutional networks across borders (Basch et al., 1994; Levitt & Schiller, 2006). The extant literature also adopt frameworks that are more concerned with the end goals and outcomes of mobility, whereby international student mobility is seen as a way to accumulate various forms of capital and, in so doing, outsmart others in global positional competitions (Brown, 1999, 2000) and (re)produces social advantage (Bourdieu, 1996b, 2010; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). More recently, there has been an attempt to theorise student mobility as 'freedom' (Lo, 2019), 'self-formation' (Marginson, 2014; 2018) or 'becoming' (Tran, 2016) by building on literature which links the accumulation of capital to non-positional goals and outcomes such as personal growth and adventure (Pyvis & Chapman, 2007; Waters et al., 2011).

In this thesis, the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is deployed as an overarching theoretical framework. Unlike the emphasis placed by many of the aforementioned frameworks on either agency or structure, this perspective enables various – for example, institutional and individual – levels of analysis by overcoming such dualism. In addition, Bourdieu's framework goes beyond the deliberate and rational personalisation of capital as suggested by Brown (1999, 2000) to include the more habitual and unconscious aspects of its accumulation and application. As demonstrated in existing empirical work (Collins et al., 2014, 2017; Findlay et al., 2017; Gomes, 2015; Soon, 2012), the way in which students embark on

international mobility is not entirely rationally calculated and neither does the decision to engage in onward mobility after the completion of studies always align with their initial plans (see Chapter 2). Furthermore, this theoretical approach has successfully incorporated, in a range of studies, the often neglected dimensions of age, gender, class and race/ethnicity and the intersectionality between these social characteristics (Ball, Davies, et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005). In doing so, this framework helps to tease out why certain students – and not others – succeed in maintaining or enhancing their competitive edge in global higher education and, subsequently, a global labour market. In the following sections, I will outline the explanatory potential and limitations of Bourdieu's key concepts of field, habitus and capital and demonstrate how they are utilised in my research.

3.1 Field

Field is defined as 'a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). According to Bourdieu (1990b), society consists of different and sometimes conflicting social fields or space characterised by their particular logics. Each field is structured in a hierarchy, whereby agents or institutions occupy dominant and subordinate positions depending on the amount of resources (i.e., capital) they possess in relation to others. Also, the field has a variable degree of autonomy, consisting of its own autonomous and heteronomous poles which represent competing principles of hierarchisation. An autonomous principle centres on the field's specific activities, whilst a heteronomous principle is subject to external pressures or influences and operate beyond the activities of field (Maton, 2005, p. 605). These principles of hierarchisation form the basis of struggles between agents who attempt to uphold or transform the established power relation for the purpose of enhancing their position. Another important feature is homology, that is, a 'resemblance within a difference', between social fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 106). Bourdieu has shown throughout his research that the patterns and practices within the field of cultural production, for example, bear similarities to other social fields such

as education (Bourdieu, 1996a, 1996b; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), television (Bourdieu, 1999a) and housing (Bourdieu, 2005) among others.

Bourdieu's concept of field has also been applied in research on higher education, which is often analysed at four distinct levels: 'the field of power, the broad field under consideration, the specific field, and agents in the field as a field in themselves' (Bourdieu, 2005; Thomson, 2008, p. 77). In the changing landscape of higher education within different national contexts, scholars have explored the extent to which the field of higher education maintains autonomy in relation to other fields of power (e.g., the economic and political fields) as well as the way in which institutions located in various positions in the field respond to those external pressures (Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004). The relative autonomy in the field of academic disciplines is also identified by Albert (2003) who contends in his study of two Canadian universities that the pressure to 'instrumentalise' knowledge is manifested differently in the fields of sociology and economics. The relationships of students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to the field of higher education (Bok, 2010; Reay et al., 2005, 2010) or individual institutions (Reay et al., 2009) are other frequent themes in the extant literature. Studies have looked at barriers to university access or access to learning faced by working-class and/or ethnic minority students in relation to the field of higher education in which middle-class norms and values are traditionally dominant (Ball, Davies, et al., 2002; Reay, 1998b; Reay et al., 2005, 2010). It is also suggested that these students are more likely to attend new, ethnically diverse universities where they feel more comfortable and 'fitting in' (Ball, Reay, et al., 2002).

In Bourdieusian terms, international education is shaped by the interplay of multiple fields, amongst which a government's policies on the internationalisation of education and skilled migration constitute important social fields that configure the practices of international education. As noted in Chapter 2, the significant growth – albeit with some temporary fluctuations – in the number of UK international students is assumed to be driven by the ensemble of international education (e.g., PMI, PMI2 and IES) and skilled migration policies (e.g., Tier 1 Post-Study Work visa). Highlighting the

relevance of the Bourdieusian polarity, Marginson (2008) has contended that the global higher education field is structured by an opposition between research-intensive universities (e.g., Harvard, Stanford, MIT and others in the US and Oxbridge in the UK) and institutions solely focusing on revenues and market share. There are a range of institutions in intermediate positions with a varying degree of emphasis on the research mission and/or cross-border revenues. As Bourdieu has also indicated, each field holds a certain level of autonomy, defined by its ability to reject external determinants and operate only according to its own specific logic, in relation to other fields. This is exemplified by the relatively lesser impacts of international education and skilled migration policies on elite institutions than on mass or subordinate institutions (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2002).

Despite the contributions of Bourdieu's notion of field to understanding international higher education, there are several limitations of previous studies which employ the concept including, inter alia, the issue of having too many fields and its applicability to contexts characterised by social change. As illustrated the higher education studies above, the analysis of field at different scales poses a problem of where to draw the boundaries of the education field, that is, how to discern where the effects of field end (Thomson, 2008). There is also a question of whether it is apposite to the present context where universities are no longer entirely independent of direct pressures from governments and markets. However, it is argued that the polarity of field remains relevant to explain the stratification of, and competitions between, higher education institutions across national systems (Kim, 2011; Marginson, 2008). Likewise, field can also refer to a transnational social field in which class dynamics take place, as is explored in migration research (Levitt & Schiller, 2006; Thatcher & Halvorsrud, 2018). Building on the extant literature, I will deploy Bourdieu's notion of field to investigate students' choices of UK higher education in the global field of higher education (see Chapter 4) and their experiences in the field of individual institutions (see Chapter 5). The notion will also be applied to the field of a home, host or third country where they obtain employment or plan to do so after graduation (see Chapter 6).

3.2 Habitus

Habitus is the different system of dispositions generated by particular social and economic conditions that shape the ways individuals perceive and act (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Instead of juxtaposing active subjects with objective structures, Bourdieu (1998) considered habitus as 'a socialised body', that is, a body which has incorporated the immanent structure of a world (p. 81). It is expressed through a range of activities, including eating, speaking and gesturing (Bourdieu, 2010). Another key feature of habitus is the interplay between past and present. Present circumstances are based on those from earlier socialisations and are therefore reflective of individual history. In other words, habitus as 'something historical' provides the basis of the structuring of subsequent experiences (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 86). Bourdieu also sees habitus as the compilation of individual and collective trajectories. Not only is it a product of an early period of an individual's life and especially socialisation within the family, but it is likely to be similar to those from the same positions in the social structure (Bourdieu, 2010). The notion of habitus is also helpful in highlighting the tension between structure and agency (Bourdieu, 1990a). Whilst habitus predisposes the individual towards a certain practice, it also allows for individual agency. Its ability to hold structure and agency in tension therefore opens up the possibility that the individual is able to draw on both constraining and transformative courses of action (Reay, 2004).

Habitus comes into view through its relation with Bourdieu's notion of field. Central to Bourdieu's accounts of a wide range of social fields of practice is the relationship between field and habitus. For instance, when habitus 'encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). However, the problem often arises when habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, generating – albeit a potential for change and transformation – ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty (Reay, 2005). The habitus–field disjuncture often results in

what Bourdieu (1999b, p. 511) has described as 'a habitus divided against itself' or a 'cleft habitus'. The (mis)match between habitus and field is well documented in existing research in higher education. The literature has often shed light on the way in which social characteristics of students, and the intersection of those features, influence choices, experiences and identities in relation to the field of higher education or individual institution (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Reay, 1998b; Reay et al., 2005, 2009). This line of argument can be extended to international students who move across borders to study. As new – albeit to a different degree – entrants to the global field of higher education, their experiences of choice-making and being at/belonging in university are also found to be fragmented (Taylor & Scurry, 2011).

Notwithstanding the traditional focus of habitus on individuals, a small number of studies have drawn on the concept of institutional habitus to develop a collective understanding of habitus. These studies have discussed how the shared practices of schools and colleges have a significant impact on students' aspirations for, and choices of, higher education (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Ingram, 2009; McDonough, 1997, 1998; Reay, 1998b; Reay, David, et al., 2001). As scholars like Reay (1998b) have argued, its collective nature also makes institutional habitus less fluid and open to change than individual habitus. However, researchers have cautioned against using this notion to suggest that all the individuals within the same institution share an identical habitus. Institutional habitus assumes variations across individuals, as it is shaped by both collective and individual practices of its members (Burke et al., 2013). It is also suggested that institutional habitus attends to 'the ways in which social power, acting through educational institutions, interacts with student habitus and generates differential educational experiences and outcomes' (byrd, 2019, p. 172). Its conceptual utility and theoretical coherence therefore lie in illuminating the *active* socio-cultural effect of educational institutions on the habitus and practices of individuals within them, while drawing attention to the potential congruence or dissonance between individual and institutional habitus.

Overall, the idea of habitus is useful for capturing 'the complex interplay of not simply the individual in their socio-cultural location, not simply of habitus

and field, but of the collective and interrelated practices of *multiple individuals* within a particular field' (Burke et al., 2013, p. 166; emphasis in original). However, it has been underlined that habitus is often perceived as equivalent to social backgrounds or socialisation without due attention to its relations with field(s) in generating social practices (Bourdieu, 2017). There has also been a similar tendency to assign institutional habitus to a specific area – for example, college/university choices – of an educational institution, as evidenced by existing empirical work (McDonough, 1997, 1998; Reay, 1998b; Reay, David, et al., 2001). In order to advance understanding and application of the notion(s), I will explore the dynamic quality of habitus and its relations with multiple fields in terms of students' higher education choices (see Chapter 4) as well as their imaginings and experiences of an international career (see Chapter 6). Furthermore, the notion of 'institutional habitus' will be introduced to enable socio-analysis at the meso level and identify specific effects from attending a particular higher education institution on post-study aspirations and trajectories (see Chapter 5). Its focus will thus go beyond looking at the choice process of higher education to the ways in which students imagine and experience the field of possibilities after the completion of their studies in the UK.

3.3 Forms of capital

For Bourdieu (2010), capital refers to assets and resources, which indicate agents' positions in social space and directs, alongside habitus, the *field of the possibles* (p. 104; emphasis in original). It can take different forms beyond the narrow sense of the term 'capital' – that is, forms of not only economic but also social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Economic capital relates to material and financial assets, with social capital indicating actual or virtual resources accruing from 'a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). Unlike the other two types of capital, cultural capital exists in three states: in the *embodied* state (e.g., a set of acquired and socialised bodily and mental dispositions); in the *objectified* state (e.g., books and

artworks); and in the *institutionalised* state (e.g., educational qualifications) (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 17; emphasis in original). Added to the three variants of capital is symbolic capital, which is the form that any of this capital assumes when it is (mis)recognised as legitimate and powerful in a given context. As a social field is structured by the unequal distribution of the various forms of capital, the position of individuals is plotted by the overall volume, composition, and trajectory (i.e., change over time) of capital. Mapping social space also allows the possibility of locating a cluster of individuals who share similar levels of capital and attitudes and thereby identifying the differences between and within the group(s) (Bourdieu, 2010).

The distinctiveness of Bourdieu's notion of capital lies in its transposability or exchangeability within social space. Bourdieu (1986) has claimed that the different forms of capital can be seen as transubstantiated forms of economic capital (p. 24). For instance, economic capital is the precondition for the accumulation of social and cultural capital within the family. He has gone on to suggest that the conversion of one form of capital into another depends on the amount of time devoted to the accumulation of capital as well as the field in question within which its value is mutually recognised. In other words, social or cultural capital is acquired within the family on the basis of not only its quantity but also the time free from economic necessity and available to foster it (ibid., p. 19). Also, these different forms of capital developed within the sphere of family are either positively or negatively sanctioned within and across various social fields. Researchers have shed light on the valuing and devaluing of certain capitals in the field of education and, subsequently, job market, emphasising how the education system is used by the dominant class as an instrument of social reproduction capable of masking its own function to reproduce their social advantage (Bourdieu, 1996b; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Skeggs, 1997). The transferability of different types of capital is therefore closely associated with strategies aimed at ensuring the reproduction of capital and the position occupied in the social field(s) (Bourdieu, 2010).

The forms of capital have been employed by many scholars to analyse different positions of individuals or institutions and their position-taking

strategies in the field of higher education. What previous research on international students collectively highlights is *cultural capital* accumulation strategies of middle-class students and their families through their pursuits of international higher education at a time of increased participation in local higher education (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Waters, 2006) (see Chapter 2). Similarly, traditionally elite institutions in both national and global fields, prevailing not just *status-wise* but also *economically*, tend to navigate through the new field structures from a more advantaged position (Boliver, 2015; Cronin, 2016; Marginson, 2008). This is evidenced by the persistence of entrenched hierarchies between 'Upper Tier' and 'Lower Tier' institutions in the UK despite the introduction of an 'impact' (i.e., non-academic) agenda that can potentially alter the dynamics of field governed by academic criteria (Papatsiba & Cohen, 2019). This brings us back to Bourdieu's (1999b) point that those already well equipped with economic and symbolic capital – whether they are individuals or institutions – tend to achieve more dominant positions within the new field structures.

Nonetheless, one of the criticisms of existing research adopting Bourdieu's notion of capital is that its role in explaining social practices is relatively sidelined by habitus (Burke, 2018). As Reay (2004) points out, there is an increasing tendency for habitus to be habitually deployed in existing empirical work. However, the importance of capital in both charting individuals' positions in social space and directing certain actions with habitus needs to be underscored in order to provide an accurate and relational picture of students' positions and account for the change in their trajectories (Burke, 2018). This is particularly important, given the increasingly diversified social backgrounds of mobile international students in the stratification of higher education system worldwide (Marginson, 2016). In this thesis, I will demonstrate the way in which students' choices of higher education in the UK are grounded in their pre-existing stocks of economic, social and cultural capital (Chapter 5). The extent to which students accumulate or reproduce various forms of capital will also be examined through identifying strategies of individuals and institutions (Chapter 6). Lastly, I will elucidate the way in which capital plays a part in shaping how students imagine and practise an

international career after the completion of their studies in the UK (Chapter 7). This will thus enable the examination of *intra*-group differences – that is, variations amongst mobile international students as well as the UK universities.

Conclusion

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework for my research based on Bourdieu's notions of field, habitus and capital. Although much of Bourdieu's empirical research was bounded in a national context, his theoretical framework can assist our understanding of the uneven geographies of international student mobility to and from the UK. Field is understood in this study as a site of struggle on a global scale in which individuals or institutions compete against one another. The position within social space, partly determined by the levels and types of different forms of capital, affects not only objective life chances but also levels of aspirations before, during and after international study. As 'systems of durable, transposable *disposition'* (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72), habitus influences alongside capital individuals' or institutions' strategies to maintain or reproduce their positions within and across social space. What Bourdieu has attempted to highlight in his logic of practice is the interpenetrative relationships between these concepts, as illustrated in the following schematic form: '[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 95). That is, habitus and capital interact with each other within a dynamic context, engendering practice. In line with Bourdieu's theory of practice, I will demonstrate in my thesis how these conceptual tools are brought together in a relational framework.

Also, this study will give equal attention to both transformative and reproductive aspects of Bourdieu's framework. Bourdieu's theory of practice is often charged with structuralist determinism in which there is an immediate complicity between positions and dispositions (Alexander, 1995; Jenkins, 1992). The main thrust of research drawing on this theoretical perspective in the area of ISM reifies this criticism. It highlights how international education

is appropriated by middle-class students and their families to (re)produce their positional advantage across national boundaries and thus contributes to existing social inequalities (Brooks & Waters, 2011; King et al., 2010, 2011; Waters, 2006; Xiang & Shen, 2009). However, this interpretation undermines the possibility of Bourdieu's work in elucidating transformative courses of actions. Given that HEIs are themselves endowed with different levels of symbolic and economic capital, they may enhance initial resources students used to have and in so doing expand the range of options that they could envisage or realise after graduation (see Chapter 6). Moreover, transnational student mobility can provide students with conditions for change including 'reflexivity', as they encounter new, unfamiliar fields and potentially experience a mismatch between habitus and field (Yang, 2014) (see Chapter 7). With this in mind, the following chapter outlines my methodology and research design to provide context for understanding my research findings.

Chapter 4 Methodology

In this chapter, I discuss the qualitative methodology adopted for this study and the associated research design and methods. Three case universities located in two different cities in England, that is, Oxford and London, were selected to provide a more nuanced picture of non-EU international student mobility to and from UK higher education. Each case study involved a range of participants including international students as well as career staff. The student participants were mainly from the top non-EU sending countries and were, at the time of the interview, enrolled in or had recently (i.e., within 5 years) completed full-time Masters or PhD degrees in the fields of Social Sciences (SS)[9] or Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Semi-structured interviews were employed either face-to-face or via Skype as a principal method. Alongside the rationales for research design and methods, this chapter describes the way in which interview data were collected, transcribed and analysed. I especially highlight challenges that I met along the way when it came to recruiting graduated students and career staff from the three case universities. Ethics related to online interviewing are also outlined, which are different from those for traditional, face-to-face interviews. Other issues including positionality, bias and reflexivity are considered in the following section.

4.1 Methodological approach

As explained in greater detail in Chapter 2, there is little empirical work addressing the significance of individual *as well as* institutional characteristics in transnational student mobility. This study aims to explore this empirical gap by attending to how the meanings of ISM – linking initial

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[9] Social Sciences cover here a wide range of disciplines such as demography and social statistics, methods and computing; development studies, human geography and environmental planning; economics, management and business studies; education, social anthropology, and linguistics; law, economic and social history; politics and international relations; psychology and sociology; social policy and social work (see https://esrc.ukri.org/about-us/what-is-social-science/social-science-disciplines/).

motivations for studying overseas to expectations of later mobilities – diverge according to the characteristics of not only individual students but also different HEIs. This points to the ontological assumption underlying this study, i.e., the philosophical stance on the nature of social reality, which is grounded on relativism. I concur with Snape and Spencer (2013) that 'there is no single shared social reality, [but] only a series of alternative social constructions' (p. 16), placing more emphasis on the diversity of interpretations of reality. Accordingly, my epistemological position, i.e., the belief on the nature of knowledge, is guided by interpretivism. I believe that the knowledge of actions can be obtained from 'specific, situated meanings and meaning-making practices of actors [both the researched and the researcher] in a given context' (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013, p. 1). Emphasis is therefore given to participants', as well as the researcher's, representations, which are likely to yield different types of understanding on the issues being explored.

Following this, it is necessary to revisit my research questions introduced in Chapter 1. As indicated below, these questions revolve around the three aspects of ISM:

- Why and how do international students make higher education choices in the UK?
- To what extent, and in what ways, do UK higher education institutions play a part in shaping international students' post-study aspirations and transitions?
- How is an international career imagined and actualised by international students in the UK?

I argue that the above research questions can be answered through qualitative case studies, whereby semi-structured interviews are used as a main source of evidence to generate the perspectives of research participants. A qualitative methodology is best suited to this line of inquiry, as it brings the significance of contexts to the fore by 'celebrat[ing] richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity' (Mason, 2002, p. 1). The investigation of 'a contemporary phenomenon – the case – in

depth and within its real-world context' is thus essential (Yin, 2018, p. 15), justifying a case study approach for this study. I decided to focus on multiple cases rather than a single case because of the highly stratified nature of the UK higher education system, as I have explained in Chapter 4. The evidence from multiple cases is also considered, in general, to be more compelling and robust than a single-case study (Yin, 2014, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were employed to investigate the perspectives of current and graduated international students, which were the subunits of analysis for each individual case study. Since the units of data collection were individual HEIs, I additionally conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with career staff. Where their views were not available[10], other publicly available information on the respective institutional websites was used to complement them.

4.2 Selection of research sites and populations

This study examines the experiences of non-EU international students who were pursuing or have completed postgraduate degree(s) in the fields of SS and STEM disciplines from three universities in England: University of Oxford, University College London, and Oxford Brookes University. As will be explained below, the choice of study sites and populations was intended to be heterogeneous, rather than statistically representative, in order to reflect a variety of individual perspectives and experiences.

Research sites

In her research on the status differentiation of universities in the UK, Boliver (2015) demonstrates that there are four statistically distinctive clusters of higher and lower status HEIs. Building on her cluster analysis as 'a sampling frame' (Mason, 2017, p. 77), I first screened the candidate cases for my

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[10] As will be explained later in the chapter, interviews with career staff from Brookes were not available. Due to the use of institutional names, only those interview quotes approved by career staff were included in this thesis.

research. I initially aimed to include one institution per cluster; however, due to the time and resource constraints, I narrowed down the scope of my research to the first three clusters. The following criteria were additionally taken into consideration to compare student responses according to various institutional positions in both global and national field of higher education: size, diverse student body and international reputation. The criteria for size are based here on the total number of full-time equivalent degree-seeking students. By diversity, institutions with the higher proportion of international students or the top recruiters of international students were selected. Given the frequent use of university league tables by international students, Times Higher Education (THE) UK University rankings 2018 were used to elucidate the perceived reputations of institutions. Given that this research was not externally funded, insider information and easier access were considered equally important in the selection of study sites. Subsequently, the following three institutions were chosen for this study: Oxford (i.e., cluster 1), UCL (i.e., cluster 2), and Brookes (i.e., cluster 3).

The University of Oxford is often placed at the top of British and world university rankings[11]. As a member of the Russell Group of Universities (i.e., the old, pre-1992 universities, consisting of 24 prestigious, research-intensive universities in the UK), Oxford is renowned for its world-leading research within and beyond the UK. However, Oxford and Cambridge are differentiated from other old, pre-1992 universities in the UK, distinctively forming an elite tier as the UK's two oldest universities (Boliver, 2015; Brooks & Waters, 2009). Oxford University is situated at the heart of Oxfordshire, and its accommodations, colleges[12], departments, and other facilities (e.g., museums, theatres, parks) are scattered throughout the city centre. Oxford has a distinctive collegiate structure[13] where students and academics belong

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[11] Oxford University was ranked first in the world in the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings from 2017 to 2020 (see https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-oxford).

[12] There are 38 colleges and six permanent private halls, all of which function as a small, interdisciplinary academic community and, albeit financially independent and self-governing, relate to the central University.

[13] About/ Organisation (see https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation?wssl=1#)

both to the University and to a college or hall. The university is considered medium in terms of size relative to the other case universities, with about 25,390 students enrolled in Oxford in 2018/19. The proportion of undergraduates is nearly equivalent to that of postgraduates, both making up 49 per cent[14], respectively, of the total student population. 20 per cent of undergraduates and 64 per cent of postgraduates are from outside the UK. According to the university statistics, the majority of academic staff and students are white, accounting for 75.9 percent and 77.9 percent of the total staff and student population, respectively (University of Oxford, 2020).

Figure 4.1 Oxford University (Source: Oxford University website[15])

Founded in 1826, UCL is also a Russell Group university with a strong international reputation[16], while maintaining its strong position nationally as one of the top five British universities[17]. UCL consists of 11 faculties[18], offering 440 undergraduate programmes and 675 postgraduate programmes.

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[14] Facts and figures/ Student numbers (see https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/facts-and-figures/student-numbers?wssl=1)

[15] Oxford University (see https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation)

[16] THE World University Rankings (see https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/ucl).

[17] Best Universities in the UK 2020 (see https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/best-universities-uk/)

[18] This includes Arts & Humanities; Barlett (Built Environment); Brain Sciences; Engineering Sciences; Institute of Education; Laws; Life Sciences; Mathematical & Physical Sciences; Medical Sciences; Population Health Sciences; and Social & Historical Sciences. (see https://www.ucl.ac.uk/about/how-ucl-works/ucl-faculties).

Its main campus is in the central London area of Bloomsbury, surrounded by leading organizations and iconic institutes such as the British Library and the British Museum[19]. Its new campus in Stratford, East London, i.e., UCL East, is expected to have 180,000 m^2 of space – 40 per cent of the size of its central Bloomsbury campus – when it completed, allowing the university to accommodate up to 60,000 students[20] in both campuses. There are more than 41,000 students – the largest in size (aside from Open University) – in 2018/19 (HESA, 2020). UCL is also the largest higher education providers of international students in 2017/18 (UKCISA, 2019). The proportion of international (i.e., non-UK) students (53%) to the total student population is almost equivalent to that of UK-domiciled students (47%)[21]. Unlike Oxford, the proportion of BME students (29% of UK-domiciled students and 62% of non-UK domiciled students) is significantly higher than white counterparts[22]. Notwithstanding, only 11 per cent of academic staff are from a BME background (UCL, 2020).

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[19] UCL Campus Maps (see https://www.ucl.ac.uk/maps/downloads/).
[20] UCL floats plan to expand to 60,000 students (see https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/university-college-london-ucl-floats-plan-to-expand-to-sixty-thousand-students/).
[21] UCL Key statistics (see https://www.ucl.ac.uk/about/what/key-statistics)
[22] UCL Student Statistics (see https://www.ucl.ac.uk/srs/student-statistics)

Figure 4.2 UCL Campus (Source: UCL website[23])

Established in 1865 as Oxford Polytechnic, Oxford Brookes University is a post-1992 institution, one of the former 34 polytechnics which gained full university status in 1992. With a relatively less distinguished brand name and traditional reputation[24], the university tends to feature in its marketing materials '[its] contemporary relevance, [its] flexibility and [its] ability to offer an experience akin to educational tourism… [with the emphasis on] their place of location' (Sidhu, 2006, pp. 163–164). It has four main campuses[25], and the Headington campus – the biggest of its three Oxford campuses – is only 1.2 mile (1.93 km) away from University of Oxford. The university

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[23] UCL Campus (see https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2020/mar/statement-ucl-ceases-all-face-face-teaching-immediate-effect)

[24] Oxford Brookes University was ranked within the ranges of 501-600 and 601-800 in the world in the THE World University Rankings for 2019 and 2020, respectively (see https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2020/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats).

[25] Three of its campus (i.e., Headington Campus, Harcourt Hill Campus, and Wheatley Campus) are located around the city, and one campus is in Swindon. The university provides the BROOKES bus service to facilitate connections between its Oxford campuses and to the city centre (see https://www.brookes.ac.uk/studying-at-brookes/living/our-campuses/).

consists of four faculties[26] and 16 departments. There are approximately 16,600 students[27], with the majority of them (76.88%) studying at the undergraduate level. Similar to other newer British universities, postgraduates take up only 13.5% of the total student body (HESA, 2020). 82 per cent of students are UK-domiciled, and 18 per cent are those from the EU or overseas. Whilst its staff data are not publicly available, Brookes was ranked in one of the most culturally diverse institutions in the UK in terms of the staff and student body (Oxford Brookes University, 2016). The university plays a significant role in global market as one of the largest TNE providers in the UK together with the Open University and University of London International (UUKi, 2018). This may have implications for having less students studying physically in the UK than those pursuing UK education in their home country.

Figure 4.3 Oxford Brookes University Headington Campus (Source: Brookes website[28])

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[26] They are Business School, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Technology, Design and Environment (see https://www.brookes.ac.uk/about-brookes/structure-and-governance/faculties-and-departments/)

[27] Brookes at a glance/ our students (see https://www.brookes.ac.uk/about-brookes/at-a-glance/our-students/)

[28] Brookes Headington campus (see https://www.brookes.ac.uk/about-brookes/contacts-maps-and-campuses/headington-campus/)

Study population

The study population was restricted to non-EU postgraduate international students. Those from EU countries were not be taken into account for this study as they were different from other non-EU international students in access to employment, working conditions and all other social and tax advantages (e.g., tuition fees, loans, grants, visas), although whether these rights are to be continued post-Brexit has been called into question (Europäische Kommission & Generaldirektion Justiz, 2013; Martel, 2017; Reidy, 2017). The majority of the participants were from the top ten non-EU sending countries, identified from the 2016/17 Higher Education Statistics Agency international student statistics (HESA) (See Table 4.1). Around a third of the participants originated from China, and those from India accounted for the second largest group after the Chinese participants. The rest of the countries was more or less equally distributed as shown in the table below. While the priority was given to those from the top ten non-EU sending countries, ten interviewees from outside of these countries were included in the sample because of the ways in which the interview participants were recruited (elaborated in the following).

Table 4.1 The country (region) of origin of student interview participants

China (PRC)	12
Malaysia	2
USA	5
India	9
Hong Kong	5
Nigeria	2
Saudi Arabia	1
Singapore	4
Thailand	2
Canada	3

Other[29]	10
Total	55

Important to highlight here is the diversity of race/ethnicity of the participants with the same nationality. For instance, two Malaysian participants represented different ethnicities (one was *bumiputera* and the other *non-bumiputera*) which reflected the composition of ethnicity in Malaysian society. As briefly discussed in Chapter 2, the former term is generally associated with indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia, and the latter referred to a person with immigrant background and having less cultural affinities to the region such as Chinese and Indian (Hwang, 2003). Similarly, the race/ethnicity of the American participants was not homogenous; some of them had Asian and African origins, with others being white. Those from India also consisted of different ethnic groups and came from various parts of India: Mumbai (West); Bhubaneswar and Kokata (East); Bangalore and Kochi (South); New Delhi and Delhi (North). One Canadian graduated student identified herself as Asian Canadian. Two participants from New Zealand were ethnically Asian. However, two Nigerian interviewees belonged to the same ethnic group Yorùbá, and both of them were from the relatively affluent part of western Africa. The ethnicity of all Singaporean participants in my sample was Chinese which reflects the majority ethnic group in Singapore.

Postgraduate students who were, at the time of interviews, enrolled in or who had already graduated from full-time[30] SS and STEM programmes at the above universities were chosen for the research. The following three rationales led me to focus on this group of international students as the subunits of this study. Firstly, the proportion of international students is

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[29] Others include those from New Zealand ($n = 2$), Japan ($n = 2$), Kenya ($n = 1$), Ghana ($n = 1$), Indonesia ($n = 1$), Vietnam ($n = 1$), Chile ($n = 1$), and Taiwan ($n = 1$).
[30] There is one participant from UCL who started her full-time PhD and then changed it to part-time.

higher at the Master's and doctoral levels in the UK and elsewhere (HESA, 2016; OECD, 2016, 2017; UUK, 2017a). Also, graduation from overseas postgraduate degree programmes can be seen as a key transitional moment of career and life stage. The massification of higher education worldwide means an undergraduate degree is no longer perceived by many students as sufficient and needs to be complemented by further study after graduation (Brooks & Everett, 2009). Moreover, SS subjects have become increasingly popular amongst international students, which provided a basis for examining student experiences in those disciplines together with those in STEM subjects. It was only the latter programmes that have thus far received much attention in policy and academic discourses as the main targets of skilled migration policies (Geddie, 2013; Gesing & Glass, 2019; Lomer, 2017).

In addition to current students (i.e., those who were studying at the time of interviews), I included graduated students (i.e., those who already have completed their degrees) in order to uncover various transition experiences upon graduation. I recruited mainly those who recently graduated (i.e., graduated within five years before the interview). The time frame of maximum five years after graduation allowed the participants to reflect on and recall their occupational pathways and progression with more accuracy than those who completed their studies many years ago. For example, half of the graduated interviewees had one to three years of working experiences, followed by those working for less than one year (6) and for three to five years (5). Only one person had worked for more than five years since graduation. Moreover, I interviewed three different groups of graduated participants: individuals working in their country of origin (10), those working in the UK (6), and those engaging onward mobility for work to a third country or across many countries (8). This not only enabled the comparison of life chance experiences of graduated participants against aspirations held by those currently studying in the three case universities (15 indicated their return home and 16 planned on working in the UK or a third country). This was also useful to examine the transferability of cultural capital obtained through the UK higher education on a global scale.

Table 4.2 summarises some of the main characteristics of the interview sample. Across the whole sample, there was a more or less equivalent split between the sites (20 at Oxford, 18 at UCL, and 17 at Brookes) and the disciplines of study (33 in SS and 22 in STEM subjects). Thirty-one individuals were female and 24 were male; twenty-four were graduated students and 31 were currently enrolled in one of the three case universities. Out of 31 current students, there were 16 Masters and 15 PhDs. Those from China – combining participants from both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Hong Kong – constituted approximately a third of the student interviewees and, together with Indian participants, accounted for almost the half of the student participants. The two major nationalities in my sample also aligned with the 2017/18 HESA statistics[31] featuring them as the top two non-EU sending countries, followed by the USA (5). The other largest group of participants were from the rest of the top ten countries, including those from Singapore (4), Canada (3) and Thailand (2).

Table 4.2 Characteristics of student interview participants

	Gender	Study/graduation status	Enrolled degree	Discipline of study	Nationality
Oxford (20)	Female (11) Male (9)	Graduate (12) Students (8)	PhDs (9) Masters (11)	SS (13) STEM (7)	China (7) India (7) Other (6)
UCL (18)	Female (11) Male (7)	Graduates (6) Students (12)	PhDs (10) Masters (8)	SS (7) STEM (11)	China (8) India (1) Other (9)
Brookes (17)	Female (9) Male (8)	Graduates (6) Students (11)	PhDs (4) Masters (13)	SS (11) STEM (6)	China (2) India (1) Other (14)
Total (55)	Female (31) Male (24)	Graduates (24) Students (31)	PhDs (23) Masters (32)	SS (33) STEM (22)	China (17) India (9) Other (29)

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[31] HESA Figure 11 – Top ten non-European Union countries of domicile in 2017/18 for HE student enrolments 2013/14 and 2017/18 (see https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from)

Whilst the proportions of female participants were generally higher than male all across the case universities, a closer look at participant statistics revealed some fine-grained differences at institutional level. At Oxford, the interview sample consisted of eight current students and 12 graduated counterparts. Out of the total Oxford participants, nine held a DPhil (i.e., the Oxford equivalent of a PhD at other universities in the UK) and 11 graduated from or were enrolled in Master's programmes. Those from SS disciplines (13) accounted for the majority of Oxford participants, with fewer than half of Oxford participants (7) pursuing degrees in STEM subjects. STEM students were much more predominant amongst UCL participants relative to the other two case institutions. Also, there was a significantly lower number of respondents at Brookes holding (1), or were studying (3) for, a PhD relative to those in Master's programmes. At both UCL and Brookes, the number of current students was almost double that of graduated interviewees. As will be discussed shortly in the following section (see below section 4.5), the characteristics of student interview participants in part reflected my institutional (i.e., a Masters at Oxford, a PhD at UCL) and disciplinary (i.e., Social Sciences) background.

Given that class categorisation varies by different national contexts (see, for example, Goodman, 2014), the students were not selected on the grounds of their socio-economic status. In the UK context, social class is usually measured in both official statistics and academic research by the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), a measurement of class based on occupational categories (ONS, 2016). Within educational research, students' social class has also been defined according to parents' level of education alongside their occupations (see, for example, Reay et al., 2005). Similar efforts have been made – albeit sparsely – in literature on transnational student mobility to delineate the inter- or intra-class differences of internationally mobile students (Waters & Brooks, 2010; Xiang & Shen, 2009; Xu, 2020). For example, parental education and income/wealth are often employed to determine the class or social position of South Korean international students (Kim, 2011; Kim, 2018), with its intersectionality with other social divisions such as race/ethnicity providing a more accurate

analysis of class in the context of Malaysia (Sin, 2016). It is therefore deemed more apposite to examine how class is lived and experienced by my research participants in everyday settings rather than using objective measures to categorise it.

Nevertheless, I accord with the arguments made by scholars like Findlay et al. (2006), Brooks and Waters (2011) and Beech (2015) that those coming from middle-class and relatively privileged backgrounds are most likely to pursue their education overseas. Indeed, the higher costs of living and studying in the UK than their home countries meant that most of my participants at least had access to various resources necessary for undertaking overseas education. However, notable differences amongst participants were identified during the interviews (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion). For example, the sources of funding were found to vary significantly, such as family, the home/UK government, university or company. There were a handful of respondents who were funded by a student loan from their home government or only partially funded by their universities. Also, a number of participants – especially, those from Brookes – indicated that they relied on part-time work to support their studying and/or living costs while in the UK. Moreover, participants had diverse institutional backgrounds before commencing their postgraduate studies in the UK, ranging from local to transnational and international higher education institutions. The cost of studying overseas is usually higher than transnational education, followed by domestic education provision (Knight & McNamara, 2017; Mok et al., 2018). This suggests the possibility for intra-class difference, with some having more modest backgrounds than others from more economically well-off families.

In order to identify the types of careers advice and support available at three case universities, interviews with career staff were conducted. I explicitly sought the views of those administering and delivering either career provisions to current and/or graduated international students or (international) career related events, although I was open to interviewing any of those working in a careers department in case I failed to recruit career staff who would meet the above criteria. The interviews with career staff

made it possible to compare what the career staff from the case institutions told me about their career provisions and what the current/graduated students themselves reported about their experiences. The data obtained from the interviews with both student and staff participants were triangulated with information publicly accessible on university websites to ensure that the case studies had reflected the participants' perspectives accurately. However, the latter information is rather supplementary to the main interview data and referenced wherever relevant throughout the chapters. This strategy was particularly helpful when interviewing career staff was not possible or the interviewees wished to remain anonymous.

4.3 Qualitative interviewing

I employed qualitative semi-structured interviewing as a main data collection method, which has been informed by my ontological and epistemological positions. As Yin (2018) has pointed out, interviews are one of the most important and common sources of case study evidence, since they help to provide 'explanations (i.e., the "hows" and "whys") of key events, as well as the insights reflecting participants' relativist perspectives' (p. 118). In addition, the open nature of semi-structured interviews allowed interviewees to talk about a subject within their own frames of reference, thereby providing a greater understanding of the subjects' points of view (May, 2011, p. 134). Consequently, my interview questions were constantly adapted and modified to the context of the particular interview. In fact, this flexibility also helped me to access a wide range of important information than initially anticipated. For example, it came to my attention during the interview process that higher education choices were closely associated with the ways in which my participants understood and engaged in an international career. This led me to reconfigure my original research questions, drawing more attention to the choice-making processes. Notwithstanding, interview guides (see Appendix A, a) were used to provide some direction and flow in the interviews. The interviews covered the following four broad topics:

- Background information including reasons for choosing to study in a particular university in the UK;
- Previous/current international study and/or work experiences;
- Future career and life mobility plans;
- Perceptions and experiences of an international career.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked to talk about their lives in relation to their previous mobility, international study experiences and/or current employment experiences. The objective of this was to open up the discussion and build a rapport with the interviewees by asking them to talk about their own lives rather than restricting the discussion to the topics related to the research questions. I then directed the focus on the key themes relevant to the research. This involved asking participants to reflect on their higher education choices, experiences while in the UK, and post-study aspirations and transitions. The ways in which the participants conceptualised an international career were also explored, together with the question of whether such a career was perceived by them as a viable and imaginable option. The demographic information of participants, such as gender, age, hometown, language spoken (including mother tongue), was collected separately after the interview.

Where face-to-face interviews were not feasible or convenient, Skype interviewing was conducted instead to accommodate the schedules and preferences of the participants. Skype allowed for conducting interviews with convenience in terms of time and location for both the researcher and the researched (Mason, 2017, p. 128). The interviews took place at a time of the respondents' preference, such as graduates working full-time and/or abroad and students in their final year, which would otherwise be difficult for the researcher to accommodate through a face-to-face interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014, pp. 608–609). Equally, the researcher did not have to impose themselves physically within the participant's personal space without making the interviewee encroached on their personal place (Hanna, 2012, p. 241). The predominant use of communication technology (e.g., social media, Skype, e-mail) amongst international students provided another rationale to

use Skype for this study. However, the disadvantage was the difficulty of building a rapport in ways that were easier in the offline face-to-face interviews.

4.4 Data collection, transcription and analysis

In the previous sections, I have explained the overall research design, the case selections, and the source of case study evidence. In what follows, I will elucidate practical issues that I encountered during the data collection process and some of the strategies I have deployed to overcome those problems. I will also discuss the approaches I have taken when transcribing and analysing data.

Data collection

Data collection took place in Oxford and London between February and May 2018. Participants were recruited first via my personal contacts (e.g., Oxford graduated students and UCL current students), then via the contacts of my interviewees. To illustrate, I asked the research participants at the end of interviews to introduce their friends in the same institution. In case I had interviewed too many students from certain disciplines or countries, I would specifically ask the interviewees to recommend someone from a different discipline or country. However, given that I had generally limited connections with graduated and current students across the case universities, I sought additional assistance from student unions, international student offices and career service departments in three universities to circulate my research advertisement and establish contact with potential interviewees. The latter strategy turned out to be not very effective. Only a handful of student participants and one career staff contacted through these methods agreed to take part in interviews. I anticipated, to a degree, such responses especially when this research was not supported by an external organisation and neither were monetary incentives offered in return for research participation.

While looking for alternative ways to recruit participants, I posted advertisements for my research on various Facebook student and alumni groups from the three universities. Those groups were easily identified, as they were societies organised by students usually from the same region (e.g., Asia-pacific, Africa) or country (e.g., China). I successfully built up initial key contacts from each institution through this social media platform. Although some of them did not meet the criteria as a research participant, they still helped to promote my research to their peers and alumni. About a quarter of the respondents were recruited through this method. I also tried recruiting potential participants (especially graduated students) through LinkedIn, yet only one graduated student from Brookes agreed to take part in the interview. The recruitment also took place by meeting international students at career events or seminars targeted to postgraduate students on and off campuses. Crucially, I made sure throughout the data collection that I sampled interviewees who were able to provide informative and diverse perspectives on my research questions. Sampling was continued until data were saturated i.e., no new or relevant data was emerging (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013).

In total, 55 interviews were conducted with both current and graduated students from three case universities. Interviews were scheduled through e-mail exchanges, and they were usually conducted at a time and place convenient to the participants. Given that I had to commute from London to Oxford to meet the participants from Oxford and Brookes, I tried to interview participants from these two institutions on the same day while accommodating the needs of my research participants. To minimize distractions and maintain the quality of interviews across the sample, interviews were carried out in quiet study spaces of the universities (for student participants) or offices (for career staff). These places were mostly booked in advance with the help of interviewees in the cases of Oxford and Brookes, while I managed to secure those spaces at UCL.

The interviews were conducted all in English and generally lasted on average an hour. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and occasionally my iPhone. While the overall interview was guided by broad

topic areas and questions, I also encouraged the participants to bring up any issues that they felt were important and interesting throughout the interview. Overly private or sensitive issues which would potentially cause any psychological stress or discomfort to my participants were not discussed. Moreover, I attempted to generate a consistent set of responses from interviewees by asking about the same topic in various ways and on different occasions, which would then function as a set of 'multiple' sources for data triangulation (Yin, 2018, p. 129). Although all the participants gave consent to record prior to the interviews, some of them felt uncomfortable about the presence of the recorder. In this case, I placed it in a position which was not visible and therefore less distracting to them. Recording facilitated the process of reviewing interactions with the participants and transcribing the interviews for data analysis.

Whilst I had originally intended to interview career staff from all three case universities, I was only able to conduct interviews with one member of career staff from Oxford and two from UCL. Whilst the purpose of the interviews was to tease out various institutional approaches to careers provision rather than make comparisons among the three universities, career staff from Brookes opted out of the interviews due to a concern about the university being compared with the other two research-intensive universities. Interviews with career staff covered topics (see Appendix A, b) such as the type and range of career services for current and graduated international students, the definition an international career, and their consultation experiences with international students. Despite the rich data collected from the interview with Oxford career staff, these interview data were not included in the final analysis of my thesis due to the issue of using the name of institution[32]. All the information I provided in relation to career provisions at Oxford was

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[32] The information sheet I initially provided for my research participants indicates that their institutional affiliations will not be included in any publication. However, as I found it necessary to use institutional names in order to contextualise the data (as discussed in greater detail below), I followed up with my research participants to ask for their permissions. Only information approved by my research participants were included in the final thesis.

therefore based on the publicly accessible information on the university's websites.

Transcription

The analysis began with transcriptions, followed by several rounds of reading, coding and interpreting. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by me as soon as I finished my data collection, and the transcriptions were completed in July 2018. I retained the colloquialism to maintain the voice of the participants, resulting in transcripts with traces of grammatical errors and choice of words and expressions that deviate from Standard English. After transcribing the full data, I began analysis initially with the excel sheets and later with the NVivo 12 software to be more efficient in the storing, analysis and reporting of data. The search function of the software was especially helpful to search and retrieve specific information without having to open multiple files on the laptop or manually going through papers to identify them. Also, it facilitated a systematic analysis of themes, issues and relationships across cases. In order to prevent the de-contextualisation of data, the interview transcripts and field notes were read several times – both vertically (i.e., within individual data) and horizontally (i.e., across the entire data set) – to familiarise myself with the context of each interview as well as capture predominant or important themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; see also Mason, 2017).

Data analysis

The overall analysis aimed to provide 'a cross-case synthesis', retaining the integrity of the entire case and then identifying any cross-case patterns (Yin, 2018, pp. 194–196). I initially probed each case study to build on explanation about each case and thereby discern any within-case patterns. This procedure inevitably entailed a recursive and reiterative process (see also Mason, 2017). For example, my initial analysis was informed by Bourdieu's

theoretical concepts, such as capital, habitus and field. I read the transcripts to look out for information which could be explained by, and relevant to, these concepts. Whilst imposing those analytical categories on the data was helpful to organise the data in the beginning, I found out that the data did not always fit neatly into these categories and neither did this approach remove bias in interpretation. I tried to be open to generating new concepts from the interviews as the analysis proceeded, with a focus on emerging themes, issues and patterns. It was only after making tentative conclusions about the respective case studies that I checked whether the within-case patterns were replicated literally or theoretically across the cases. Through a series of coding and re-coding as well as going back and forth between the literature related to my study and the interview data, I was able to refine the main categories which were later developed into larger themes for presentation of findings in the next few chapters of this thesis.

4.5 Positionality, bias and reflexivity

In this section, I will take a more reflexive stance to question my positionality and potential bias that may have incurred throughout the research process from research design to fieldwork and data analysis. In relation to this research, I consider my positionality to be an insider-outsider, that is, both an insider and outsider. My position can also be viewed as 'outsiders within' (Collins, 1986) or 'insiders without' (Ingram & Abrahams, 2018). Insider research refers to researchers studying populations of which they are members (Kanuha, 2000). Like my research participants, I came to the UK for a Master's degree at Oxford and then – after one and half years of work experience in Paris – returned to pursue my PhD at UCL. These backgrounds made me a member of communities with which I conducted research, but at the same time I did not share complete sameness within this cultural group. I was, and still am, an insider because of my status as a non-EU international student and graduate from UK universities. I am an outsider, because my studying experiences were limited to two universities in the UK; similarly, the study-to-work transition was mediated by my institutional

backgrounds and personal characteristics such as class, gender, race/ethnicity among others. I outline in this section how my positionality has informed my research design as well as data collection and analysis, together with some of the strategies that I employed to research 'at the hyphen of insider-outsider' (Kanuha, 2000, p. 443).

First, I was drawn to study non-EU international students in the UK because of my personal experiences of the UK higher education as a postgraduate student from South Korea. As a researcher, I wanted to know more about the experiences of others that are potentially similar to, or different from, mine. My insider status made it easier to access to, and recruit, research participants (see, for example, Gair, 2012). I also sought a theoretical and conceptual framework for elucidating what seemed to me taken-for-granted aspects of international student mobility, that is, the choice-making processes of higher education in the UK; the post-study aspiration formation and transitions; and the understandings of an international career. Furthermore, I wanted to make contributions to both knowledge and practice by making visible the diversifying experiences of non-EU students and ultimately improving the experiences and well-being of international students in the UK. Given that it is important to scrutinise and reflect upon the research object itself as well as conditions of its elaboration (Bourdieu, 2003), I was mindful of the influence of my own perspectives on the issues being explored and tried to be reflexive throughout the entire research process.

More specifically, I recognised that my previous studying and working experiences might have caused some bias in the assumptions. One of such presumptions was not only would those from the same institutions be likely to have similar experiences but those from highly ranked universities would also have a wider range of – if not better – opportunities across countries. I was nevertheless aware that my experience was limited in terms of institutional and disciplinary backgrounds as well as relatively smooth transitions to UK universities. I tried to mitigate these potential biases by diversifying the samples in terms of age, the level/stage of study and employment status and organisations among others. For instance, whilst the majority of participants

were in their 20s and 30s, there were a few participants (three in total) who belonged to the age group of 40s and 50s. Within the research student group, seven students were in their first year of study, with one and seven students in their second and third years at the time of interviews, respectively. The majority of the participants were employed, with a handful of graduated students considering themselves either self-employed (3) or unemployed (2). Likewise, there were variations in the type of organisations graduated participants were working for: inter-/non-governmental organisations (2), multinational corporations (6), government bodies/departments (1), universities[33] (6), and local business/research/educational organisations (7).

The challenges of conducting an insider-outsider research became evident when I began interviewing study participants and analysing the data that I collected from interviews. Being an insider facilitated the interview process through providing a level of trust and openness amongst my participants. Nevertheless, this sometimes impeded the research process by limiting my ability to probe information that I was already familiar with and analyse the interview data from a perspective other than mine (Gair, 2012). Equally, the fact that I was, and am, also a student at a UK university (i.e., Oxford, UCL) often led my study respondents to make implicit assumptions of similarity that I would understand what they were referring to. It was not difficult to spot shared laughter, specific terminology (e.g., formals, matriculations, Michaelmas) and unfinished phrases (e.g., 'you know what I mean') scattered around my interview transcripts. In order to minimise the presumptive, coded communication during interviews, I made conscious efforts to separate my own experiences from those of my research participants by asking participants to clarify or elaborate their points (Kanuha, 2000). I also decided to reveal my previous institutional background (i.e., Oxford) only after the interviews. These strategies were found to be helpful in

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[33] Those in universities includes participants who continue to study at the university after the completion of their studies in the UK.

eliciting richer descriptions of, and more critical stances towards, their experiences, which might otherwise have been missed out.

Whilst being an insider allowed a familiarity with the kind of experiences that participants had before, during and after their studies in the UK, my role as a researcher nevertheless did not qualify as complete insiders. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) have written:

> Perhaps, as researchers we can only ever occupy *the space between*. We may be closer to the insider position or closer to the outsider position, but because our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher (which includes having read much literature on the research topic), we cannot fully occupy one or the other of those positions (p. 61; emphasis added).

I concur with this view, arguing also that holding membership in a group is not necessarily sufficient to be able to comprehend the experience of those individuals in the group (see also Fay, 1996). Indeed, perhaps because of my personal biases and perspectives, there were moments of difficulty in understanding the ways in which participants negotiated their higher education choices, envisaged their transitions after graduation, and perceived an international career. Whether there were some common experiences with my participants (or, conversely, a lack thereof), I tried to listen intently to participants and seek an empathic understanding of them (Gair, 2012). This active listening not only led some participants to depict the interviews as 'a therapy session'. It also improved my ability to capture, perceive, and reproduce the lived experiences of my participants as closely as possible. Ultimately, I believed occupying a position within what seemed to be 'the third space' provided me with the vantage point of understanding the perspectives and experiences of non-EU international students in the UK in a more creative and insightful way, rather than being confined to either 'insider' or 'outsider' perspectives (Bhabha, 2004; see also Ingram & Abrahams, 2018).

4.6 Ethical considerations

There are a number of ethical considerations regarding research with human subjects, which relate to informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality (Eynon et al., 2008, p. 3). To make sure that these concerns were addressed, I referred to UCL Institute of Education (IOE) Research Ethics Committee guidelines[34] when developing my research design. The ethics application for this research was approved by UCL IOE before starting my fieldwork in February 2018, as evidenced in Appendix B. Participation in my research was *voluntary*, and no monetary incentives were given to participants. Those who became interested in the study, met through initial personal contacts, discussed the project with me through face-to-face meetings or e-mail exchanges. If they were willing to taking part in interviews, only then were they provided *an information sheet* (see Appendix C) off- or online outlining the information on the overall research project, as well as a consent form (see Appendix D, a) requiring their signature. Since it was not feasible to get written consent from those who opted for Skype interviewing, particularly in the case of graduated participants, the consent was gained virtually through an e-mail. Given the ease of withdrawal from skype interviews, it was specified in the conditions of the study to which participants gave consent that partial data could be used. The fully informed consent of research participants was obtained before commencing the interview.

In order to ensure *anonymity* and *confidentiality*, participants and the organisation(s) they were affiliated with (e.g., companies, organisations) at the time of the interviews were assigned pseudonyms to ensure that they would not be otherwise named or identified in the research. Participants were also assured that should they opt for full anonymity, no information about participants acquired from the research process would be revealed to any party nor included in any publication. However, when analysing and reporting data, revealing the name of the three case institutions was deemed essential for interpretation. This helped to contextualise the data more easily by

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[34] Due to the relocation of my primary supervisor, I transferred to the Department of Geography in September 2018.

conveying what the word 'Oxford' evoked to not only Oxford participants but also those from Brookes in terms of both place of study and academic prestige (see Chapter 6). Also, the disclosure of institutional names within the boundaries for protecting human subjects made the case studies transparent and hence generally more desirable in terms of interpreting the data and ensuring reliability (Yin, 2014, 2018). The participants were contacted again to ask for their permission to use this information (see Appendix D, b). Only information approved by the participants were included in the final thesis. All raw data were anonymised and saved securely in a password-protected file, and once anonymised they were separately stored from the raw material. Once the anonymous transcripts were all archived in my laptop, the audio/video recordings of interviews were destroyed and the relevant files removed accordingly.

Another important issue of consideration was the language and culture of participants, when they were being interviewed. Since all the interviews were conducted in English (which is unlikely to be the first language for the majority of the participants and the researcher), misinterpretations may arise. In order to avoid any potential misunderstandings, whether my interpretation of what the participant say is accurate was regularly checked throughout the interviews. Equally critical to this study was the issue of culture within which the understanding and interpretation of the researcher and the researched are grounded. Cross-cultural differences have been viewed as particularly significant in shaping career choices and aspirations (Baruch & Bozionelos, 2011; Bozionelos et al., 2015). I therefore kept myself sensitised to differences across cultures in terms of framing of discourses relating to their perceptions and experiences of an international career by inviting participants to share their mobility experiences before, while and/or after studying in the UK.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the approaches to methodology and methods used in the fieldwork for this study. I discussed the ontological and epistemological stances underlying the use of qualitative interviewing as the principal method for my research. The use of semi-structured interviews was well suited for investigating the subjective perspectives and/or specific practices of my research participants regarding higher education choices, post-study aspirations and transitions, and an international career. This chapter described the process of conducting field work where I travelled back and forth between London and Oxford for four months. I explain the strengths and shortcomings of my research design and method, followed by the review of my data collection and analysis. This chapter also included a reflection on my positionality in relation to this research and the strategies to diminish potential biases caused by my previous experiences as both current and graduated students from the UK universities. Ethical considerations related to qualitative interviews, and Skype interviewing in particular, were addressed. The next three chapters detail the research findings.

Chapter 5 Elite or middling? Motivations for, and choices of, UK higher education

In the context of mass higher education and overcrowded graduate markets worldwide, international higher education has catered to the needs of many middle-class families and students. Against this backdrop, it has long been recognised that mobile international students are generally young and well-resourced individuals already in possession of substantial economic, social and cultural capital (Brooks & Waters, 2009, 2011; Findlay & King, 2010; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Going abroad for education is therefore seen as a smooth and fairly seamless transition for these students. Also, the extant literature tends to describe students' motivations for international higher education as reproducing their individual advantage and social reproduction across borders through accumulating foreign cultural capital, as it is usually channelled into prestigious, high-paying jobs in their home country (Findlay et al., 2012; King & Sondhi, 2018; Waters, 2006). However, such narratives – while predominant in the literature – have painted a homogenized picture of mobile international students, without attending to the diverse backgrounds of these students that are increasingly characterising international higher education within and beyond the United Kingdom (Xu, 2020a; Yang, 2018). Moreover, much less is understood of how students from non-EU countries make their higher education choices within the UK.

I consider that Bourdieu's (1986, 1990b, 2010) concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and field provide a framework for a nuanced understanding of the higher education choice processes of international students. The notion of cultural capital, developed by Bourdieu (1986, p. 243) to explain the unequal academic achievement of children with different class backgrounds, has been expanded to educational research on local, as well as international, higher education choices (Archer et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2005; Waters, 2006). Building on these studies, I draw on the concept of cultural capital in a broader sense to illustrate how the various abilities of my research participants to deploy knowledge, skills and competences influences their choice-making. Also, the notion of habitus is introduced to examine whether

the participants' choices are bounded by the framework of opportunities and constraints that they find themselves in. This framework is often – but not always – inflected by their social characteristics such as class, age, gender and race/ethnicity. The field here mainly refers to the field of international higher education. Applying these concepts to this study therefore provides a more nuanced understanding of students' choices of UK higher education and, particularly, three case universities.

Through the perspectives of non-EU postgraduate students in three UK universities differently situated in the global as well as national field of higher education, I explore how participants negotiate their higher education choices and attempt to understand opportunities and constraints within this choice process. The main focus of analysis is their choices of the country (i.e., UK) and a particular university (i.e., Oxford, UCL, and Brookes). However, given that the choice of international higher education also involves other dimensions such as decision to study abroad, city, and academic programme (Pimpa, 2003b, 2005), these aspects are also addressed where relevant. In the following section, I firstly look at the extent to which participants' decisions to study in the UK are concerned with reproducing their social advantage transnationally and whether this perspective would suffice to understand their mobility decisions in the context of a rapidly changing and diversifying international student clientele. I then show that participants' experiences of choice-making are qualitatively different by the volume and/or trajectory of cultural capital. In addition, I demonstrate through the notion of habitus how this decision-making process is complicated further by their social characteristics such as class, age, gender and race/ethnicity.

5.1 Choosing overseas study: Beyond distinction

A great deal of work to date on international student mobility has thrown light on factors influencing students' decision to embark on overseas study. For example, scholars have identified infrastructure and availability of courses as one of the main motivating factors to pursue their education abroad (Guth &

Gill, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Although less salient in the extant literature, travelling and living abroad is also associated with creating new identities and experiences (Bagnoli, 2009; Desforges, 2000; see also Marginson, 2014; Tran, 2016; Waters et al., 2011; Waters & Brooks, 2010). The general tenor of previous studies, however, is that students tend to engage in the strategic and conscious pursuit of distinction through overseas study (Baláž & Williams, 2004; Li et al., 1996; King et al., 2010; Waters, 2006; Brooks & Waters, 2011). This is contrary to the findings of this study as the evidence uncovered the diversification in motivations and suggested that participants' decisions to undertake a postgraduate degree abroad and especially in the UK moved beyond a narrow economic calculus. The following section explores how positional or (self-)transformative motivations are closely interlinked in participants' motivations (cf. Pyvis & Chapman, 2007; see also Robertson et al., 2011).

Gaining competitive advantage

With the rise of mass higher education and associated overcrowding of graduates in the labour market across the world, having an undergraduate degree certificate no longer guarantees a ticket to superior employment in many countries (Collins, 1979; Tomlinson, 2008). In this context, the pursuit of postgraduate study, especially in prestigious institutions, is increasingly seen as a way of securing one's 'positional advantage' (Brooks & Everett, 2008; Brown et al., 2003, 2004). Moreover, as the number of people with international credentials is increasing in certain contexts such as China, overseas postgraduate and sometimes specialised qualifications are considered to be a must or vital supplement to advance individuals' career prospects and social status in their home country (Waters, 2009). Such views were widely held all across three institutions, although some differences by the country of origin were identified. Those from China and India tended to express more strongly the importance of employment prospects or returns to investment in education after the completion of their studies in the UK (see also Bhati & Anderson, 2012; King & Sondhi, 2018; Mok et al., 2018). This

sentiment was echoed by several participants, such as Felicity and Jennifer, as shown in the following:

> I think in China there are increasing amount of people applying to study abroad. And with only undergraduate bachelor degree in China, it's not very… [useful]. Um, you need to have, uh, oversea experience to enhance your chances in such a competitive environment. And I think it's just the oversea experience, the difference in education and the chances of, uh, securing a better job in the future [were] the main reason[s] why I applied abroad, yeah. (Felicity, Associate Lawyer, China, MSc Law, Oxford)

> I think, uh, maybe some experience abroad can help me to… [get a better position]. Well, if I can get a PhD here [and] when I back to China, I think maybe I could be more competitive compared with the one who did the PhD in China. There is [are] still few people [with PhD degrees] abroad, so it could make me more competitive. Yeah, I think they [companies] [tend to] pay more if you got a PhD abroad. Um, another factor is if I consider to stay in academia in China, if you want to go to a good university [for a job], you have to do the PhD abroad, not in China. (Jennifer, China, PhD Pharmacy, UCL)

Looking at these cases in more detail, however, different – and often conflicting – motivations were tangled in their narratives. For example, although Felicity got accepted to prestigious universities in the UK, the US and Hong Kong, she chose to study at Oxford because of its tutorial system and ranking. Although the tutorial system exists only at the undergraduate level, she associated having such system with a high quality education offered by the university in general. She believed the one-to-one interaction with professors would ensure deeper understanding of a subject, which other educational system based on lectures could not offer: 'The education is so special in Oxford, whereas there are mainly lectures in other UK universities or in US universities or Hong Kong universities. So the interaction with professors and the understanding [of a subject] is less deeper comparing to the study in [the] UK'. However, she described moments of difficulty when

choosing between Oxford and a handful of US universities that she received an offer:

> It's really difficult decision for me to choose between [the] US [universities] versus Oxford, cos studying in Oxford doesn't necessarily make[s] me qualified to take their exam to become a UK qualified lawyer. On the other hand, if I study in [the] US, I can take examinations and become a US qualified lawyer. […] And that's quite valuable I think in international law firms. […] But, overall, on the balance of all factors, I still [decided to] choose Oxford.

Even though Felicity understood the opportunity to sharpen her positional advantage even more through studying in the US institutions, her genuine interest in, and exposure to, a new education system was factored into her choice of Oxford. This is contrasted with Jennifer, for whom doing her PhD in the same university where she did her Masters was taken for granted, as it enabled her to achieve the goal of receiving her doctoral degree and gaining positional advantage relatively easily through the connections with her previous supervisor built up through the Master's study in UCL.

Transnational mobility aspirations

Waters, Brooks and Pimlott-Wilson's (2011) research on young British students seeking higher education overseas indicates that student mobility is increasingly linked to the student's lifestyle. They contend that UK students lack 'strategic' concerns about employment or the economic advantages that accrue from engaging in education abroad, which is often found in the motivations of students from non-Western countries. They go on to argue that British students' decision to undertake a degree programme overseas was characterised instead by the pursuit of 'excitement' and 'adventure' (see also Waters & Brooks, 2010). As the above section highlights, the strategic intent was evident in the narrative of some participants in my study. However, many of them similarly indicated that their decision to study in the

UK was shaped by their desire to experience new cultures, education and life in different countries. For example, the possibility of exploring different parts of the world was one of the factors that influenced Mia's decision to further her study in the UK:

> Someone asked me like that. Someone asked me, "Why don't you go back to university that you graduate?" So and [I said], "Why you have to go back to [the place where you are] familiar with all things? Why don't you just, like, have a new experience from other places and explore the world? Because it's different". You already know about Australia right? Same environment... it's a little bit boring. (Mia, Thailand, PhD Hospitality Management, Brookes)

Despite having the option of continuing her study in Australia where she did her Master's degree, Mia described that experiencing a new country and its education was more important to her. Also, she believed that the proximity of the UK to other European countries would make it easier to travel while studying. Again, this aspiration for transnational mobility was closely entangled with the need for personal development through her doctoral study: 'Because I want to be a [university] teacher. And in order to do that, you have to understand [my subject] deeper and that's why I have to do PhD'. Given that she planned on working in academia, the reputation of destination country for her doctoral degree and its recognition in the home country was nevertheless crucial for Mia. Likewise, Sabrina (Indonesia, MSc Finance, Brookes) indicated that the main reason for choosing a Master's programme in the UK was relatively low costs of traveling to nearby countries, such as those within Europe. Given that her study was fully funded by her employer, it was equally important to choose a place where she could improve her knowledge in her field, that is, merger and acquisition, which the UK is well known for. In both cases, the desire for traveling figured prominently alongside other motivations in their choice-making.

Personal development and growth

The interview transcripts were also scattered with references to a chance for personal growth and enrichment, which motivated participants to go abroad for their postgraduate study. However, there were some differences by institutions in the perspectives of participants, with those attending Oxford – who had relatively less pressure to secure prestigious jobs after graduation due to the institutional prestige and partly their social backgrounds – placing more emphasis on non-instrumental and (self-)transformative motivations such as personal development and social betterment (see also later discussion). This was the case of Amelia who went overseas for a Master's degree in Anthropology after completing her undergraduate study in India. She revealed that the subject choice for her first degree (i.e., Bachelor of Laws) was initially influenced by people around her and a social discourse that law is one of the subjects that guarantees good career prospects and high social status in India. However, throughout her law school, she had been frustrated by the fact that most if not all of Indian law was still largely based on a colonial law and that there was 'a huge disconnect between legal values and more rural societal or tribal set-up[s]'. She continued to say that this disjuncture sparked her interest in how to make the law more congruous and easily translatable to the local settings. The answer for this was to pursue her study in social anthropology, and the underfunded and politically controlled field of social sciences in India led her to look at other countries:

> And then I had to look outside of India to study Anthropology because, very unfortunately, the humanities and social sciences are, kind of, underfunded [in India]. I think this could be entirely by stereotype of mine, but I think, to some extent, a lot of the social sciences are very politically controlled? So there isn't as much freedom to do, like, actual research. Cos if you find something that is unfavourable, there's a lot pressure that funding would get taken away from you, if you don't change the outcome and just things like that. […] So yeah, that was, kind of, one of my prompters. (Amelia, India, MSc Social Anthropology, Oxford)

However, as with other participants, Amelia's institutional choice was still governed by the reputation of university which she described as offsetting the risk of pursuing her interest in a less employable degree: 'Um, honestly, when I sat down and thought about it [my choice], I realised that switching to anthropology was somewhat risky. Because it doesn't give me too many job opportunities. But I feel like the name Oxford itself would balance it out'. Even when she reflected on non-instrumental elements of decision-making, her choice was mediated by its likely impact on her ability to improve her job prospects on graduation.

The need for personal growth was also played out in the choice of Adam who had graduated from a medical school. Instead of staying on for the completion of medical training, he decided to further his interest in research and pursue his postgraduate degree(s) – Masters and, subsequently, DPhil – in the UK. He told me that while applying for postgraduate programmes overseas, he mainly considered universities in the US and the UK. With the issue of preparation for additional language exams during his 'time-occupied' clinical training, he believed that UK universities were perceived to be a better option than US universities. Of them, Oxford was the one which he believed would offer him the best resources and training as well as the reputation in his research areas:

> Because with a medical degree, of course, you'll get further training after graduation to become a specialist. But then, I feel like, "Um, I want to do something in addition to clinical practices which can be research in any area". I've done some laboratory scientific research myself. And I quite liked the lifestyle or the work that is involved. So I kept on looking for different studies [courses/programmes]. And then I found out, um, what we called epidemiology which is using a lot of data to find patterns and to solve some research questions. I found out that Oxford has really good resources. I mean, for example, we've collected individual data for millions of people and then we've followed up them for maybe more than 20 years now? So they have very very good resource. You could say it is one of the best [universities] in the world to study [his subject area], and that is why I wanted to come to study here. I mean, I applied to several other universities [and] I've got

offers. But then, I chose [to study] here [Oxford University]. (Adam, Malaysia, DPhil Population Health, Oxford)

Although both Amelia and Adam could have easily (re)produced individual advantage by following their occupational trajectories (e.g., lawyer, doctor), they decided to pursue their interests in the areas which do not necessarily guarantee superior employment and status than their original disciplines. To some extent, pursuing their study in Oxford University balanced out their risk of unemployment. Nonetheless, both Amelia and Adam linked international study to an opportunity for personal development and growth. These narratives have lent support to extant research which largely depicts the motivations of international students as an opportunity for personal growth and self-formation (see, for example, Marginson, 2014; 2018; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Tran, 2016).

Social betterment

The motivation for a particular subject is sometimes extended to a larger goal of social betterment. Some of the interviewees indicate that their intentions to study abroad are not restricted only to their own good such as superior employment or personal growth but to the contribution to the wider society or global public goods through research and teaching (Marginson, 2011). As indicated in the above section, such an account was particularly pronounced amongst participants from Oxford. For example, Mary's decision to pursue her study in Integrated Immunology is reflective of this. Given that furthering her research interests in India was neither possible at a Master's level nor of sufficiently high quality, she had to look for opportunities to pursue a postgraduate degree outside her home country. She acknowledged a couple of options she had at that time, including the US, Germany or France. While she was aware of many benefits conferred on studying in Germany and France such as tuition waivers and post-study work opportunities, she was able to speak neither German nor French. This chimes with Forsberg's (2017b) observation of the relationship between language capital and

perceived scope for action. In other words, the fact that Mary felt more comfortable speaking English than the other two languages led her to choose the UK over Germany or France as a destination country. Also, the question of her undergraduate degree being accepted in the US universities where the duration of study is usually four – not three – years for an undergraduate study eliminated the option of studying there and consequently led her to focus on applications to the UK universities. Unlike the earlier examples, however, the pursuit of her study at Oxford was not limited to personal benefits; she believed that the development of her knowledge in this field would help her to achieve the goal of improving the lives of those suffering from tropical diseases:

> I would like to be looking at neglected tropical diseases right now? Because I feel like the world is concentrating on the big three – HIV [Human Immunodeficiency Virus], Tuberculosis... these are problems that affect millions and millions of people. But then, there are also a lot of, like, tiny little diseases that – I can't say ignore – definitely [are] not being looked at. And people are still suffering from those things as well. So, ideally, [I would like to] apply my science to figure [them] out if we can, you know, come up with solutions for helping those people out, yeah. (Mary, India, MSc Integrated Immunology, Oxford)

In their study of motivations of adult and younger undergraduates in one American university, Wolfgang and Dowling (1981) found that the primary reasons for older undergraduate participants to enrol in higher education relates to their desire to learn. They indicate that adult undergraduates tend to have a stronger internal drive for learning than traditional age students (18–22 years old) who are either more interested in social relationships or likely influenced by external expectations (see also Kump & Krašovec, 2007). Indeed, older participants like Mark (Ghana, PhD Entrepreneurship, Brookes) also indicated that his choice of PhD programme in the UK was driven by his interests in entrepreneurship. He recalled that not many universities provided the doctoral programme in the area, and programme availability resulted in his application to Brookes: 'I was looking that a place, uh, university where I

can do [study] entrepreneurship. It's not many university that does [provide a PhD programme in] entrepreneurship. So I looked at universities that will offering entrepreneurship PhD or DBA [Doctor of Business Administration]. Then, the Oxford Brookes came [out]'. He alluded to me how his PhD study would fill the gap in his knowledge in the field and would enhance his capacity for teaching Entrepreneurship at the university where he used to work in Ghana. He also revealed in the interview his hope of making contributions to the economic development of his home country through research: 'I want to, uh, research in the area of entrepreneurship and see how I can gain some insights that will help me to make contribution to policy in area of entrepreneurship. So that we can create more jobs in my country'. These examples illustrate that student mobility to the UK higher education could be related as much to a broader goal of social betterment as the positional benefits of income and status pursuits.

Timepass

In his study of middle class young men in India, Jeffrey (2010) demonstrates how his research participants spent a lot of time waiting for employment, which he refers to as 'timepass'. He goes on to highlight that the group of unemployed young men from various castes and classes passed surplus time differently to counter boredom, sign of disengagement and marker of being *left behind* (p. 77; emphasis in original). The most common strategy amongst his research participants was to keep on studying for their degree with the hope of gaining secure employment after graduation, although how long they could be able to remain in formal education rested on the availability of economic resources (p. 87). In the face of growing un/under-employment amongst young people worldwide, this sense of passing time also pushed my research participants – regardless of gender – to seek further degrees in higher education abroad. Natalie's (China, PhD Urban Design and City Planning, UCL) dislike of working in the architecture industry and the uncertainty about a career choice after her Masters in China made her pursue a PhD in a different country: 'Uh, I think part of the reason I'm

doing this PhD [is] because I don't like working in that [working] environment. Or maybe not now. I don't want to work right now so... I wasn't sure about my career choice after Masters. So I, sort of, decided to do a PhD and then sort these things out and then have a career'. She elaborated that she had various options of pursuing her study in other countries including the US, UK and the Netherlands where some universities offered her full scholarships. However, she ultimately decided to come to UCL for her PhD because of the supervisor who was most supportive during the application process. The fact that her boyfriend was studying at another university in London was also factored into her decision. She also underlined the importance of the university's location, claiming herself as a 'very urban person'. Importantly, Natalie believed that pursuing a PhD degree in the UK would help to overcome the sense of being 'in limbo' after the completion of her Master's study in China, while figuring out her future.

Unlike Natalie who had several options for international higher education to choose from, studying in the UK was the one and only option for some participants to pass their time. Ellen (Hong Kong, MSc Environment Systems Engineering, UCL) disclosed that the decision to do Masters in the UK came after she discovered too late the difficulty of getting a job related to her field of study in Hong Kong. Given the lesser emphasis of the government on the environmental sector at the time of her application, she believed that the only possible way to avoid unemployment was to further her studies. She found out that UK universities, unlike those institutions in Hong Kong, were offering places despite her late application. This led to her decision to apply for her Master's study outside Hong Kong. Similarly, doing postgraduate studies in the UK provided Oliver with a good reason to stay abroad instead of returning to his country after working in New York:

> So after four years [of working experience], I thought, uh, I needed to leave [New York] [laughs]. […] Um, well, I wanted to leave, but then I didn't necessarily want to go back to New Zealand. […] Um, so I thought [I should] take a break and do my postgraduate degree. […] The plan wasn't really to get another degree. It just that's one of the options, and it happened to work out. So it was either to continue

working elsewhere or to go back to study. And because of the scholarship and they [Oxford Brookes University] accepted my application. (Oliver, Assistant Architect, New Zealand, MArch Architecture, Brookes)

The UK was an ideal choice for Oliver, as there was a youth mobility scheme at that time offering New Zealand citizens an opportunity to stay and work in the UK for two years. It is therefore important to note that these mobility aspirations were closely linked to structural factors at the time of their application such as the availability of programmes or scholarships and a culture of mobility widespread in the context of New Zealand (Conradson & Latham, 2005). Unlike neoclassical migration theories that highlight rational choice based on push-pull factors (see, for instance, Raghuram, 2013), these quotes illustrate that their mobility emerged unexpectedly and the decisions to engage in international higher education were equally accidental and contingent on forces outside their control. In addition, these examples demonstrate how not only current life stage and circumstances but also past experiences of students underpin their motivations for international study, which closely articulates with individuals' life-course trajectories (Findlay et al., 2012, 2017).

5.2 Unequal distributions of cultural capital: Students' experiences of higher education choice

Whilst the previous section examines participants' motivations which go beyond the narratives of distinction and social reproduction, the following two sections look at how they engage in the choice process and make higher education choices within the UK. A range of sociological work on UK students from different social backgrounds finds differences not only in their choices about university, but in their capacity and orientation towards mobilising different forms of capital in the choice-making processes (Archer et al., 2003; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay et al., 2005). It is also suggested that individual choices are developed in and through the dynamic interplay

with different 'arenas of action' or social spheres that encompass family, education and work/social life (Ball et al., 2000, pp. 147–148). Studies of international students have similarly underlined important ways in which their mobility is socially embedded in networks of kinship, friendship and romantic relationships as well as material and institutional infrastructures (Beech, 2015, 2018, 2019; Collins, 2008; Jayadeva, 2019; Mosneaga & Winther, 2013; Pimpa, 2003a, 2003b, 2005). Building on the existing body of literature, this section focuses on how cultural capital obtained through the arenas of family, education, work/social life configures participants' choices of higher education abroad and especially in the UK, and how the interaction of different arenas influences, and nuances, their choice process.

Family and cultural capital

The influence of family, and parents in particular, has been well documented in research on students' choices of higher education. Previous studies have paid close attention to how the family's class position and trajectory configures not only their decisions about whether to go onto university but also the ways in which they make choices of a higher education institution (Brooks, 2003; Reay, 1998b; Reay et al., 2005; Sheng, 2017). Pimpa (2003b, 2005), for instance, identifies various aspects of familial influence in his study on Thai students' choices of international education, including 'finance', 'information', 'expectation', 'competition', and 'persuasion'. He goes on to explain that financial support and expectation from family are of greater influence than other forms of influence from family. Notably, a significant difference is found between students from family with and without direct experience in international education. As the difference in higher education choices is often associated with the volume and trajectory of parental economic, cultural and social capital, this section aims to demonstrate how participants' choices are configured differently by the extent to which parents engage in their university choice process as well as the way in which they provide support. Also, I suggest that other family members such as siblings or relatives equally play a part in the participants' decision-making.

As noted in extant literature, the availability of parental financial support certainly affected the ways in which the participants conceived, and narrowed down, their choices. More than half of the participants (31) who received financial support from their parents to fund their study in the UK indicated that financial support from family played a central role in shaping their choice-making process. Where family funding was not available, participants tended to resort to other external sources available to them. For around a third of the participants (18), postgraduate study was fully funded by the home/UK government, university or company, with four on a student loan from their home government and two only partially funded by their universities. However, given that these participants lacked financial resources from their parents or family members, their higher education choices were often compromised, for example, by the sources of funding. For instance, Jasmin preferred other prestigious US universities to Oxford University, because US universities allowed her to cross register courses in different disciplines. Nonetheless, she ended up attending Oxford because she received a scholarship offer from that institution. She believed that her institutional choice would have been different if she'd had the financial support of her family:

> Actually, Oxford wasn't even in my first list because I really wanted to go to Columbia [University] or [University of California] Berkeley. I wanted to also study Law. And in Columbia and Berkeley, you are able to do that – you can cross register on the law school. But in Oxford, you can't do that. […] I was deciding between Columbia and Oxford. I couldn't afford the US without a scholarship [and] I didn't get a full scholarship, whereas I was awarded a commonwealth scholarship in Oxford. So I was able to afford it. (Jasmin, Consultant, India, MA Public Policy, Oxford)

However, even where the financial support was available from parents, the lack or absence of direct knowledge or experience about international higher education was the cause of distress and frustration at the time of decision-making for some of the participants. For example, Nichole disclosed that she

did not have any experience of travelling, living or studying abroad before and neither have her parents done so. Notwithstanding, she indicated that the choice of the UK as a country of education was relatively easier than that of institutions: 'Everybody knows that. If you want to be qualified, you go through [the] UK system. And people actually take you seriously. If you go to [the] US, it won't be the same. It's just different. There's just some seriousness in the UK education, yeah'. This impression, shared by people in her home country, can be partly explained by the colonial history of Kenya, a former British colony. This points to the role of 'imaginative geographies', grounded on a postcolonial ideology and formed through communities in shaping decisions of where to study, discussed by Beech (2014) in her study of international (i.e., non-UK) students in the UK. Whilst her decision to study in the UK was facilitated by her imaginative geography, she had to turn to informal sources when making institutional choices, and Brookes was the only university she had applied for:

> The reason why I applied at Oxford Brookes… I didn't even know much about it [how to apply for universities in the UK] until I went to this, um, [agency]. It's like an organisation. They help out student[s] to apply to international schools [universities in the UK], uh, and then they gave me options. So that's how I got to know about Oxford Brookes. Um, yeah, I thought that courses are really nice for the nutrition, and [they offer] the accreditation [of the courses]. So, yeah, that's why I decided to come here. (Nichole, Kenya, MSc Applied Human Nutrition, Brookes)

Parallel to Beech's (2014) argument that imaginative geographies do not always sit comfortably with the reality of place, Nichole articulated her disappointment that life in the UK did not offer the same opportunities that she had expected: 'I thought it [the UK] was the land of opportunities [laughs]. […] But I go [not] at all... shock'. Also, she reflected on a rather difficult if not painful transition experiences at the beginning of her study at Brookes: 'When I first started off in September, it was really hard for me. The environment itself was strange to me, uh, and the transition was really hard'.

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This example supports, and advances, Hopkins's (2006) suggestion that the knowledge of the university can be highly fragmented amongst many 'non-traditional' students – defined in his study broadly as students whose ability to fulfil their academic potential has been affected adversely by social, cultural or economic circumstances – and they are likely to experience gaps during their university life, as they are unable to receive appropriate advice about making successful transitions into tertiary education.

There were a few participants who gained practical – other than financial – support from parents during the application process. For example, Henry (Taiwan, PhD Architecture, UCL) revealed that his dad, a professor at a university in Taiwan, helped him to attend a summer school at a London university before making his decision to do a PhD abroad. He elaborated further that his father's personal connections with that institution helped him to obtain such an opportunity. Also, he received a lot of advice on, and opportunities to explore through for example exhibitions, his specific interest area when applying for PhD programmes: 'When I applied for the PhD, I got a lot of advice. And I also, uh, came to [the] UK to see exhibition, yeah. And, I mean, overall, I felt [the] Bartlett [Faculty of the Built Environment of UCL] should be [the] very best option'. In Henry's case, familial cultural and social capital led him to develop an attitude of 'ease' and 'self-assured' disposition towards the prospect of entering the field of international higher education.

Factors related to the family were not limited to parents alone but included other siblings or relatives. Take the example of Ellen. Her choice was largely influenced by her brother's knowledge and experience of UK higher education: 'Actually, I've just applied [to] UCL because I wasn't really interested in any other institutions. My brother graduated from UCL. So I just know about UCL, and that's why I just applied for UCL'. Also, her idea of the institution and its value after graduation was shaped by her brother's experiences:

> The reason why I chose UCL is because the name of UCL is, kind of, like, attractive to Hong Kong company, if I apply for my job [after graduation]. […] Also, I want to stay in London, compared to other

place because my brother told me that, uh, the places besides in London is really boring, yeah. (Ellen, Hong Kong, MSc Engineering, UCL)

Ellen later noted that her brother provided financial support for her study due to the financial difficulties faced by her parents in Hong Kong. Having relied on her brother both financially and educationally, she regretted not trying harder to research into other UK institutions at the time of application. This has led to the gap between her expectation and experience and, consequently, her disappointment about the university choice. Although her brother's knowledge and experience enabled a relatively smooth transition for Ellen to study in the UK, it also reduced, to a degree, her abilities to consider other alternative choices (e.g., reading a degree in a different UK institution or even in other country) other than studying in UCL. This is supported by prior research on the role of siblings in higher education choices and educational support more generally (Ceja, 2006; Goodman et al., 2019; Moguérou & Santelli, 2015).

Similarly, Tony indicated that he was encouraged by his cousin to apply to UK universities when looking for a Master's programme abroad. He recalled that his cousin, who was doing her PhD at Cambridge at that time, praised the UK education system and strongly recommended it to him. Although his initial impression of UK higher education was shaped by his cousin, her suggestion did not feature significantly in Tony's choice of university in the UK:

But I have choices. Cos compared to [the UK], Australia [has] nice weather and [it is] easy to stay after [the completion of study]. Like it's more difficult to stay in the UK after [you] graduate. But, uh, it's easier in Australia. […] My motivation to stay [in the UK] was not too big. [And] I prefer the programme [at Brookes], [which was] one of the big reason[s] why I choose. (Tony, Architect, Vietnam, MArch Architecture, Brookes)

When asked about where he found the information about the programme, he emphasised that it was based on his own research and that it would have been difficult for others, particularly those in different fields, to advise architecture students like him due to the different career orientations they might have. Tony's downplaying of the familial influence somewhat parallels participants in Beech's (2015) study who assert that their decisions was solely made by themselves. Whilst this is not to say that how students make decisions are taken in a vacuum, this individualistic narrative of student mobility can be understood as a way of forging their own biographies within the increasingly normalised practice of overseas mobility through travel and studying abroad in particular (Beech, 2019). Furthermore, the case of Tony was not exceptional, with many participants in my study having received information related to UK higher education from their relatives or conversely having made recommendations for them based on their current or previous study experiences in the UK. These examples therefore illuminate that the information from horizontal sibling-to-sibling relations is equally important as a linear/vertical parent-child transmission (Heath et al., 2010).

Education and cultural capital

The role of education, and educational institutions in particular, on students' choices of higher education has been sparsely noted in existing empirical work. School-based networks (e.g., alumni, school staff or personnel) are one of the few education-related factors identified in the literature (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Whilst institutional networks are found to be vital in filling the university information voids at home, recent literature points to the socially and spatially unequal access to social capital developed at school or university – what Brinton (2000) refers to as 'institutional social capital'. For instance, Gao's (2018) research on working-class South Asian and Southeast Asian minority youths' transitions into university has highlighted that school social networks do not play out as much in the university choice process of less-privileged ethnic minority students in Hong Kong as that of Chinese counterparts. Similarly, Waters and Leung (2013b) have

demonstrated how access to institutional social capital is spatialised, with TNE programmes failing to provide students with resources necessary to develop their social capital. Given the diversity of participants' social characteristics and institutional backgrounds, the following section shows how the varying level of networks accumulated within their previous universities affect their access to information and resources related to the field of international higher education and, subsequently, their higher education choices in the UK.

Although the vast majority of participants had previous mobility experiences abroad through traveling, for example, the extent to which they received opportunities for overseas exposure through their previous institution differed greatly. In the case of Aysha, her choice of international higher education was largely influenced by a short-term exchange to an Ivy League college in the USA which was in partnership with her undergraduate university. When asked whether she had considered going back to the same university for her Masters, it was the requirement for two years of work experience in the field that eventually deterred her from applying to US universities. Notwithstanding, she acknowledged that having previous overseas exposure through the university generated her interest in studying abroad:

> I haven't studied abroad [before], but there was, um, [an] exchange [programme] with [an Ivy League college in the USA] in my second [undergraduate] year. […] So I went there for two weeks. […] And that early experience opened my eyes to universities overseas and it motivated me to study overseas and not in India. (Aysha, Consultant, India, MSc Learning and Technology, Oxford)

Of particular relevance to the discussion here is Aysha's university choice in the UK. Although the fact that a handful of her seniors went to Oxford was important, she revealed that it was important to study in universities of a similar prestige as the Ivy League college in the USA and that Oxford is therefore the only institution she applied for in the UK. This indicates how institutional connections provide a framework for what was 'thinkable' for her.

Likewise, the first time Jennifer (China, PhD Pharmacy, UCL) was exposed to overseas higher education was a graduation project in the UK during her final year of studying at a university in China. She explained that the opportunity was available because her department worked in collaboration with the department in one of the universities in England: 'I did three years in China [and] one year in UK for my last year project. […] It's about the cooperation between our university and the school of pharmacy [at a UK university]'. This experience shaped her impression of, and familiarity with, the UK higher education and eventually led her to focus on her applications for a Master's degree in the UK. Moreover, the connections with her previous supervisor built up through the Master's study at UCL made it easier for her to return and secure a place for PhD in the same university after two years of industry experience in China. A similar theme pervades Brooks and Waters's (2010) analysis of the role of social networks in students' decision-making processes. Whilst pointing to the unequal access to social networks amongst their participants, they contend that student mobility is partly mediated by the particular type of domestic educational institutions the participants have attended, such as 'top' independent schools and Oxbridge colleges.

International exposure through the university was apparent amongst those with transnational education (TNE) backgrounds. There were four participants (three from China and one from Hong Kong) in my study whose undergraduate degrees were conferred entirely by, or in affiliation with, the UK universities. They were registered, respectively, in one of the 2+2, 3+1, and 2+1+1 programmes in which host country students, having completed a specified curriculum locally, were able to articulate/transfer to the final year(s) of a sending country programme (McNamara & Knight, 2017, p. 36). Whilst all but one participant completed their degrees in their final years in the UK, they all decided to come back to the UK for their postgraduate studies. When I asked about the reason for pursuing a Master's degree in the UK, Matthew's (China, MSc Engineering, UCL) response was particularly illuminating: 'Because I think I have, um, some educational background in the UK. So that makes [it] easy for me to apply, yeah, the Master course in the UK'. Given that most students from TNE programmes, upon graduation,

receive a degree certificate identical to one that is conferred to students in the UK, the participants with TNE backgrounds indicated that this facilitated their access to UK higher education institutions (see also Yu, 2020). Despite the small sample size in my research, the finding is supported by the recent statistics published by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2015) that a third of non-EU entrants and more than half (55%) of the Chinese students used their first degree programmes obtained through TNE pathways to embark on their postgraduate study in the UK (Bothwell, 2020; British Council & UUKi, 2020).

In addition to the overseas exposure provided by students' undergraduate institution, supervisor advice and guidance was influential for many of the participants who studied at a university in their home country. For example, Edward was not sure about his pathway at the end of his Masters in Canada until his supervisor guided him through specific programmes at Oxford:

> So, um, during my Masters, I really wasn't sure [whether or not] I was gonna do a PhD. Um, what I, kind of, realised [during my Masters] was I'm not gonna do a PhD unless the right research question is there. I, kind of, growed off the idea until my supervisor, um, pushed me to look at the programmes here at the University of Oxford. […] So I, uh, took a look at the [current] department and, um, it was just a perfect research topic. (Edward, Canada, DPhil Population Health, Oxford)

He later revealed to me that some of his mentors that he worked with during his Masters all completed their PhDs at Oxford University and that this strongly motivated him to consider the option of doing his doctoral study in the UK and at Oxford in particular. Also, he was informed by his supervisor of the availability of the full scholarship at the time of applications to Oxford. This affected his access to financial aid, a form of economic capital, which was positively factored into his decision to study there: 'Um, like, there was funding. It wasn't guaranteed, but there were full scholarships available [that I can apply for]'. As Brinton (2000, pp. 289–290) indicates in her study on the role of social capital in Japanese youth labour market, a stock of social capital to which youth have access through *institutions* (e.g., schools)

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'multiplies the opportunities young people would otherwise have had through information or introductions provided by their own family, friends, and acquaintances'. Despite Edward's nor his family members' ever having studied or lived abroad before, he made a successful transition through the guidance of his supervisor who had inside knowledge of the field of UK higher education.

The case of Liam is an example of how his option was similarly expanded through the multiple interactions with a prospective supervisor over the course of applications. Although he had already been offered a place from his previous Master's supervisor, he noted that fewer funding opportunities available in Hong Kong made him reluctant to accept the place at that time. Whilst looking for other funded PhD opportunities, he came across a potential supervisor at Oxford who was working on the projects he was interested in. When asked about how he identified this supervisor, he emphasized that it was based on his own research:

> I can say [that] it's by my own research. Cos, um, they put up, like, quite detailed information online. Like on the graduates programme application website. Um, so they listed several projects that they intend to do [during the DPhil/PhD programme]. And then, um, they also put up, like, information about themselves. So I think it's quite detailed online, and then I just have to do some background research of them, yeah. (Liam, Hong Kong, DPhil Clinical Medicine, Oxford)

Whilst he did not have either much financial resources or social connections with universities abroad, it was through, to use his word, 'three to four long conversations' with the prospective supervisor that his current study became feasible. In Liam's case, he had a stock of cultural (e.g., being able to speak English fluently) and academic (e.g., knowledge about the research field) capital to draw on leading him to secure a funded place for his PhD at Oxford University. It is also important to note that he had one-year student exchange in a university in Scotland through his alma mater in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, this example points to the significance of positive interactions

with school staff in reinforcing students' aspirations for, and transitions to, higher education (Gao, 2018).

In fact, the extent to which school social networks could assist the international higher education choice process is socially unequal, with opportunities such as student exchanges not readily available to less-privileged students. Even though some of the participants were aware of such opportunities, they indicated that those opportunities tended to be highly selective and usually given to those who have financial resources and higher academic grades. Joseph's narrative is illustrative of this:

> I mean this [student exchange] programme… it's really limited. It's just one or two people by university in some cases. [….] So, at the end of the day, most of the people studying abroad are people coming from rich families, you know, that can support them for this six month. For example, in my case, when I wanted to study abroad, the university told me, "That's great. But we are paying [only] for your flight and that's all". So, [eventually], I didn't [apply]. [Because] I didn't have the money for studying abroad for six month. (Joseph, Consultant, Chile, PhD Psychology and Human Development, UCL)

The case of Joseph points to the significance of international students' financial circumstances, along with other factors such as academic preparedness, in their freedom of movement and options (Choudaha et al., 2012; Pimpa, 2003b, 2005). Those from low socio-economic backgrounds could be doubly excluded because of lower academic grades and, secondly, lacking financial resources. This suggests that whilst it is crucial for universities to provide international higher education experiences, more resources should be allocated to students who cannot afford those opportunities and may thus show little interest in them (Brooks & Waters, 2011, p. 170).

Work/social life and cultural capital

It transpired that paid work and social life, both of which have received, to date, little attention in extant literature, were of equal importance for higher education choice-making processes amongst my research participants. Some of the participants noted that their knowledge and/or support of international higher education was obtained from these two different – yet related – channels. They are closely associated with each other, since networks of friends which may be able to inform them of the field of international higher education can be developed from the workplace as much from pre-existing social networks. Cultural capital gained through the arenas of work and/or social life were significant especially for the choice process of those who received little support from family and/or educational institutions. This was evident in the example of Joseph. As indicated earlier, he was unable to fulfil his desire for overseas study during his undergraduate years in Chile due to a lack of financial resources. However, when later working for a university in Chile as a lecturer after his Master's degree, he obtained information from his colleagues about the new government programme to support Chilean students in doing their PhDs abroad:

> Well, while I started [working] in the university, most of my colleagues already had a PhD degree [either in the US or in the UK]. […] So most of my friends working there said [to me] this [Chilean government] scholarship. I said, "Okay. I will try". (Joseph, Consultant, Chile, PhD Psychology and Human Development, UCL)

Joseph's colleagues, most of whom were already familiar with the field of international higher education, were able to provide knowledge essential for his decision-making. He noted that information on the availability of government scholarships was key to his decision to pursue his doctoral degree outside Chile: 'Um, because if you are coming from Chile and if you would like to pay by your own, it's impossible basically. You can't came [come] here without [financial] support. Because it's absolutely expensive compared to our wage, you know?'. Despite securing a scholarship to attend

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a US university (i.e., Fulbright scholarship), he explained that the applications for doctoral programmes in the USA failed because of his poor level of English. He then turned to the UK universities where he was able to embark on his study before the scholarship would expire. Although he secured a place at other prestigious universities in the UK, his ultimate university choice was more concerned with the lifestyle rather than the reputation of university in itself:

> Of course, the reputation [of university] is important. But I received an approval [offer] from the Cambridge University which has, in general, a higher reputation compared to UCL. But we [me and my wife] prefer to came here, cos London is a great city, and [we] can find here more opportunities compared to Cambridge. Cambridge is a beautiful city, but I can't imagine to live there for four years to be honest [laughs]. One year is okay. But four years? I don't know.

Joseph' narrative is parallel to Prazeres et al.'s (2017) argument that within a differentiated global higher education landscape, markers of distinction are no longer limited to institutional prestige; instead, they are extended to lifestyle and experiential pursuits.

The opportunity to engage in international higher education also came to Sabrina through her workplace. She told me that although she had always dreamed of pursuing her Masters in other countries, the issue of funding her overseas study was again a barrier to realize that goal. When she heard about her company's plan to provide financial support for tuition fees and living expenses abroad for a small number of employees on the condition of returning after the study, she decided to grab the opportunity: 'First, I already had a dream about, uh, pursu[ing] my Master study [abroad] before. And I heard about a change in scholarship [programmes] in my company. [They decided to fund the study] even abroad. And I think, "Okay. I can do it". And I applied [for] my [company] scholarship'. Whilst the funding from her company enabled her to seek her education in a number of countries, her destination choice was eventually narrowed down to the company's interest:

> And they [the company] ask me, "Which country that you want to you want to be?" So I chose [the] UK because, uh, they [the company] already asked me to take a finance [as a subject]. I take a specific major, like, merger and acquisition [in] this field. I mean, in the UK, they [financial industries] have a lot of experience about a mergers and acquisition. And I think I can, uh, learn something new from this country about that major. That's why... [I chose the UK over other countries] (Sabrina, Indonesia, MSc Finance, Brookes)

When it comes to the institutional choice, having flexible entry dates was important to Sabrina. She went on to say that a January entry[35] additionally offered by Brookes – unlike the usual start of term in September at other universities she got accepted – allowed her to have sufficient time to complete a pre-Master's course before initiating her Master's study. Tannock (2018) attributes this difference in support system to intense competition amongst UK universities for international students. He goes on to argue that this competition can sometimes lead some universities (especially those lower ranked and less known) to 'develop extra policies and programs, welcome and support systems that can help to make their institutions more appealing to these students' (p. 101). However, Sabrina equally emphasised the location of Brookes, that is, being closer to London than the other universities. When I asked her about why she did not make any applications to London universities, she attributed this to the higher costs of living: 'The standard for [of] living is higher [in London] than [in] Oxford. Even [though] I have my scholarship from my company, I still have [to] think, like, 'Okay. I will [should] save my money'. This again points to the importance of level of financial assistance available for students in enabling, as well as constraining, their choices for and within the UK higher education.

The case of Sabrina somewhat resonates with previous research on the mobility of (foreign) highly-skilled workers in the growing competition for global talents. Focusing on the global mobility of skilled employees in the City

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[35] January entry (see https://www.brookes.ac.uk/studying-at-brookes/how-to-apply/applying-direct/january-entry/)

of London, Beaverstock and Hall (2012) highlight the increasing industry practices of short- and medium-term skilled labour circulation from and to London financial district. They contend that attracting, fostering and retaining foreign talent is therefore crucial for maintaining the City's position in the face of rising competition from other international financial centres. This also echoes Waters's (2009) study which demonstrates the competition for positional advantage at an individual level. She argues that individual competitive strategies were represented in the pursuit of specialised and professional postgraduate study, such as MBA courses, even amongst students who received their undergraduate education abroad. Whilst Sabrina's subject choice was not based on a 'strategic' decision, the promotion of educational mobility amongst employees with a specific disciplinary focus (e.g., finance) can be interpreted as the company's efforts to upgrade its labour forces in the global competitions or 'war' for talents (Michaels et al., 2001).

In addition to the sphere of work, the extended networks of individuals function as a source of reliable information. Brooks (2003) argues in her work on higher education choices of middle-class students in the UK that despite the strong influence of families, what constitutes a 'feasible' choice for her participants seems to rest on their friends and peers. Similar points have been made by Beech (2015, 2019) that the decision making of international students in the UK does not operate within a vacuum but draws upon social networks of friendship. She underlines the significance of these networks in reducing perceived risks associated with studying abroad and normalising the mobility process. Corroborating the findings of these studies, not only did networks of friends generate interest in studying in a different country but they were used by several participants in my study as a source of information. For example, Brian consulted his close network of friends before deciding on the UK as a study destination. Although he did consider Australia alongside the UK, the knowledge and experiences of his friends helped to remove it from his options:

> Yeah, [I got this information] because one of my friends, he did a Master's [degree] last year in the UK. Uh, he told me everything about it [studying and working in the UK] and stuff. And, like, one of my other friends he did the Master's in Australia last year? So I did a comparison between both of them like who[se experience] is better. (Brian, India, MSc Construction Project Management, Brookes)

Brian assessed the appropriateness and viability to seek his overseas postgraduate studies amongst peers and therefore adjusted his higher education choices accordingly. He went on to describe the information from his friends as 'practical' and 'real' as opposed to 'theoretical knowledge' available online: 'If I search on Google, I cannot get the real result [feedback], you know, the actual result [feedback] because I don't know if it's true [or] not'. However, the influence of his friends in his institutional choice was balanced out by a combination of his research and the information received from a student recruitment agency in India: 'I chose Oxford Brookes, because out of all these universities [recommended by the agency] the course that I wanted to do pursue related to construction was only in Oxford Brookes. Otherwise, all [the] other universities were providing a general course, which was not, uh, specific to construction'. This example confirms the role of social networks of peers in shaping parameters of value and legitimacy of students' decision to study abroad as highlighted in the extant literature (Beech, 2015; Brooks & Waters, 2010; Jayadeva, 2019). Additionally, this points to the growing role of international education agents in mediating international student mobility and higher education choices in particular (Beech, 2018, 2019; Collins, 2008).

For several participants, pools of contacts not available through their existing social networks were perceived as more central than their immediate friendship circles to their choice process (see also Jayadeva, 2019). For Naomi, the decision to pursue her study in the UK was initially influenced by her partner (now husband) who was studying there at the time of her application. However, it was through the networks of friends developed from her previous Master's study in Australia that she improved her limited knowledge and experiences in relation to the UK higher education:

> So I have friends [from Australia] who are working here [in the UK], and they introduced me to people who were connected to psychology. So they were not psychologists, but they knew people who were doing, uh, psychology programmes [in UK universities]. And then somehow, I do manage to get a few names whereby they were willing to talk [through emails] about their experiences about training and working in the UK. So that was how I got the information. (Naomi, Singapore, PhD Neuroscience and psychology, UCL)

This is reminiscent of the concept of 'institutional social capital' as noted previously (Brinton, 2000). However, instead of mediating her higher education choice directly, Naomi's connections from her previous institution provided only the basis for navigating the choice process. Rather, people previously unknown to her or what Granovetter (1973) terms 'weak ties' enabled her to find out information about UK universities offering non-EU international students professional doctorate programmes in her subject area. Like other participants, she noted further that the reputation and location of the university was factored into her decision to study in UCL: 'I was given offers in Australia and London. UCL had the best programme, uh, in terms of just the professional doctorate itself. And London is a city which is quite exciting? So I thought maybe it would be a nice change from Australia as well'. This example shows that social relations of friends are built across different arenas of participants' lives and they can have equivalent influences on the participants in making their higher education decisions.

5.3 Possibilities or limitations? Habitus and UK higher education choice

Within the UK context, there is a longstanding concern about the relationship between social class and higher education choices. Drawing on Bourdieu's (2010) notion of habitus, previous studies have shown the significant role it plays in the institutional choice of domestic students within UK higher education, with students likely – but not always – choosing the academic place which fits into their dispositions and perceived ability structured by their social class (Archer et al., 2003; Ball et al., 1995; Bathmaker et al., 2016;

Brown et al., 2007). As 'a socialised body', habitus also intersects with other social characteristics beyond class to include age, gender and race/ethnicity, all of which structures their perceptions of and actions in the social world (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 81). Ball and his colleagues (2002), for instance, elucidate the ways in which UK students' choices of higher education are not only classed but also gendered and racialised (see also Reay, Davies, et al., 2001; Reay et al., 2005). In this section, I demonstrate how the abilities of international students to make higher education choices within the field of UK higher education are similarly grounded in their habitus.

Costs matter? Differences in choices within middle class fractions

Reay et al.'s (2001; 2005) research highlighted the importance of material constraints in the educational choices of working-class students in the UK. Although the extent to which social class is defined by the volume of economic capital may differ depending on the national context, a few participants' decision-making processes were similarly constrained by financial circumstances. For example, Alice's choice of international higher education was largely shaped by monetary concerns. Her motivation for doing a Master's degree was to access internship opportunities in the publishing industry through the university, which she believed was otherwise difficult to obtain. When asked about the most important factor influencing her choice to study in the UK, she replied, 'Definitely money. Um, and the ability to get student loans from the US government? I couldn't have gone to school [Oxford Brookes University], if I couldn't have done that'. Whilst acknowledging that she had also looked at the option of doing her Masters in the US, the huge difference in costs pushed her to focus on her applications in the UK:

> It was cheaper to get my degree there [in the UK] than to get my degree here in the United States. […] I looked in the United States. I looked in NYU [New York University], um, but it was a two year programme unlike all the programmes in the UK which were only one

[year]. Whereas I paid about 20,000 USD [United States Dollar] for, um, Brookes degree, it would have been 60,000 [USD] a year in NYU [laughs]. So it was just so expensive there [in the USA]. It quickly became no longer an option. […] And so that led me to looking at schools in the UK. (Alice, USA, MA Publishing, Brookes)

Alice elaborated further her choice of Brookes out of the offers she received from other UK universities: 'I was accepted to all that I applied to, yeah, and so then my decision just came down to financial, um, stuff. So I did some math and it would be cheaper for me to go to school [universities] in Oxford than the school [the universities] in London'. Moreover, instead of relying on extensive and diverse sources of information, her choice was guided mainly by a free education counselling agency she came across unexpectedly during the web search:

By just googling, like, "Studying in the UK". and then it [the education agency] came up in my search. I have never heard of them before. It [was] just happening. […] They work with Canadian and American students, and they worked for free. You give them your information, and they handle your application. They actually submit your application to the universities [on behalf of you]. (Alice, USA, MA Publishing, Brookes)

She admitted that only those institutions working with the recruitment agency were a prime consideration, as they were the ones which did not charge application or admission fees. Whilst it was Alice who made the ultimate decision, her choices from the country to the institution were largely shaped if not constrained by the financial factors.

Similarly, the institutional choices of Martha and Payton were based on the availability of alumni discounts. The alumni discounts were particularly appealing to those who were self-funded or on a student loan. Whilst not expressed explicitly, the financial burden of her parents in paying for her overseas study clearly discouraged Hannah, a UK TNE graduate in Hong Kong, from considering other alternatives: 'Because I can apply for the

alumni discount if I study here [at Oxford Brookes University]. […] Because my parents, uh, paid for I study in [a] Master['s] degree. They support my cost of living and anything in the school fees'. Payton also chose to study at Brookes for this very reason:

> So I applied to five places in the UK, and then I got into every one of them. But I just came to Brookes, cos my sister went here. So I got a discount [laughs]. It was the cheapest option. I have the discount. (Payton, USA, MSc Human Resource Management, Brookes)

Considering the student loan that he took out to finance his Master's degree, the discount Payton was able to receive from Brookes made his choice easier and more affordable than studying in any other universities in the UK. These narratives offer a contrasting, but complementary, analysis with earlier research. Whilst those studying in UK universities are typically portrayed in extant literature as privileged and endowed with high levels of social, cultural and economic capital (Tannock, 2013, 2018; Waters, 2012; cf. Xu, 2020), the findings of this research point to subtle differences within the relatively privileged group of international students.

The difference in higher education choices is, however, not strictly bounded by the financial circumstances of participants. Zoe's (Research Scientist, China, MA Drug Delivery, UCL) higher education choices were largely shaped by Bourdieurian sense of her place. As Bourdieu (2010, p. 473) has argued, one tends to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded. When asked about why she did not at all think about other prestigious institutions in the UK, she replied, 'I don't want it [a university application process], like, too difficult. Um, it must be difficult to apply for like Cambridge, Oxford University for me, cos my English isn't that good'. Instead, she decided to choose institutions where she could feel more comfortable and also receive support from her friends who applied together: 'KCL [King's College London] and UCL are maybe like, um, third or fourth or whatever [in the subject ranking], but they are not bad. […] Uh, two of my friends also choose to go to a UK. So we apply for the university together.

[We applied to] different universities but in the same city'. Her higher education choice was therefore governed by what it is acceptable and 'reasonable to expect' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 226).

This is in stark contrast with David (Academic staff[36], Singapore, DPhil Zoology, Oxford) who expressed a strong sense of belonging in relation to elite universities in the UK. Raised and educated in an environment that encouraged him to aim for the best of the best institutions, applying for a top university such as Oxford was beyond question for him: 'I did my undergraduate in [a top public university in Singapore]. […] I think for me, I need a challenge. Maybe it's how I was brought up. The only the top university is where I should focus my energy'. Also, his choice was grounded on the first-hand knowledge of a place of study rather than on the guidance of an education agency and/or a web search by happenstance. Not only was he well informed about a place of study he had chosen through his own research and personal visit, but he knew that it was the right place for him: 'During my [personal] graduation trip on holiday, I managed to meet the person at Oxford. I thought that his lab group was great. I managed to interact with his PhD students and postdocs. And [I] realise[d] that this is the environment that I would like to work in'. This echoed 'one's relationship to the world and one's proper place within it' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 474). Moreover, although he did not manage to secure any of the scholarships available at the time of application, this did not affect his institutional choice or prevent him from pursuing his postgraduate study in the UK, as he received the financial support from his parents throughout his doctoral study.

Although a range of factors including finance and a sense of place impinge on the participants' choice process, their higher education choices were not always limited by these constraints and demands. Describing herself as 'not coming from a very affluent background', Natasha indicated that attending Oxford University was seen as almost impossible within her home community in India because 'people think it's beyond them'. A number of factors

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[36] The participant wished to remain completely anonymous, and his current position has thus been broadly referred to as academic staff.

distinguished Natasha from her peers. The emphasis that her family placed on international education had a significant effect on her and her brother: 'Um, my family focuses a lot on [international] education. That's the only thing. We do not come from a [rich] family… my father is a government [low-ranked] officer, and we didn't have much money. Uh, but yeah, we did invest into it [international education] and had a lot of trust and faith [in it]'. The greatest impact seemed to be her brother who was doing his PhD at UCL at the time of her application and who to her was 'always a gateway' and 'the window'.

Despite being motivated by the example of her brother and her parents' belief in overseas education, Natasha had to make conscious efforts in order to break out of the perceived barriers prevalent in her surroundings, including her alma mater: 'Like, uh, it's a very respected university, but nobody… [tried to apply for prestigious universities abroad]. People [alumni] have never come [gone] to the University of Oxford or Harvard or UCL. So I had to take extra effort, um, to be eligible [to apply for Oxford]'. She described these efforts in the following way:

> I didn't have any connections. So I think, uh, from December to March, I was just like a freak, um, looking for an internship [outside of India]. I was just talking to professors and giving my proposal. I talked to, uh, 35 professors [across different universities in the UK]. And I think it was more or less perseverance, uh, because I was, um, kept following, kept following [and] didn't stop. It was not very easy. […] It's very difficult to for someone in India who does not have any formal ties with the university sought a person to get an internship. (Natasha, India, MSc Comparative Social Policy, Oxford)

Once she managed to obtain social capital gained from the internship opportunity with the University of Oxford, the study destination for her postgraduate study was indisputable. Although she was aware of the risk of being rejected and that was no guarantee of getting a place, she believed that her faith and belief in herself ultimately brought success to her application: 'Uh, he's not like the head of the department or something. It is

not really mean that you will get a place. It was just a risk and, um, like I would say faith?' Not only were a range of her options for higher education enhanced through several factors related to the arenas of family and education, but they were boosted further by her desire to construct herself differently from her peers in India for whom applying to prestigious universities like Oxford was virtually unthinkable. However tenuous her perception of the family's class position may be, the choice process appeared to reinforce her original class position. Indeed, despite its potential of generating a wide repertoire of possible actions, habitus predisposes individuals towards certain ways of behaving and, in so doing, reproduces the social conditions of one's own production (Bourdieu, 1993). Yet, it is important to note that her choice process revealed a degree of deliberation and improvisation, which is in stark contrast to those coming from established middle-class families like David.

The shorter, the better: mature students

Age is another factor impinging on the higher education choices of my research participants, most of whom fall into the category of mature students i.e., any student aged 21 or over at the start of their studies[37]. Given his long tertiary educational history which lasted up to 10 years, Thomas (Canada, PhD Education, UCL) acknowledged that time was his utmost concern in his choice-making. Although doing a PhD degree in Canada was considerably cheaper, the length of PhD which can last up to five years ultimately dissuaded him from pursuing his doctoral study there. He explained that the UK higher education system met his needs because it was 'something not just a solid education but relatively quick [one]'. However, it was equally important for him to work with a supervisor whose research interests were in line with his topic, which he believed would be central to a doctoral study. He elaborated further that due to his supervisor's sudden relocation he ended up studying at his current institution which was different from the university he

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[37] Mature students (see https://www.ucas.com/file/35436/download?token=2Q6wiw-L)

originally applied for. Underpinning his decision was therefore the opportunity to work with a supervisor, with the shorter period of study providing additional motivation for doing his doctoral studies in the UK.

Echoing Thomas's opinion is Mark (Ghana, PhD Entrepreneurship, Brookes) who also found the shorter length of PhD in the UK appealing. He further noted that additional exam requirements in the US were of great challenge to older applicants like him: 'It's more challenging to be able to get [apply] to university especially in the US, because you have to do all sorts of [exams]. You have to [take] GMAT, GRE and a whole lot of, um, [exam preparations]. The older you become, the more challenging it becomes, you know'. Despite having been accepted into a university in the Netherlands, it quickly became no longer an option for him due to the difficulty of getting a scholarship. In fact, he indicated that many scholarships had age limits, which prevented him from considering a wide range of options including countries such as Germany: 'If you are gonna apply for a scholarship, uh, you have to be younger than 40 years to get a scholarship. And I'm older than 40 years. So because of that [an age limit], getting a scholarship was always a challenge'. In both Thomas's and Mark's cases, their options for higher education were significantly compromised, if not reduced, by their age. Conversely, this also implies that UK degrees, usually required a shorter period of study than other country providers, are especially attractive for older and more mature international students.

This was, however, not solely an issue for older students like Thomas and Mark. In the context of rapid growth in the university graduate population worldwide, the sentiments of getting a degree as soon as possible were widespread amongst participants regardless of their age (Oleksiyenko, 2018). David stressed the centrality of time in his higher education choice, as he began his PhD study late in comparison to other students in the UK: 'The time limitation eliminates anything in the US'. When asked why he felt so urgent about getting his degree early, he attributed it to the two year military service that delayed his chance of finishing doctoral study as early as other UK students:

> The fact that in Singapore you [have to] go to military service… it takes two years of your life. And, in fact, when I first began my PhD [in the UK], I was actually two years older than most of my peers. In fact, most of the people here [in the UK], um, some of them complete their PhD before 25. That's amazing. I started my PhD when I was 25. (David, Academic staff, Singapore, DPhil Zoology, Oxford)

Interestingly, students and graduates in his home country were not a point of reference, suggesting the growing sense of global positional competitions amongst individual students (Brown, 2000; Brown et al., 2011).

Similarly, it was for the shorter period of postgraduate study in the UK that Natalie opted for the UK over other study destinations:

> I think other reasons include the duration of the programme. Because, generally, in the US, you have to study for five or six years to get a PhD. And I don't think I can... [study in the US]. I mean I can, but it will put me in a disadvantaged place, if I want to find a job later on. […] Like you have to be under 35 when you apply for this assistant professor position or like [a] lecturer [in China]. (Natalie, China, PhD Urban Design and City Planning, UCL)

Having started her doctorate study in her late 20s, she believed the longer period of study in the US would be a disadvantage in the Chinese labour market where there is a widespread perception of age limits in entering into certain industries such as academia. Although this was not officially written in law, she elaborated further that such perception was quite common in China and generally accepted by people as a norm. This echoes the findings of Xiang and Shen's (2009) research that a growing number of female students from China are choosing to study abroad due to the increasing gender discrimination in the job market. To recapitulate, age not only structures the ways in which international students make choices of country providers and/or institutions, but it also gauges the extent to which those preferences are appropriate.

Balancing a gendered risk: the role of gender

Although less conspicuous, the decision-making process is gendered for some participants. A handful of male participants believed that it was necessary to return upon graduation because of their responsibilities to take care of parents and/or family members. The following narrative from Brian is illustrative of this: 'I wanted to come back to India [after the completion of my postgraduate study abroad]. That is why I chose [the] UK because there are more opportunities in Australia [to stay after graduation]. Like, I get a two year [post-study work] visa. But in the UK, there are less opportunities if you want to stay here'. When asked about why he intended to return to India after graduation, Brian indicated his plan to help expand his father's construction business upon graduation. Although he had a sister who got married and lived near his parents' house in India, he underscored the importance of him as a son to support his parents. This finding chimes with Sondhi and King's (2017) study of Indian students whose mobility decision after their overseas studies was largely shaped by gender relations. They contend that their male participants regarded their return as 'permanent and an end to their migration adventure', with the female participants imagining return as 'part of a migration trajectory still to be continued' (p. 1318). Such desire to return after graduation was a common observation amongst those from India and African countries.

Nevertheless, the role of gender in affecting higher education choices was more prevalent amongst female participants in general. For example, Rachel's (China, MSc Computer Science, UCL) choice of UK higher education was largely framed by her mother as 'easy for a girl'. This was partly explained by no additional exam requirements for universities in the UK as was the case in other countries. This included her home country where the understanding about a subject is evaluated alongside the general knowledge of Chinese politics and history before entering universities. As Sánchez et al. (2006) indicate, the pressures deriving from university entrance examinations and particularly the prospect of failure in the local school system often motivate Chinese students to study abroad or increase their intention to do so (see also Waters, 2006). Although a risk management

strategy was common across genders, this strategy was often gendered, as illustrated by Rachel: 'She [My mother] said, "Because you are a girl, if you choose America, maybe this is really hard for a girl. You must, uh, struggle on yourself. Uh, maybe choose [the] UK"'. This example partly accords with previous research on young, middle-class female students whose degree mobility is motivated by the desire to bypass gender inequalities, barriers and discrimination in the labour market (Kim, 2011; Martin, 2017).

Gendered risks were also observed in the choice process of other female participants including those with caring responsibilities or, more specifically, with dependent children. Despite the burgeoning body of literature on international students in the UK and beyond, the issue of student-parents, and student-mothers in particular, has received to date little attention in existing scholarship (Anderson, 2012; Brooks, 2012, 2015b). In her study of student-parents in two UK universities, Brooks (2015b) indicates that feelings of guilt vary amongst the student-parents depending on gender, institutions attended and social class. Such feelings were, according to her findings, more easily found amongst female, working-class students from a newer university. In her related research on international student-parents, she suggests that her participants' decision to move abroad for higher education was based on the certainty about their choice, and they were thus relatively less susceptible to the sense of guilt (Brooks, 2015a). In some ways, my study corroborates her study findings in that student-mothers were found only at Oxford Brookes University. However, unlike her sample, the dependent children of my participants remained in the home country whilst they were studying in the UK, projecting a different picture of feelings of 'guilt' in the participants' choice process.

When asked about whether she had any difficulties in making decisions to study abroad, Mia (Thailand, PhD Hospitality Management, Brookes) indicated that she had no regrets for coming to the UK alone and leaving her children in her home country. In fact, she revealed that she would have felt much more guilty if she had brought her children with her: 'Even bring them [my children] here... how can I work? How can I study? How to take care of them?' So [for them to] stay there [in Thailand] is better'. Although she

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seemed to express no regret at her decision, a sense of guilt underneath was evident. Interestingly, guilt was expressed in relation to her study, not with respect to childcare. This may be explained by the support she received from her parents in Thailand. Although she later admitted that she often missed her children and did not like the fact of being separated from them, she believed that pursuing a doctoral study was 'more important' than staying with her children. To Mia, the university becomes a site of safety, happiness and self-fulfilment, in which she can escape – albeit temporarily – from the roles she was supposed to take on (see also Quinn, 2003).

In the case of Nichole (Kenya, MSc Applied Human Nutrition, Brookes), a single mother, her mobility choice was not an escape from her responsibility as a mother but the extension of it: '[Studying in the UK is] to be actually supporting my daughter, um, living by myself and all those things'. Unlike Mia, she strongly expressed a feeling of guilt about not being able to bring her daughter with her and her frustration over the high costs of applying for a dependent visa for her child. However, central to her decision was the perception of the UK offering high quality education and better employment prospects. Her desire can be understood as part of her efforts to secure better future employment and construct a positive role model for her child (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Reay et al., 2002). Again, the presence of, and support from, her parents facilitated the choice process, while mitigating the risk associated with childcare. In addition, transnational communication methods such as video calls, SMS messages or photographs partly helped migrant mothers like Nichole and Mia to maintain intimacy with their children across borders (Parrenas, 2005). Despite the sense of 'guilt' – whether explicit or implicit – of not fulfilling their role as a mother for the period of study abroad (Brooks, 2015b), this did not prevent both Mia and Nichole from pursuing their postgraduate study in the UK. Furthermore, in both cases, the gendered risks were partly mitigated through studying in the UK where they could be able to complete their degrees within a shorter period of time.

Diversity at the centre of choice: ethnic minority students

In the UK-based literature, the ethnic mix of universities tends to figure prominently in ethnic minority students' higher education choices (Ball, Davies, et al., 2002; Reay, 1998b; Reay et al., 2005). As described by the existing empirical work which examines the choice process of ethnic minority British students in the UK, some of my research participants – especially, non-white students – highlighted that their race/ethnicity was another significant factor affecting their choices of international higher education. For example, the diverse population of Brookes was appealing to Nichole (Kenya, MSc Applied Human Nutrition, Brookes) for whom studying in the UK was the first time she went overseas: 'I found out [on the website] that the school is really diversified. Like, there [are] lots of people from everywhere and [such image], kind of, gives you… [the feeling that] you don't feel so out? Yeah, so I think that's what I like[d] about Oxford Brookes'. However, there is a difference between ethnic 'mix' and 'swamping' (Reay et al., 2005, p. 129). Whilst such diversity on campus offers the potential of backgrounding and masking race/ethnicity, the dominant proportion of students of her nationality in Nottingham University led Jennifer to accept the offer from UCL instead of Nottingham. She believed there would be fewer Chinese students in UCL than Nottingham, although the reality was different from what she had imagined:

> Well, when I applied [for] this three universities [UCL, KCL, Nottingham] in China, they [people around me] told me that [there are] too many Chinese in Nottingham. So I think, "Maybe I will not, uh, go there [laughs]". But when I come to UCL, [there were] more Chinese than Nottingham [laughs]. And King's give me the offer very late. I already accept the UCL. So [I] just passed [rejected] it. (Jennifer, Chinese, PhD Pharmacy, UCL)

In their study of higher education choice-making processes amongst ethnic minority students in the UK, Reay et al. (2002; 2005) divide their participants into three categories: those for whom ethnic mix does not feature in their thinking about university choice; those who have thought about ethnic mix

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but for whom this is not central to their choices; and those for whom ethnic mix is a crucial factor in their choice-making. Whether students were, in Reay et al.'s (2005, p. 171) terms, 'deracialised choosers', 'race aware' or 'race active', it is evident that ethnic/racial mix of university was seen as a decisive factor for some participants in ruling out certain universities or areas of country (see also Donnelly & Gamsu, 2019).

In fact, the different emphasis placed by participants on race/ethnicity in their choices of higher education intersects with social class. As Reay et al. (2005) suggest, the ethnic mix of universities matters more to those from working class backgrounds than middle-class counterparts. The case of Amelia (India, MSc Social Anthropology, Oxford) is illustrative of this. Although she spoke of how broader geopolitical concerns at the time of her application led her to drop the USA as a study destination, her institutional choice deviated significantly from those for whom race/ethnicity concerns loomed large in choosing where to study, as shown in the above examples. She believed the reputation of a country provider and a university was of great importance: 'And then, there's just left Oxford, Cambridge and UCL. Uh, if I want to do [stay in] academia especially in Asia, like, I need a brand that's recognised. And Oxford, Cambridge, UCL were those brands'. This may be explained by her previous experiences of studying and traveling abroad. For Amelia, studying in the UK did not make her feel out of place compared to those without overseas experiences. Exploring the various class, age, gender and race/ethnicity within which the participants framed their choice-making therefore sheds light on a wide range of concerns, aspirations and experiences surrounding higher education choices in the UK.

Conclusion

The motivations and choices of international students have been focused on how they pursue distinction through the academic prestige associated with elite institutions or place of international study with little attention paid to the extent to which their practices have any potential to move beyond the narratives of distinction and social reproduction (Findlay et al., 2012; Prazeres et al., 2017). Neither does previous research show the way in which international students make their higher education choices or the extent to which the processes of their choice-making within the same educational context differ qualitatively (Beech, 2014, 2015, 2019; Geddie, 2010). I demonstrate that whilst it is indeed driven by employability concerns and career for many participants, their mobility is equally triggered by other non-instrumental motives including transnational mobility aspirations, timepass, personal growth and social betterment. Drawing parallels with that of domestic students in the UK, this study also provides explanation of how participants' choice-making is situated within multi-layered contexts which include the university and workplace/social life in addition to family and peer group (Ball et al., 1995, 2000; Reay et al., 2001; Reay et al., 2005). Furthermore, I highlight the significance of age, gender, social class and race/ethnicity, as well as intersections of these factors, in understanding the choice process of participants.

Given the diverse individual, disciplinary and institutional backgrounds of participants, it seems difficult to tease out their respective impacts on higher education choices. Nevertheless, the study suggests that students' motivations are nuanced and complex, which are mediated by individuals' circumstances as well as institutions they chose to study (see also Brooks et al., 2020). In addition, those from more privileged class backgrounds tend to make their choices of international higher education based on extensive and diverse sources of information ranging from family to educational institutions and work/social life (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Reay et al., 2005). Material and time constraints, respectively, prevent economically less advantaged and older participants from having a wide range of options both within and beyond the UK. The diversity of student population on campus is one of the

main concerns for a group of ethnic minority (i.e., non-white) participants, although the centrality of ethnic mix varies by their class locations. Gender also features prominently in the choice process of both male and female participants with caring responsibilities. The detailed examination of students' choice-making processes therefore challenges a homogenised image of international students as single and young individuals from privileged backgrounds (see, for example, Tannock, 2013; Waters, 2012).

Bourdieu's (1986, 2010) notion of cultural capital is used as a point of departure in order to elucidate the variations of international higher education choice-making processes amongst mobile, and ostensibly privileged, international students within UK universities. I highlight that those with a greater volume of cultural capital generally experience a seamless transition to the UK higher education and express less disappointment and frustration over a country or institutions of their choice. A focus on habitus is also useful in illuminating how the varying level of cultural capital can be compounded by the participants' social characteristics such as class, age, gender and race/ethnicity and how this produces very different higher education choices. Likewise, the concept of field helps to indicate the position of participants in relation to the international higher education field, while contextualising social influences across different arenas of their lives. In doing so, this study responds to Brooks and Waters's (2011, p. 168) call for challenging 'the privileged social position of mobile students'. Also, research into this group of international students is particularly apt at a time of uncertainty faced by the UK HEIs since Brexit. This is borne out not least by a steady increase in numbers of non-EU students in 2020 in comparison to a sharp drop (13.2%) in the proportion of EU students in the same year following the UK government's decision to end home student fees for applicants from the EU in England (Morgan, 2021; O'Malley, 2020b; Stacey, 2020c).

Chapter 6 A future of endless possibilities? Institutional differences in post-study aspirations and transitions

In extant literature, international students' plans and/or trajectories after graduation have been mainly explored by identifying how these students perceive or experience the exchange value of cultural capital obtained from studying abroad (Kim, 2016; Sin, 2009; Tu & Nehring, 2020; Waters, 2006). Given the recent development and expansion of various types of internationalisation in the sector worldwide, the research focus in this area has been expanded to different country providers and/or modes of study (Leung & Waters, 2013; Sin, 2013; Sin et al., 2017; Waters & Leung, 2013a, 2013b). Studying onshore and especially in Western, Anglophone countries (e.g., US, UK, Australia, see OECD, 2018) is still dominantly positioned at the top in the perceived hierarchies of status in the global field of higher education (Findlay et al., 2012; Marginson, 2008). It has been argued that this form of 'overseas education' tends to proffer significant educational payoffs in some national contexts by enabling individuals to accumulate various social and cultural capital, both of which are otherwise difficult to obtain from a local or TNE degree (Ong, 1999; Waters, 2006; Waters & Leung, 2013a, 2013b; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Nonetheless, the emphasis of existing research on *where* students have studied or pursued their degrees has masked the potential of individual institutions in configuring students' aspirations and transitions as well as any institutional differences within the same popular study destination such as the UK (Geddie, 2013; Tu & Nehring, 2020; Tu & Xie, 2020; Xu, 2020).

Drawing on the concept of institutional habitus, this chapter uncovers complexity and diversity in the perceptions, experiences and outcomes of participants who obtained ostensibly similar institutionalised cultural capital through studying in the UK. Institutional habitus, introduced by McDonough (1997) as organisational habitus in her work on the influence of classed high schools on students' college choice making in the US, refers to the 'impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour, through an intermediate organisation' (p. 107). This study adopts Akom's (2003)

definition of institutional habitus, expanded on McDonough's, which is 'a set of dispositions, perceptions, and appreciations transmitted to individuals through a common organisational culture' (p. 306), as it specifies both a mechanism of influence and the types of individual behaviour affected (byrd, 2019, p. 192). The term 'institutional habitus' is preferred over 'institutional culture' or 'institutional climate' in this study, because it addresses the *interaction between* individuals and social structures – more specifically, how the values, beliefs and current practices of institutions not only provide meaning but also shape students' dispositions and preferences and vice versa.

The notion of institutional habitus has been deployed by several researchers to illuminate a 'school effect', that is, the way in which the organisational cultures of schools and colleges interact with student habitus and generate different higher education choices in the UK (Reay, 1998a; Reay, David, & Ball, 2001). As informed by Reay et al.'s (2001) research, institutional habitus is operationalised in this study mainly in relation to educational status, organisational practices, and cultural and expressive characteristics. Whilst the analytical focus of institutional habitus is mainly on the members of institutions and their collective practices, institutional habitus does not necessarily imply that all individuals within a university possess a single habitus. Given that the institution is realised through a variety of not only collective but individual practices, it is possible for each student to develop individualised forms of both similar and differing, *yet interrelated*, habitus (Burke et al., 2013, pp. 171–172, emphasis added). Despite the potential variation across individual habitus, it is through the articulation of these common practices that an adequate examination of those who tend to conform to institutional practices, or not to do so, becomes possible.

Building on existing literature, this chapter aims to shed light on how individual institutions expand or limit the range of opportunities and choices that the participants could envision or realise. I argue that the institutional habitus reflected in different attributes of each institution influences the process whereby my research participants imagine and delimit the field of possibilities post-graduation. The constructs of capital and field are employed

in conjunction with habitus to examine how they construct future horizons. Whilst acknowledging that the research participants in the study are located within a matrix of influences of individual, family, friends and institution (Reay, David, et al., 2001; Reay et al., 2005), this chapter focuses on the ways in which institutional habitus configures their aspirations and transitions. This enables a more detailed examination of institutional differences as well as the interplay between students' habitus and institutional habitus within the same institution (Reay et al., 2010). In doing so, this chapter identifies specific effects from attending a particular university in the UK rather than homogenising institutional effects within the same educational context.

6.1 Educational status

Developed by Rupp and De Lange (1989) in their work on elementary schools in the Netherlands, the notion of educational status is used to indicate the level (i.e., quality) of secondary schooling for which the elementary schools prepare their pupils. Building on this concept, Reay et al. (2001; 2005) assert in their study on students from six institutions (all in or close to London) that educational status forms an integral part of institutional habitus which influences the prospective university applicants' destinations within higher education. However, they fail to present institutional elements (e.g., assumptions, practices and experiences) as features that are inherently and functionally tied to the various social positions of schools rather than students. In the field of higher education, the respective positions of individual institutions are delineated and structured by university rankings through which their status and reputation, as well as performance and quality, are assessed and measured against one another (Hazelkorn, 2015). As the institutional rankings continue to play out on a global scale, the field of higher education has expanded globally (Marginson, 2008; Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007). This section presents how the participants in my research perceive the position of their institutions in both the global and national field

of higher education and how these perceived educational statuses frame their expectations and choices after graduation.

Degree, which degree? The role of differential educational status

The educational status of the three case universities in this study can be differentiated at both the international and national levels. Taking on Bourdieu's notion of field to a global system of higher education, Marginson (2008) maintains that the global field of higher education is structured by an opposition between the elite subfield of restricted production featuring selectivity characterised by modest student intakes and their research focus and the subfield of large-scale mass production centring on generating revenues and market share. Between the subfields are found a range of intermediate institutions which 'have elite roles in their national field and compete in the global research stakes while building high volumes of full fee-paying international students' (ibid., p. 305). As researchers like Boliver (2015) and Brooks and Waters (2009) illustrate, this is replicated within the field of UK higher education (see Chapter 2). For example, both Oxford and UCL are members of the Russell Group, consisting of 24 prestigious, research-intensive universities in the UK. However, Oxford is differentiated from UCL by forming an elite tier of universities alongside Cambridge as the UK's two oldest universities. As one of 35 polytechnics which were granted full university status in 1992, Brookes is a relatively new university and thereby tends to be held in less regard than the other two older universities (Scott, 1995; Tight, 1988).

In fact, these institutional hierarchies are too reflected in the way my research participants perceived their institutions. For instance, some of the participants like Emma (New Zealand, MSc Spatial Planning, Brookes) highlighted important differences between Oxford Brookes University and the other two institutions: 'The course was accredited. It [the accreditation] was one of the things that they [the university] advertised the most I think'. This relates to the university's position as the largest offshore education provider

in the UK (HESA, 2016, 2019). Not only does the university offer international education globally and on a commercial basis, but its onshore programmes are more visibly featured in terms of professional accreditations and industry placements (Sidhu, 2006). Similarly, despite the rising global presence and high reputation within the UK, there is a difference in the way in which the participants from UCL perceived their institution relative to more elite institutions such as Oxford or Cambridge. For instance, making a fine-grained distinction between institutions within the UK, participants tended to evaluate academic worth of their university against criteria other than institutional prestige, such as location (see also Prazeres et al., 2017). This is further evidenced by how the university brands itself on the website (i.e., 'London's Global University').

Notably, the perceived educational status of each institution, defined here as its position in university rankings, is often played out in participants' aspirations and transitions post-graduation. For instance, the perception that Oxford is placed at the top of both the global and national field of higher education was not only shared by participants at Oxford. This is also channelled into their beliefs that Oxford degrees would be highly appreciated and well received in any parts of the world. In fact, two-thirds of graduated students from Oxford (8) were working in the UK or a third country after graduation, with only one current student firmly indicating her intention to return to her home country because of her scholarship requirement. As a recent graduate working in a transnational corporation based in Belgium, Aaron (Engineer, India, DPhil Engineering) recalled having applied for a number of positions within and beyond the UK before taking up his current position: 'I applied to about thirty companies in the UK and another twenty in Europe. [My job applications were] spread[ed] out… in Germany, in Portugal, in France, and also in Prague, Czech Republic, yeah'. Although he later revealed that he had faced difficulties in getting a work visa sponsorship[38] in

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[38] Since the Tier 1 (Post-Study Work) visa is closed to all applicants from April 2012, a Tier 2 (General Work) visa has become the main route for skilled migration in the UK. However, applicants for a Tier 2 visa are required to obtain a job offer that supersedes

the UK, this did not stop him from looking for opportunities in other countries. He believed that having a degree from 'a reputed university' allowed him to imagine himself working in many different countries: 'I think every... everywhere through the world? I don't think it's geographically limited. The degree is quite, uh, universally accepted, I suppose'. This illustrates how his broader geographical imagination stemmed from the global standing of the university.

Echoing Aaron's geographical imagining is Sana who, unlike Aaron, relied on a study loan to support her study in the UK. Reay et al. (2001) argue that working class students' choices tend to be geographically constrained because of the cost of travel and accommodation relating to moving out of the family home. Like other working-class students in their research, Sana too had limited economic capital and thus could have operated within narrow circumscribed spaces of choice. Despite having the pressure to pay back her loan after graduation, she envisaged various possibilities across countries after graduation:

> So this degree really, uh, opens all doors for you. So this degree is, uh, accepted and valued all over the world? There is not a limitation. So that's what I said I'm open to everything. And this degree helps me. I think, as far as the degree concerns, I will have, uh, opportunities in the UK and Europe, US, China, uh, India... everywhere, I think. (Sana, India, Master of Business Administration, Oxford)

This shows how the educational status of Oxford perceived by Sana enabled her to imagine herself working in various geographical locations rather than being geographically restricted, such as working in the UK or returning to her home country, despite fewer economic resources to rely on.

However, educational status sometimes imposes narrower boundaries around choice. For example, a good career choice for many Oxford

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minimum salary thresholds and comes from an employer who is licensed to sponsor Tier 2 migrants (see https://www.gov.uk/skilled-worker-visa).

participants seemed to be the prestige of the workplace, as illustrated by Harriet (USA, DPhil Education; MSc Learning and Technology, Oxford): 'If I have a university degree from, like, the best... one of the best universities in the world, I want to use it in a job that's one of the best jobs in the world or for, you know, employer that's one of the best [in the world]'. Similarly, thinking about furthering her study in the US after graduation, Amelia (India, MSc Social Anthropology, Oxford) described that the universities she was considering for applications were 'Harvard, Columbia, Stanford and Brown [universities]'. Although she explained the main reasons for choosing these schools were linked to the availability of funding and supervisors, the universe of possible institutional choices seemed to be limited exclusively to elite universities. Implicit in their choices was a presumption of compatibility of their Oxford degree in relation to other globally renowned organisations, that is, both educational and employment institutions, which does not exist to the same extent amongst participants from the other two universities.

The degree of possibility was framed differently amongst participants from both UCL and Brookes. Only four of graduated participants from UCL (3) and Brookes (1) were working in a country other than the UK or their home country, although this needs to be treated with caution. The transitions of the three UCL participants were partly related to the field of their study. Given that certain programmes such as international development focused on development work in different parts of the world, participants enrolled in such programmes tended to show more interest than others in working overseas after graduation. Also, a handful of participants (4) who were eligible to apply for a Tier 1 (Post-Study Work till 2012 and now Investor) visa or a Tier 5 (Youth Mobility Scheme) visa[39] at the time of completing their studies almost all ended up working in the UK. For instance, it was no question for Oliver (Assistant Architect, New Zealand, Master of Architecture, Brookes) to work in the UK upon graduation, given that he was able to use the Tier 5 visa to stay in the UK for up to two years. Whilst other participants from UCL and

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[39] Tier 5 (Youth Mobility Scheme) visa allows

Brookes similarly expressed their interests in working in the UK or a third country after the completion of their study, what distinguished them from Oxford participants was the extent to which they viewed working abroad as manageable options and tried to act upon those aspirations.

Olivia's (Scientist, China, PhD Pharmaceutical Science, UCL) words encapsulate the way in which participants from UCL and Brookes set parameters around the possible: '[I could be able to work in the] USA, [the] UK or the whole Europe, Asia… maybe Singapore [laughs]. But, uh, not quite much [in reality] because, yeah, this is very ideal [laughs]'. Despite having no difficulty of stretching out her possibilities geographically, she ended up applying to jobs only in the UK and more specifically in London. The failure to gain employment in the UK after graduation, which she blamed on a restrictive access to work visas, led her to return to China and landed in a job in a global pharmaceutical firm. Notably, inability to obtain work in the UK did not lead her to find opportunities in any of those countries she indicated earlier, especially given that she was not bounded by any scholarship bond or care responsibilities at the time of the interview. Whether the perceived institutional status limited her imagining was not clear, she placed less emphasis on the university's standing: 'Why choose UCL… because it's in the centre of London and the ranking for the UCL, uh, which is mainly [about the] subject in UCL'. This reflects previous studies on international students which emphasise the importance of other institutional features, such as geographical location, to offset a sense of inferiority derived from the institutional hierarchy and provide alternative narratives of distinction based on 'place' rather than academic prestige (Collins, 2014; Ho, 2014; Prazeres et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2014).

Educational status was mirrored in Rachel's post-study aspirations in a more tangible way. When asked about her plan after the completion of her Master's degree, she indicated her intention to stay and work in the UK for two to three years before returning to China. She explained that the main motivation for this was to ensure positional advantage with regards to employment in China. This parallels the recent work of Tu and Nehring (2020) which demonstrates how perceived immobility in China motivated

Chinese international students in the UK to lengthen their stay and accumulate more capital post-graduation. However, I extend their argument to suggest that those perceptions are closely related to the institutions they attend. For instance, Rachel went on to explain that having a degree from UCL – rather than having a UK degree in general – would not be enough to gain positional advantage over local students unless she gains some work experience in the UK:

> I think because I study here, you must have some job, uh, experience here. It's better for you to, uh, [have some work experience in the UK and] back to China. It's just for me better because [if] you study here and then you [come] back to China and find a job, then why not you just, uh, study[ing] in China [from the beginning]? Because if you study [in China and] if you find job in China, it's better. There are a lot of, uh, local student[s] [who] study in China [and], um, the local company really like [prefer] the local student[s]. So it's just like, uh, protection. It's also [sigh] difficult to find a job in China and in [the] UK, so why not just try it? (Rachel, China, MSc Computer Science, UCL)

Unlike an Oxford degree, which many participants believed would suffice to ensure positional benefits, the symbolic worth of Rachel's degree from UCL needed to be complemented by other elements such as overseas work experience. Also, working in countries other than China or the UK seemed quite inconceivable to her: 'Uh, it's difficult for you. You don't study there and apply [a] job in there? It [would be] difficult'. Anxiety and self-doubt marked the post-graduation plan of Rachel and a few other UCL students, which was contrary to the sense of entitlement and confidence prevalent amongst Oxford participants. In Rachel's case, the standing of her institution limited, rather than facilitated, her abilities to picture a wide range of possibilities after graduation.

Likewise, participants from Brookes believed that having studied at Brookes alone would not be sufficient to command the attention and recognition necessary for expanding their opportunities across countries. George similarly acknowledged that the symbolic worth of his degree was inferior to

one from other prestigious universities such as Oxford University. However, when asked whether the absence of instant societal recognition of his university would be potentially a concern to him, he indicated that his university name which contained 'Oxford' would make employers believe that he is from the top institution in the UK:

> I think, that's where it [Oxford Brookes University] stood out from all of that [other institutions]. Because, basically, [attending] the university is not generally… it may not be an advantage [and] all of that. But, um, okay, let me give you an instance now. When I return, if I go back to my country and I go with an Oxford Brookes certificate, yeah? Except someone who knows the school [Oxford Brookes University] very well, I [will] just say I [am from] Oxford [laughs]. (George, Nigeria, MSc Finance, Brookes)

As indicated in the quote above, George believed that he could derive symbolic capital because Oxford – associated with the name of his own institution – signals reputation and prestige. Whether he could actually benefit from this symbolic capital is beyond the scope of this research. Nonetheless, this example shows how he and other participants from Brookes gauged the symbolic worth of their institutions against other universities in the UK. This chimes with Sidhu's (2006) study that highlights the way in which Oxford Brookes University represents itself in its marketing materials. In her analysis of those materials, she has pointed to the prominence of its location in the city of Oxford. This was illustrated by a senior staff member in her study: 'We are successful… partly because of the location, partly because Oxford is a name associate with education' (p. 164). In addition, he planned to use it in his home country, not in other places. This example also relates to Waters's (2006) argument that the relative value of cultural capital is geographically sensitive and the conversion into symbolic capital works only when it is acknowledged and validated by social relations (see also Collins et al., 2017).

The perception of inferiority or lower symbolic value was also prevalent amongst the graduated participants. Take another example of Alice who

returned to her home country straight after completing her Master's study at Brookes. Whilst admitting that she once thought of staying in the UK for work after graduation, she found it challenging to find affordable accommodation in London within the limit of a student loan she took from the American government. Not only was her choice financially constrained, but she felt that she was too old to have a career outside of her country and thus ended up applying for jobs in her hometown: 'When I was there [in the UK], I was 28 years old. So I was older than a few people on the programme. So it seems, you know, kind of, right to go back home'. Although she got a job of her dream in the publishing industry upon graduation, she attributed this to overseas study and internship experiences in the UK rather than the degree from Brookes. Her doubt over whether her degree would make a significant difference to future employment became more evident after she was recently made redundant from the job: 'Um, I don't know how much it would help... I think the fact that I've lived abroad twice. […] I think to that end, it would be an advantage. But I don't think the actual specific degree would matter as much as just having the experience in general'. She went on to point out that the reputation of the university would matter more than having a degree from the UK:

> I think, probably [it] depends on the university. Because, you know, maybe if I applied for the job in the UK [and] they [employers] would be familiar with Brookes and its reputation, [then I] may be, you know, [having better opportunities than] someone also from the States who went to some school that they've never heard of. But if they went to Harvard, that would be a different story [laughs]. (Alice, USA, MA Publishing, Brookes)

Although in this case the field of possibilities were initially hindered by her personal characteristics (e.g., age and lack of economic capital), the influence of institutional habitus on her capabilities was relatively weak compared to the participants from other institutions. Overall, these examples suggest how the educational status of the university perceived by the

participants plays a part in geographies of possibility, as well as what is a logical and plausible choice, for their future.

6.2 Organisational practices

Whilst organisational contexts and processes have been frequently mentioned in identifying institutional habitus in previous studies, there has not been a coherent understanding of what is – or is not – included in these practices and in some cases they were only vaguely mentioned without teasing out details (Reay, 1998b, 2001; Reay et al., 2010; Smyth & Banks, 2012; Thomas, 2002). Given that the purpose of this chapter is to show the institutional effects on the participants' post-study aspirations and transitions, this section will focus on the following aspects of organisational practices: the quality and quantity of careers service and resources, and other informal institutional connections with the field of work. These resources and connections operating at the institutional level enable participants to cultivate both formal and informal networks which they could later capitalise on (see, for example, Brinton, 2000). The availability of such networks therefore affects their abilities to envisage future opportunities and choices, making certain aspirations and transitions unthinkable, possible or probable (Bourdieu, 1984). However, I go on to argue that whether the amount and extent to which the participants can utilise institutional resources varies depending on the institutional context.

Levels of careers support and advice within different universities

As identified in extant literature on transitions to higher education, one key aspect of institutional habitus that impacts on students' post-school decisions is the quality and quantity of careers service and resources (McDonough, 1997, 1998; Reay, David, et al., 2001; Reay et al., 2005). My research found similar differences amongst the three universities, where there were differing advice practices despite some common provisions across the institutions

such as career fairs and one-to-one advice appointments. For example, several participants from Oxford indicated that the university provides a wide range of additional careers guidance including micro-internships and student consultancy programmes. In fact, there were a variety of programmes at Oxford University which are not readily available in other institutions. Examples include the Student Consultancy, the Researcher Strategy Consultancy, Insights Programmes, Personal Development Programme for Women among others[40]. This may be partly explained by the high income of the university, which is nearly 493 million pounds in 2017/18. This is almost double or even triple the amount of income the other two universities generated in the same year[41].

Natasha is a good example of someone benefitting from one of those careers programmes through which she gained actual employment after graduation. Relying on relatively limited financial support from her parents to fund her Master's study at Oxford, she emphasised that it was important for her to secure a job in the UK and ensure the return on investment. She alluded to me that she did not have previous knowledge and experience in the UK labour market and particularly in the industry of her interest: 'Because [as] an international student, first of all, I had no [work] experience [in the UK]; second[ly], I had a lot of, um, voluntary and part-time experiences [in different industries] in India'. However, she indicated that she learned about the opportunity for a micro-internship during a fresher's fair. She believed that this provided her with the industry experience she was lacking and helped her to achieve the goal of staying and working in the UK after the completion of study:

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[40] Oxford University Careers Service Skilled Programmes (see https://www.careers.ox.ac.uk)

[41] Oxford University Financial Statement 2017/18 (see https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation/finance-and-funding/financial-statements-oxford-colleges-2017-18?wssl=1); UCL Financial Statement 2017/18 (see https://www.ucl.ac.uk/about/how/financial-information); Oxford Brookes University Financial Statement 2017/18 (see https://www.brookes.ac.uk/about-brookes/structure-and-governance/policies-and-financial-statements/#financial)

So University of Oxford has their schemes. One of their schemes are micro-internship. Um, I came to know about micro-internship in the fresher's fair. It really got my attention because these are only for five days and you get a very tangible result in only five days. And then that was this opening time and I applied for it. And I applied only in a very few… one or two and, uh, got selected in, uh, one of those. […] And that is where I'm working, to be honest, right now. Uh, my internship got converted to job [in the UK]. (Natasha, India, MSc Comparative Social Policy, Oxford)

In addition, the university's linkage with global employers was evidenced in the case of Felicity (Associate Lawyer, China, MSc Law, Oxford). After learning that several internship programmes were available exclusively for Oxford students during her studies, she decided to apply for internships in the regional office of an intergovernmental organisation in China. She believed that coming from Oxford University offered the easier access to internships in the intergovenmental organisation: 'It was through, uh, Oxford internship programme where I applied. As an Oxford student, I think it is, uh, different procedures from general applicants. They have some, kind of, special programme between Oxford and [the intergovernmental organisation based in China]'. Whilst relating to her previous work experience there, she recalled having met a lot of Oxford graduates who obtained internships and/or work opportunities through a similar route. This suggests a high degree of coupling between elite universities and global companies, as suggested in extant literature (see, for example, Brown et al., 2004; Michaels et al., 2001; Rivera, 2015).

Strong connections with employers were also reflected in the quality and quantity of career fairs. Several participants from Oxford believed that the university's career fairs gave them frequent and extensive exposure to different companies across various sectors. Aaron partly attributed this to the university's standing, as shown in the following excerpt:

I mean... it came to nothing. But they [the university] do give you a platform of attending different career fairs. So every term, at least

three or four fairs happened, and then different companies come and give their presentations. So [there are] a lot of, uh, different companies, and [you can] see which one fits your profile. […] Because it's Oxford, a lot of companies prefer to come there and, uh, present there [career fairs at Oxford]. So yeah, it gives you a larger pool to choose from. (Aaron, Engineer, India, DPhil Engineering, Oxford)

Although indicating that he did not get a job through this channel, Aaron still valued such opportunities to explore alternative options to choose from. Likewise, Daisy (University Student, MSc Learning and Technology, Oxford) indicated that she received useful information about a French business school she was interested in at that time through the university's career fairs: 'Um, I actually went to a career fair in Oxford, and then the French schools were there. At least ... the current school I am in had the table there, and I actually talked to people there. So that was also helpful'. The opportunity to directly receive information about and interact with the business school of her interest made choice of the current business school real and realisable. Since the business school she was currently attending was highly ranked amongst the top business schools in Paris, this also shows a strong linkage between University of Oxford and other prestigious universities which tend to share similar institutional habitus.

Whilst Oxford tended to capitalised on its prestige and standing in terms of resourcing of careers advice and support, UCL benefitted from being part of the University of London – a collection of 17 independent member institutions located in Greater London area. Operating as part of the umbrella body of several London universities (i.e., the University of London Careers group), the university shares and manages careers related information such as job openings in online platforms across those institutions. Also, London was foregrounded in the careers support at UCL. For instance, five universities[42] of the University of London Careers group – all located in central London –

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[42] Included in these five universities are University College London (UCL), King's College London (KCL), School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Goldsmith, and City.

take turns in holding joint careers events, through which students were able to obtain careers advice as well as to build up social networks with people from other London universities. This was highlighted by one career staff from UCL: 'We have, uh, global career series which is [are] five different events based on the different region[s] in the world. And that's with the four of the university colleges [in London]. So, for example, this year, UCL hosts the event focused on Southeast Asia, and the students can go to any of those five events [across the London universities]'. This, she believed, also helped to attract and host more employers in the university's career fairs than other universities engaging individually:

> We have the careers fairs and that would be, kind of, quite common across the universities. But again [they are] the bigger one[s], I suppose. So we have 900 employers that come on campus every year. So it's quite big. […] Cos otherwise employers from other countries are unlikely to invest in the expense of coming to visit just one university. Um, so our location and ability to collaborate helps us [to] do something different [from other institutions in the UK], I think. (Career staff, UCL)

However, such institution-wide provisions based on the advantage of university location were rarely mentioned or utilised by the participants from UCL. Whilst it was unclear whether they were aware of various resources offered by the university's careers office, the lack of awareness of those provisions on the part of UCL participants points to the gap between the quantity and quality of careers support and guidance available at the university.

Although no interview data are available with career staff at Brookes and therefore it is difficult to identify institution-specific careers support, many student participants noted that they had used resources for careers guidance commonly found at other universities such as careers fairs and one-to-one appointments. When asked about the extent to which the university's careers support was accessible, the prevalent student view was that support provided at the university level was less likely to result in securing

employment after graduation. Many participants commented that advice tended to be generic and, at times, not helpful, often being referred to working on their CVs or attending career fairs in the university, as illustrated by Simon's narrative:

> Because I want to have, uh, like a[n] internship experience. But I don't know how to start. So I talked with them [the university's careers office] and they told me [I should] do some CV, uh, résumé first. When I finish the CV, they need [asked] me to come back to talk with them again so [that] they can check my CV. They told me that I can [then] use this CV to apply for a[n] internship or a job, yeah. […] I haven't talk that part [finding internship opportunities] with her [a career staff]. But I just ask her, um, "Will there be some company com[ing] to the campus and looking for, um, students to work with them?" And she told me that "Yeah, there is a chance that they come". But I haven't talked much because she just told me to do a CV first. (Simon, Thailand, MSc Business, Brookes)

In fact, the ineffectiveness of university-level careers advising was also observed by some of the participants in other two universities, which was in many cases complemented by other informal networks (e.g., departmental connections) as discussed in the section below.

Making connections within the field of work

Informal institutional connections within the field of work also played a significant role in shaping parameters within which participants assessed the viability to take on certain academic or occupational pathways. For instance, whilst dreaming of becoming a medical doctor, Edward (Canada, DPhil Population Health, Oxford) imagined himself working as a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University or a research/policy advisor in World Bank if his plan of attending a medical school did not work out. He believed that having connections with his faculty members at Oxford would enable him to obtain those opportunities more easily than would be the case if he had studied

elsewhere: 'It was through, uh, contact[s] here that I'm able to reach out and hopefully, um, collaborate with one of the leaders in my field who is at Harvard? But I don't know if I'd be able to have the same connection without being introduced through someone with recognition from this university, you know'. Implied in his assumption is that key members of staff would have close contacts with other prestigious institutions, thus making those options imaginable and feasible for him.

Making a similar observation to Edward is Jasmin. She highlighted that her summer project, part of her course requirement during her studies at Oxford, was conducted at an institute in a European country which she described as 'one of the most well known in the field of her interest area [in the world]'. When asked how she found this organisation, she indicated that many of her classmates were encouraged to locate institutions with which the university had 'some sort of tie-ups', although they were free to choose themselves any organisation they would like to work with. Less formalised, although influential, was such guidance about where to apply, generating a feeling that those were the most appropriate places to work as Oxford students. Moreover, not only did this tie lead to her work experience in Europe, but it also led to a further employment opportunity in one of the partner organisations of the institute she temporarily worked for:

> So my paper that I did at the summer project… I presented it later at the workshop. And over there [my current employer], which was the partner organisation [of the institute] at the time, offered me a job. So they are [an Asian country] based. So then, a few months later [after finishing my study at Oxford], I moved to [that country]. (Jasmin, Consultant and researcher, Indian, MA Public Policy, Oxford)

Similarly, when I asked about his future plan after graduation, Daniel listed potential work opportunities for him without much difficulty, as illustrated in the following:

> So in the UK, apart from UCL, I think the only other viable option would have been Oxford. Like, the labs there, kind of, collaborate with UCL

quite a bit anyway. Um, and then the US? Because there are lots of people from the US who actually did their PhDs here went back to start their own labs in the US. So they are, kind of, collaborating in some sense. Um, and potentially Canada? So like UBC – University of British Columbia. Because we also have people who are working in a related field but not directly [have] ties with the current lab based in UCL. Um, I did consider Berlin in Germany, cos we have a sister's centre there that is working on a different aspect of what we do. And they are, kind of, expanding their research institute right now. So I think there is [are] a few opportunities there. (Daniel, Singapore, PhD Neuroscience, UCL)

Daniel's ability to imagine working in multiple organisations and therefore advance his aspirations in different parts of the world was largely shaped by the informal connections of his lab in UCL, that is, the extent to which potential workplaces have close ties with his current institution.

Existing ties between his institution and a potential employer were also played out in the study-to-work transition of Joseph (Consultant, Chile, PhD Psychology and Human Development, UCL). When asked about how his transition from university to work had unfolded, he revealed that the opportunity for his current job came through departmental e-mails: 'In my last weeks, I received an email from IOE [Institute of Education] saying they [my current employer] are looking for a new researcher for different projects [in my field]. So I sent my curriculum vitae there. […] Once I applied for [his current employer], I received the response one or two weeks later'. However, he underscored that this opportunity in itself did not yield the employment. It was, he believed, the match between the advertised opportunity and his previous work experiences that brought about the smooth transition to his current position. Nonetheless, the connection that his department had with various organisations related to his field of study opened up the work opportunity for him.

Whilst the participants' aspiration and/or transition in previous examples were underpinned by long-standing relationships with a number of organisations with a similar status, which members of academic staff or department had

established, there seemed to be a lack of such networks at Oxford Brookes University. This was highlighted by Chloe (Japan, MSc Business Administration, Brookes). She expressed disappointment and frustration over not being able to opt for a client project (i.e., internships), one of the options to choose from as a graduation requirement of the university, because of a lack of know-how, that is, how to find potential employers: 'I wish I could find a UK company [for a client project], but I actually don't know how to access to them [UK companies]. And I have no idea of, um, like, contact them?'. When asked about whether the programme had any ties with UK companies to work with, she replied, 'Nothing. Nothing'. Although she wished to have a 'practical' experience in UK companies through the client project instead of writing a thesis or doing a synoptic project (i.e., conducting a case study), it became no longer an option for her and she had to give up the project she was interested in. This thus affected her abilities both during and after her Master's study to navigate the field of work in the UK.

However, there were a handful of participants at Brookes who still benefitted from the connections between their programmes and some of the companies. For example, Emma (University student, New Zealand, MSc Spatial Planning, Brookes) indicated that she obtained two internships, both during and after her study, through e-mails from her course administrator. However, these internships ended up with the short-term experiences for her, not resulting in full-time employment or further opportunities elsewhere. Likewise, Alice (USA, MA Publishing, Brookes) noted the ease of getting internship opportunities during her studies through the links of her programme. While she acknowledged that having such industry experiences helped her to get an initial job, she doubted that the institutional ties – exclusively limited to the UK labour market – would continue to be of use in finding new job opportunities in the US. These examples show that participants from Brookes, with a few exceptions, tend to have considerably less extensive and established institutional resources and networks that they can resort to after completing their studies.

6.3 Cultural and expressive characteristics

In their study of higher education choices of sixth form or further education college students in Greater London area, Reay et al. (2001; 2005) consider cultural and expressive characteristics to be less tangible but equally crucial as educational status or organisational practices to institutional habitus. The authors relate the cultural and expressive characteristics to the 'expressive order' of the school, which includes expectations, conduct, character and manners (Bernstein, 1975). They argue that these features are represented in the form of embodied cultural capital – for example, in the dress, demeanour and stances of students, in the histories and qualifications of school staff, and in buildings, rituals, performances (p. 37). Although they did not document these aspects in greater depth, other related studies highlight how certain factors – for example, class and race of students and staff, and place (e.g., urban areas) – influence the ways in which universities, and individuals in those universities, operate (Allen & van der Velden, 2011; Angod & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2019; Horvat & Antonio, 1999). In the following section, I first provide context on the significance of class, race, and place to the participants in terms of defining cultural and expressive characteristics of their institutions. I then demonstrate in detail how these constructions of institutional habitus both enable and hinder the participants' post-study aspirations and transitions.

Classed and racialised institutional habitus

Race/ethnicity and class have long been identified in educational research, alongside other factors such as gender, as shaping students' school experiences and access to educational opportunity – especially, higher education choices (Ball, Davies, et al., 2002; Reay, David, et al., 2001; Reay, Davies, et al., 2001; Reay et al., 2005, 2009). Whilst these studies have added insight into how race and class function to influence individual students in the school context, relatively less attention has been paid to how these factors affect the way in which institutions characterise themselves and

operate. Horvat and Antonio's (1999) research on African American girls' experiences in an elite secondary school in the USA represented one of the few exceptions. Adopting a Bourdieusian framework, the authors delineate the process whereby both race and class impact on the institutional habitus which then interacts with, and ultimately shapes, students' individual dispositions. This section expands on this research to demonstrate how the classed and racialised institutional habitus are sometimes in conflict, or align, with the participant's habitus. Moving beyond explaining the process of choosing a university, I argue that this congruence or dissonance influences the way in which the participants experience education and conceive the field of possibilities after graduation.

The dominant habitus of Oxford University was marked by a sense of privilege based on whiteness and significant class resources. Some of the participants pointed out that the symbolic markers of the dominant white racial organisational habitus were epitomised by a curriculum which is closely related to faculty members in the university. For example, Amelia indicated that the expertise of the faculty and the curriculum of the department were narrowly focused on its academic tradition rather than following the current trends in the field:

> It's a bit, um, surprising [that] there isn't a lot of critical engagement on the racial front. A lot of, like, critical race theory things [are] happening nowadays, which again is so surprising given how like so many parts of the UK have become multi-racial? It's just very surprising that they are still stuck in their 200 year old tradition of Anthropology and they pretend [as if] nothing is changed. […] Because as much as I love my department, at the end of the day, there are all white men studying mostly non-white societies. And it's just like this [already] stopped happening like 50 years ago in the rest of the world. […] And, um, I think, that has been my biggest, sort of, disappointment with the university. (Amelia, India, MSc Social Anthropology, Oxford)

As indicated in the above quote, Amelia had the strong impression that her faculty was not only dominated by 'white men studying mostly non-white

societies' but also made little effort to incorporate new, critical perspectives on racial issues despite the growing racial diversity within and beyond the UK society. Moreover, the way in which the funding was allocated to students in her department signalled to her the hierarchical dominance of race in the university, shaping a different sense of place than, for example, other white students in her programme: 'I mean, my biggest disappointment was with regard to how the university runs its funding and, um, the way in which the history of department works. Again, it's given out to people who study things similar to the faculties. So it's like white people [who] studied non-white societies'. This suggests that the implicit racial hierarchy of the university was reinforced through the curriculum and faculty as well as other departmental practices. However, caution is exercised that not every discipline at Oxford follows such tradition and, as indicated by several participants below, the race/ethnicity of students – particularly those at postgraduate levels – had been increasingly diversified over the years.

Much like Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the institutional habitus of Oxford is rooted in the cultural practices of the university. For example, many of the participants pointed to some of the traditions concerning the classed habitus of the university. Edward vividly pictured some of the traditions that have made the university a 'really special and unique place' in the following:

> So things like, um, so eating dinner in a formal hall – you'd be dressed up and you wear these weird gowns, you know, and it will be a candlelit dinner and it's beautiful. And, um, or when you start to be officially inducted into the university, you have to be matriculated. And during [the] matriculation, you start in your college, and then you walk with your college mates to the Sheldonian theatre, and you enter. And, um, the chancellor or vice chancellor speaks in Latin at you. You don't really know what's going on. Um, all you are aware is your becoming a student at the University of Oxford. […] They've been doing this matriculation ceremony for, like, I don't know, 1,000 years. […] It's, like, those little things [that] have gone through the generations. (Edward, Canada, DPhil Population Health, Oxford)

This example illustrates that the markers of certain class features such as 'a formal hall', 'gowns', 'a candlelit dinner' and 'Latin' were implicated in these cultural practices. Not only did these practices signal a level of privilege associated with the university, but they also contributed to the making of elite subjects.

However, it is important to note that different members of the university have a different relationship to the institution, with a few participants distancing themselves from this classed and racialised institutional habitus and displaying a sense of not belonging in the environment. This was evident in Jasmin's narrative below. She discerned that the 'elitist' cultural practices of Oxford can be 'very intimidating' and 'excluding' if they do not come from upper-class backgrounds or belong to ethnic majority (i.e., white) of the university:

> I think, uh, it's quite elitist? It's very elitist. I mean, it's very easy for people to feel intimidated by Oxford. That is not to say I felt intimidated. But I could see how it was [can be] intimidating… [the] atmosphere. Because there's a lot of traditions. There's a lot of, you know, things they [need to] follow… a lot of customs. There's a lot of things happening. […] There's a lot of, sort of, dinners and halls, you know. […] It's fun. It's very quaint. It's very interesting. But it can also be very excluding – so somebody who is not [part of the upper-class], you know, yeah. And the sense that it is for a certain class of society is quite problematic because it [gives] panics to people who would otherwise, you know, want to study or be eligible to study there et cetera. So in that sense, I think [the university is lacking] in terms of inclusivity. But I think that is not so bad [at] the Master level. I felt that, uh, in an undergraduate situation, it's quite bad, I think. Also, [there are] not as many coloured people… things like that. (Jasmin, Consultant and researcher, India, MA Public Policy, Oxford)

This resonates with the notion of 'symbolic violence' which is manifested in the imposition of the norms of the group possessing greater power on those of the subordinate group (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Although the marginalisation of other class cultures did not

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feature prominently in the participants' narratives, they commonly indicated that such practices of ostensibly upper-class culture were viewed as more legitimate and appropriate within the university. This therefore exerted, in Bourdieusian term, symbolic violence to those who did not embody this dominant class culture. It is, however, important to note that there have recently been growing student movements against racisms, classism(s) and sexisms on campus across the UK, such as the *Why is My Curriculum White?* Collective at University College London in 2014 and the *#RhodesMustFall* campaign to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town in 2015 (Murrey, 2019; emphasis in original), although none of the participants in this study seemed to be aware of, or engage in, those movements.

Whilst Jasmin noted that social and physical distance that non-white students might feel was relatively less at the postgraduate level, several participants nonetheless expressed their uneasiness and discomfort with whiteness of the institution. For example, Daisy (University student, China, MSc Learning and Technology, Oxford) observed that the university's tone was 'too white', and this was a source of concern during her study: 'I know there are a lot of Asian students, so I don't feel, um, [isolated] most of [the] time. But if it's so white, and if there's no black, as an Asian, [I feel] it's not right because we are still the minority [in the university]. And even if I don't feel anything [discriminatory] on the very surface level, um, I just doubt it's very equal'. This was also supported by Oxford University's statistics on students with Black African or Black Caribbean heritage[43] who accounted for only 2.6 per cent of total UK students admitted in 2018.

One of the most common ways that the participants experienced distancing from the dominant habitus was the lack of interaction with people from other cultural backgrounds or ethnicities. Describing his programme as consisting of mostly the UK or US students, Harry (Academic staff, Hong Kong, DPhil

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[43] Facts and figures on undergraduate students with Black African or Black Caribbean heritage at University of Oxford (see https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/facts-and-figures/admissions-statistics/undergraduate-students/current/ethnicity?wssl=1).

Social Sciences[44], Oxford) explained the difficulty of 'get[tting] into their social circle'. His study experience at Oxford was looked back on with some bitterness, which was characterised by 'being distant by [from] the college environment or the community [in general]'. Not only did this lead him to establish and remain within his social circles made up predominantly of fellow Chinese – mainly Hong Kong – students on campus, but this also influenced his decision not to actively search and apply for jobs in the UK. This sense of otherness, affected by the extent to which the participants distanced themselves from the dominant classed and/or racialised habitus of the university, sometimes caused pain and hurt, and affected their experience during, as well as after, study in the UK.

Nonetheless, the majority of participants believed that they would be well prepared for the future through superior academic education and training they received at Oxford. Edward, for example, believed that skills gained from his DPhil training would offer a positive convertibility into highly skilled employment beyond his home country: 'The skills I'm gaining from, uh, this training – like working with big datasets, coding in several different languages, and learning data visualisation – are all [the] things that I think that organisations around the world are looking, uh, you know, seeking for'. This was also the case for those who criticised earlier the class- and race-defined habitus of the university. Amelia revealed that she was not sure at first about her career prospects after deciding to read a Master's degree in Social Anthropology. However, planning to further her study in the same field, she explained how the education in Oxford helped her to find her place in academia:

> The course's been phenomenal. I think subject matter wise, it's really solid. And it's a lot of work while you are going through it, but at the end of it I think it's very rewarding. In my opinion, I think it's one of the best accidents that ever happened to me. I fell in [love with] everything about this place being Anthropology. [It] has been so much fun. I'm

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[44] This participant wished to remain completely anonymous, with his discipline and current position being broadly referred to as Social Sciences and academic staff.

like a kid in a candy shop [laughs]. I think I found my place in Anthropology. (Amelia, India, MSc Social Anthropology, Oxford)

As shown in these examples, the exposure to the organisational habitus of Oxford University does not always restrict the participants' outlooks. Like African American girls in Horvat and Antonio's (1999) study, my participants believed that the classed and racialised habitus of Oxford proffered a range of benefits, including knowledge and skills, to navigate future action in their lives. However, it is worth noting that the experience of some participants – especially those with the dissimilar habitus – was marked by tension and a sense of otherness.

The sentiment that whiteness and class privilege constituted the central organisational habitus of Oxford University was contrasted with the perception of other two universities as expressed by the participants from UCL and Brookes. For instance, Payton (USA, MSc Human Resource Management, Brookes) explained that his programme is 'so international' that apart from one student from England, the majority of students were from 'all over [the place]'. This also echoes the observation made by UCL participants, describing their peers and colleagues in similar terms such as 'people from different countries' (Naomi, Singapore, Neuroscience and psychology, UCL) or 'a good mix of people from all over the world' (Katie, Canada, MA Education and International Development, UCL). Given the proportion of international students is usually higher in specific disciplines such as business or engineering, the participants in those programmes were more likely to have exposure to international peers than those studying in less popular programmes. However, it has to be pointed out that the institutional habitus of both UCL and Brookes was less salient than Oxford in terms of class and race/ethnicity, lacking the cultural practices or features of a certain class as well as the dominance of one race/ethnicity over others.

In their study of UK undergraduate students' perceptions of home and international academics at a British university, Tebbett et al. (2020) suggest that cultural homophily is central to how students perceive and experience encounters with international and home academics. This is borne out by

Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students who generally prefer being taught by international migrant academics over home counterparts. As opposed to their research participants, the diverse student and/or staff body was frequently pointed out by several participants in my study as rather unexpected. The predominance of international staff in his institution was a surprise for Simon (Thailand, MSc Business Management, Brookes) who indicated that the majority of faculty members were predominantly non-white and non-British: 'I expected to have a [white] British teacher in every subject but, in fact, I have a Chinese [teacher] and [an] Indian teacher. It's not that bad but, um, sometimes I just don't understand their accent[s], and it's mainly confused [confusing]. So that is the downside [of studying at Oxford Brookes University], I think'. The reason behind this frustration and disappointment over the composition of student and/or staff body was elaborated ironically and humorously by Ellen:

> The reason why I want[ed] to study in [the] UK is because I want to meet more foreigner students, uh, to learn the culture from other countries. […] 90 per cent of students in my programme is from mainland China. I think that is not really what I really think [expected] before I get [got] into here. I thought I can have a lot of foreigner, uh, classmates? And then I thought I can, uh, improve my English? But, um, after [all], I just improved my Mandarin [laughs]. […] If you choose the course with a lot of Hong Kong people or a lot of Chinese people, then why [did] I come to [the] UK to study? (Ellen, Hong Kong, MSc Environmental System Engineering, UCL)

As evident in Ellen's narrative, the exposure to valued linguistic cultural capital that could have been converted into personal development opportunities was limited because of the diversity or, in this case, the lack of presence of native English speakers in her programme. Also, she believed that this prevented her from building social capital and having a truly international experience which she associated with a UK education. Furthermore, the above narratives provide a glimpse into international students' perceptions of the UK population as predominantly white, which

constitutes the historical and current majority of the people living in the UK despite the increasing ethnic diversity over the years (ONS, 2019).

Notwithstanding, the overall diversity of these two institutions was the source of not only the price but also promises for some of the participants. For Katie, the high proportion of international students in her programme helped her to gain broader, global perspectives within a short period of her study in the UK. This exposure to various cultures, knowledge and experiences through her study, she believed, would be beneficial for her career in the future:

> The majority of the class was actually international students, which was nice. Cos we learned from each other's experiences as they gave us more exposure to global experiences? I think it [the international experiences gained from the interaction with other students] will allow me to work anywhere I wanted to, really. (Katie, Canada, MA Education and International Development, UCL)

Likewise, Naomi (Singapore, PhD Neuroscience and psychology, UCL) believed that the presence of people from different countries on campus made it easier to internationalise her networks, through which to expand her social capital: 'I think, uh, people coming from all the different countries to come [here] to study. […] And actually it's a good way to network as well? Because, um, that's where you can collaborate or that's where you can visit people or can have, like, friendship all over the world'. These examples illustrate that the relatively less racialised and classed institutional habitus did not cause a similar tension amongst the participants as observed in the case of Oxford. However, this did not bring about the same assessment of academic and social worth associated with their degrees, with only some, and not others, linking the social mix of class and race/ethnicity positively.

Place-specific institutional habitus

Allen and Hollingworth (2013) employ the notion of place-specific habitus to examine the interconnections between place and career aspirations for

creative industries among young people (aged 14-16 years) in three urban areas of deindustrialisation in England (i.e., London, Nottingham, and Stoke on Trent). Place is understood in their study as a broader area, that is, local communities. They argue that the spatial, as well social, location of young people delimits their aspirations for careers in the creative sector. Although less underlined in the study, they did point out that school practices can also frame what are acceptable and unacceptable career pathways to pursue. Whilst place is crucial to shaping habitus of individual participants, I argue that it too occupies an important part of the institutional habitus; that is, place is integral to, not separated from, the organisational habitus of institution. The concept of *place* here moves beyond local communities to comprise surroundings both within and around a university. This section focuses on how the participants' constructions of institution as place shape their aspirations and transitions post-graduation.

Research on elite boarding schools by Angod and Gaztambide-Fernadez (2019) reveals that pastoral landscapes of three boarding schools in Germany, the United States, and Canada are key to the process of making elite subjects who internalise the sense that they 'belong everywhere and can do anything' (p. 288). Viewing such disposition as premised on a ruling relationship with land and therefore largely colonial, they contend that the vastness of pastoral landscape communicates the sense of endless opportunities. This research found similar narratives within Oxford University, where participants described how the landscape of university was intertwined with their study experience and contributed to a sense of entitlement to endless opportunities. Many participants pointed out that studying in grand, historical campus buildings gave them a sense of privilege associated with the university. This was illustrated by Chris (Postdoctoral Associate, DPhil Engineering Science, Oxford): 'I think it was kind of, uh, living in a fairy tale. Because I hadn't experience anything, like, living in, you know, a city of building of a few hundred years of a history. So it's, um, very different and in a good way to me'. In addition to its historical buildings, a variety of academic, athletic and community-related activities available within the pastoral landscape also featured in the following participants' narratives:

You have all of these things in a city that has been built from the 13 century. It's stunning… [the] architecture. And you can bike everywhere. And, um, you know, the social life here is incredible. There's always stuff to do. It's so many communities you can belong to. You can play just about any sport that exists. (Edward, Canada, DPhil Population Health, Oxford)

So they were something for everyone over there [Oxford University]. I mean, Oxford was really open and free and accepting. [The university] help[ed] you to develop a person you want to be. And I would always be grateful to the city and to the university for helping me live there in a free spirit manner. (Aysha, Consultant, India, MSc Learning and Technology, Oxford)

As shown in the above examples, the opportunities for self-exploration were similarly limitless to the participants within the landscape of abundant resources. It is through this environment that the participants learned to embrace, and claim their entitlement to, endless opportunities. Jacob, who had had multiple opportunities in different parts of the world after graduation, encapsulated the perspectives of other participants at Oxford University: 'The opportunities [and] the possibilities are endless. So I think that's really up to how I position myself. So the possibilities are endless because, I mean, I've got an opportunity in Australia. I've had the opportunity as well to work in China, yeah. I think it's based on what I want to do'. This horizon, traditionally only allowed for the selected few (i.e., male, white/English, privileged class backgrounds), became available to, and internalised by, the participants regardless of their gender, class and race/ethnicity.

In the case of UCL, the university is constructed by the participants as a place that is inseparable from London. Although London is a backdrop to the university, the participants tended to attach the university with its surroundings. This was noticeable in Naomi's (Singapore, PhD Neuroscience and psychology, UCL) perception of her university: 'Um, I quite like the campus itself? I quite like that. I just like the feeling that, you know, different streets [in London] are different parts of UCL'. This can be partly explained

by the way in which the campus buildings are scattered around the city (see Chapter 4). However, it was for this very reason that the university was not always seen by several participants in a positive light. For example, finding a lecture room became a part of the chaotic and disorganised routine for Ellen (Hong Kong, MSc Environmental System Engineering, UCL): 'In Hong Kong, we have the fixed classrooms for a semester for the courses. But here, [we change the venue] for the new lecture every week. Sometime[s] we have the lesson in mathematic buildings. Sometimes in Russell Square. Sometime in Warren Street. Sometimes, like, in [on] main campus. I think that is so messy here'. Describing it ironically as 'an adventurous game', she nevertheless believed that this gave her the opportunities to explore the campus as well as the city while in the UK.

Beyond just appreciating the university's location, several participants were imbued with a sense of excitement and ambition over the positional possibilities that studying in London presented. For instance, Richard (India, PhD Education; MSc Education, UCL) underscored that studying in UCL enabled him to easily network across departments and other London universities. The access to world-class researchers in his institution added to his confidence in fulfilling his career aspiration: 'Where is the place which can offer such kind of things? I'm hoping that with the education [and all] the experiences [I had in London], I would be able to be in some, sort of, uh, commanding position where people would find some value in my work'. Similarly, the visible presence of buildings and statues related to historical figures, such as Charles Darwin and Virginia Woolf, near the UCL campus influenced the way in which Thomas envisaged himself and his future:

> Um, I feel like I'm part of history. So I live not far from here. And on my way to school, I get to see like a place where [Charles] Darwin used to live. Um, I get to see all sorts of history, as I'm walking by. I get to see where Virginia Woolf [statue is situated]. I get to see, um, all these amazing like trendsetter[s]… people who've like changed how the world thinks. And that's why I'm here. That's a huge reason why I'm here. [It] is for that networking to be part of that [the reason]. That culture to be part of, um, [the reason] yeah. […] [It is to become]

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somebody that make a difference in the world. (Thomas, Canada, PhD Culture, Communication and Media, UCL)

Likewise, the way in which the participants described Oxford Brookes University is specific to place(s). Central to the construction of Brookes was its geographical proximity to London as well as Oxford University. Several participants from Brookes identified this as a key strength of the university, as illustrated by Sabrina (Indonesia, MSc Finance, Brookes): 'I still prefer Oxford Brookes because, uh, this location is near from London. And also for [the] environment. I love this environment. I love Oxford [laughs]'. This place-specific institutional habitus was also reflected in the participants' imagined horizons of future opportunities. For instance, having gained the internships in both Oxford and London, Payton (USA, MSc Human Resource Management, Brookes) attributed this largely to the locational advantage of his university: 'Um, also the location [of Oxford Brookes University]... it had the best location. I have opportunities to find an internship in Oxford as well as in London'. These examples show how the place-specific institutional habitus came to feature within their field of vision, that is, 'plausibility structure' of the participants (Skeggs, 2003, p. 139).

In fact, their plausibility structure is reinforced by the ease of travel to London. This made job opportunities in London viable for many of the participants, including Chloe (Japan, MSc Business Administration, Brookes): 'Oxford is really, uh, it's really convenient [in terms of] transportation. Like, you know, coach [is] operating 24 hours. And it's really easy to go to London and then [may be] easy to find a job'. However, it is important to note that the desire to work in London is also closely related to the availability of visa sponsorships. This was particularly applicable to those wishing to stay and work in the UK after the completion of their studies. Given the high concentration of global foreign financial and professional institutions in London (see, for example, Beaverstock & Hall, 2012), Payton thought that it would be logical to look for jobs mainly in London: 'With an American visa, the only realistic way I could stay [in the UK] would be [to] find an American company who would sponsor me to stay. It would mostly likely be in London.

So to be close to there [London] would be the logical thing to find a potential employer'. With multiple factors impinging on the participants' career aspirations, the physical accessibility of the university to the capital city fed into their capacity to view London as a possibility.

In addition, proximity to Oxford University, and the exposure to people and resources from Oxford University in particular, contributed to broadening positional possibilities for Brookes participants. As residents in Oxford, the participants were given access to resources at Oxford University, such as Bodleian Libraries. The relative lack of research resources was frequently pointed out by those on PhD programmes, including Amy (USA, PhD Anthropology and geography, Brookes): 'Um, at Brookes, I thought the library, like, the resources of the library weren't so great in my opinion. They didn't have access to very many online journals'. Having additional resources such as these was therefore perceived as 'a plus' for Mark, a PhD student from Ghana: 'Since I came [to Oxford Brookes University], I've had opportunity of going there [Oxford University]. I have the library card. I can go to the library and borrow books. […] I may have an opportunity to go to Oxford to, uh, attend some programmes'. Not only would this complement relatively limited resources at Brookes, but he believed it would also enhance his knowledge and experiences in the field through which to open up various possibilities other than his previous position as a university lecturer: 'Once you finish your PhD, you have an opportunity to teach. You can also have an opportunity, I guess, to maybe consult for [the] government. You can also work in industry or agencies that [are to] do with education. I'm also interested in, um, setting up the business'. The flows of resources within the city therefore serve to expand a framework for what is 'thinkable' for the participants. This also points to the significance of materialities of learning in students' experiences, as evidenced by previous research (Brooks & Waters, 2018; Fincher & Shaw, 2009; Gunter et al., 2020; Wainwright et al., 2019).

The advantage of the university being close to a prestigious institution was also noted by Sabrina (Indonesia, MSc Finance, Brookes): 'I've been surrounded by, uh, people that study in Oxford University, you know? When [if] you socialise with their people, it will encourage you to think, um, similar

with them'. As indicated in the quote, she believed that the proximity to Oxford University would provide her with the opportunity to mingle and associate with elite social networks. Also, it is through these social exchanges with Oxford University students that she hoped to accumulate and embody valued cultural capital and dispositions. However, this can be viewed as what Quinn (2010) called 'imagined social capital'. Making connections with Oxford students can be turned into 'real' capital only if Sabrina maintains these relationships and operationalises the networks. She did not so far have a chance to interact with Oxford students since arrival in the UK and neither did she have opportunities to communicate with them regularly. This also echoes Bourdieu's emphasis on time:

> The reproduction of social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed. This work […] implies expenditure of time and energy (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 250).

Despite the fact that frequent if not regular encounters are highly unlikely as a non-member of the university, the presence of Oxford students near her institution certainly enables her to access at least in part social and cultural capital circulating in the area. Caution should be exercised when interpreting these findings. It is worth noting that the positive perception of one's university can be interpreted as post hoc rationalisation, given that the interviews were conducted *after* their arrival in the UK (see also Waters, 2018). Also, the sense of inferiority was equally present – albeit to a different degree – amongst Brookes participants in comparison to those studying in the other two institutions.

Conclusion

Extant research on the aspirations and transitions of international students has focused on how they perceive and/or experience the transferability and convertibility of overseas degrees across national borders. However, the

extent to which their degrees have a positive exchange value is usually associated with, and is often limited to, country providers and/or modes of study. I demonstrate in this chapter that individual higher education institutions and the social environments they engender play a significant role in framing their possibilities and choices. Firstly, despite having the same UK cultural capital, my research participants construct the field of possibilities differently according to the educational status of their institution in both the global and national field of higher education. More specifically, the extent to which the participants perceive or experience the global receptivity of their degrees affects their abilities to envision those opportunities and options. Whilst some organisational practices are common across the institutions, each university and sometimes a department or programme commands different levels and types of careers support and employs various strategies to maintain connections with employers. Lastly, the cultural and expressive characteristics of universities, including the dominant class and race/ethnicity of student and staff as well as the location of institutions, are identified as another mechanism through which the participants expand or demarcate their future horizons.

Noticeable differences between three universities are identified. Oxford participants tend to express broader geographical possibilities than those from the other two universities based on their beliefs that their degrees – regardless of their academic disciplines – will be accepted globally (Findlay et al., 2012; Marginson, 2008). In the case of participants from the other two universities, their geography of possibilities seems contingent on the area of study. The global standing of Oxford is also reflected in its quantity and quality of careers provisions which feature the exclusive network and investment of employers. The resourcing of other institutions is different; for example, UCL appropriates its locations as resources to cultivate employer connections. However, various careers support across the universities would be only effective provided that they are aware of these services and are eligible for visa sponsorships. Moreover, Oxford is perceived by many participants as a predominantly white and upper-middle class institution, and UCL and Brookes more diverse and international. These perceptions are

sometimes in conflict with participants' dispositions and preferences, although they too function as the source of promises for them. The findings also extend Allen and Hollingworth's (2013) argument that participants' career aspirations and transitions are mediated through place(s), that is, not just around, but also within, a university.

This chapter critically intervenes in the tendency for scholars to measure international students' aspirations and transitions by the perceived or experienced exchange value of cultural capital. Building on existing empirical work that draws on the notion of institutional habitus, it extends its focus beyond higher education choice-making to the ways in which individual universities play a part in configuring participants' future opportunities and choices (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Ingram, 2009; Reay, 1998b; Reay, David, et al., 2001). The institutional habitus, operationalised here as a concept encompassing educational status, organisational practices, and cultural and expressive characteristics, throws light on the significance of various aspects of each institution and how they relate to the participants' experiences during and after their studies. Also, this notion makes visible how participants respond to the institutional habitus which is sometimes in line or conflict with their dispositions, perceptions and appreciations. Despite the growing diversity of higher education providers in the context of internationalisation of higher education, the experiences of participants at three different UK universities point to the need to be attentive to the role of individual institutions within the same educational context in shaping the field of possibilities.

Chapter 7 In pursuit of 'an international career': International students' aspirations for onward mobility after graduation

Under the conditions of neoliberal globalisation, students are encouraged to be internationally mobile through studying and/or working abroad in order to utilise opportunities provided by the global economy (Brown et al., 2011; Brown & Tannock, 2009). The notion of an international career, defined vaguely as a job overseas, work abroad, or a career with global/international aspects, is frequently used in research on international students to reflect on this trend. For instance, previous studies have shown that international study is motivated not just by a desire to study at a world-class institution but also by the pursuit of an internationally mobile trajectory and, more specifically, an international career (Findlay et al., 2017; Marcu, 2015; Packwood et al., 2015). It is also suggested that those who graduate from 'world-class' universities are more likely to have such a career (Findlay et al., 2012; Marginson, 2008). Yet, very little existing empirical work involves explicit delineations of how an international career is understood and pursued by international students. Nor is its significance extended beyond conferring substantial positional advantage in the global labour market (see, for example, Bozionelos et al., 2015; King & Sondhi, 2018; Mohajeri Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Wiers-Jenssen, 2011).

In making these arguments, I suggest that Bourdieu's (1986, 1990b, 2010) notions of capital, habitus and field provide useful tools through which to explore the construction of an international career. Specifically, I propose that these concepts not only help to delineate the messy ways in which an international career is produced; they also direct critical attention to how it is perceived and experienced differently by participants. Whilst my research concerns how attending institutions with various prestige may affect students' perceptions and experiences of an international career, little differences are found across the three universities. The focus of this chapter will therefore be to identify differences between students rather than the institutions they attend. The field is understood here as both field of origin and new field(s), the latter of which refer(s) to the UK and/or a third country. The objective

position of the agent in the field(s) shapes, and is shaped by, habitus which in this chapter alludes to participants' dispositions towards transnational mobility in general. Habitus, which often intersects with one's social characteristics such as class, gender, race/ethnicity and age, interacts with various forms of capital s/he possesses within the field(s) to engender practice, that is, the pursuit of an international career. The interplay of these three conceptual tools illustrates why some participants, and not others, find the dominant conceptions of an international career that focuses on transnational mobility imaginable and feasible. However, this does not prevent participants from exercising agency and producing alternative narratives of an international career.

This chapter extends the scope of extant literature to explore the ways in which an international career is envisaged and practised by internationally mobile students in UK higher education. The notion was explicitly introduced by me during the interview, with interviewees elaborating further their views of an international career. Other concepts such as global, national and local careers were also explored to capture the relational nature of an international career. I argue that the perceptions and/or experiences of an international career vary greatly depending on participants' position in the field(s), their habitus, and the possession of different forms of capital. In the following section, I first show the ways in which the dominant framings of an international career that valorise transnational mobility are perceived and experienced differently by my research participants. I then discuss how their career aspirations, intertwined with various considerations, are constituted through orientations that are simultaneously 'local' and 'international'. Lastly, I demonstrate how an international career is understood as a process of 'becoming' for some participants. In so doing, I attempt to move beyond its narrow focus in the existing scholarship on superior employment outcomes in the global labour market.

7.1 'Mobile' international career

Bauman (2009) argues in his book *Globalization* that 'mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among the coveted values – and the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or postmodern times' (p. 2). Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that almost half of the participants (12 graduates and 16 students) either had the experiences of working in the UK and/or a third country or expressed their intentions to do so after graduation. Many participants also defined an international career as 'working abroad [outside of home country]' or 'frequent traveling to and from other countries'. Likewise, my participants believed that *degree of mobility*, that is, 'freedom to choose where to be', is what differentiates an international career from a national or local career (Bauman, 2009, p. 86; emphasis in original). Notwithstanding the ostensibly similar understanding of an international career, the perceptions and experiences of such a career varied by participants. This difference was also observed within those already working or intending to work in the UK or a third country after graduation. This section demonstrates how the UK or a third country was envisaged by some as a place to start again, with others constructing it as the social space within which to continue their elite, 'high life' trajectory.

Improving life chance opportunities

In his ethnographic study of European citizens engaging in international mobility, Favell (2010) calls into question whether mobility should still be linked to higher social status or privilege under present conditions of globalisation. He suggests that given the ease of travel (in terms of access and costs), the spatial mobility of these individuals for education and careers abroad is more concerned with improving chances of better employment and social mobility in a new country, rather than pursuing a hypermobile lifestyle of the most socially advantaged (see also Favell et al., 2007). My research also found a group of participants whose decision to move was driven by

ambition, frustration, or boredom, which Favell (2010) refers to as 'social spiralists' (p. 95). A case in point is Payton who articulated without hesitation his aspiration for an international career after completing his studies, not least because he would be able to stay and work in the UK and possibly in other European countries:

> I want to have international career, um, cos I wanna stay here. I am hoping Brexit doesn't happen so [that] I can have more opportunities to, like, work in Europe? Um, I would love to work abroad. Coming over here [for a Master's degree], I thought this is the way to help give me the opportunities to actually realistically work internationally. […] I don't wanna go back [to my hometown]. Um, politically one. Um, Trump got elected. And I was like so offended especially what happens with healthcare in America? Um, then I was like, "I don't wanna be here". […] Two, cos, it's just, like, I am sick of it. And three, It's not fun. It's not exciting. [...] After I graduated [from a university in my hometown], I worked, um, in commodities trading. So I did that for [a] couple of years. I advanced. But after two years, I, kind of, made as far as I could. And then, I was, like, "Okay. I'll try to go to other firms". Wasn't having any luck. (Payton, USA, MSc Human Resource Management, Brookes)

Looking into Payton's narrative in more detail revealed that his preference to work abroad was mainly due to frustration with his life in USA. For him, getting a postgraduate degree in the UK not only provided a means to avoid the unfavourable economic, social and political environment in his home country. This points to the significance of socio-political climate in furthering student mobility (Li et al., 1996). He also believed that an international career would provide him with a second chance to achieve social mobility and make a difference in terms of his life chance pathways blocked at home. Interestingly, the reasons that initially drove him to pursue his postgraduate study in the UK equally shaped his career aspirations and influenced the ways in which he conceptualised an international career. This mirrors the findings by Findlay et al. (2012, 2017) that the motivation for international

student mobility is closely linked to subsequent mobility intentions relating to the rest of the life-course.

Despite Payton's narrative of self-(re)making in the new social field, he seemed to struggle over the stakes to be won in the game. When I asked him about whether he had any potential employers in mind, his reply was vague and general, lacking details of how he can gain desirable employment and status outcomes in a new context: 'I think any, sort of, big, small company, um, private organisation, charity, public organisation... HR [Human Resources] is in all that stuff. So I don't have a, like, particular preference'. The only 'realistic' strategy he came up with was to find 'an American company in London' to sponsor his work visa, although he did not have any personal contacts or institutional social capital to capitalise on for locating and gaining access to these companies. Moreover, given the reliance of a student loan from the US government and hence the lack of economic capital he could dispose of, not only was his scope for venturing into other fields (e.g., Europe) limited but he indicated his plan on returning home if this strategy fails. Payton demonstrated a weak employment strategy and was prepared to return to his home country in the eventuality of not being able to succeed in that strategy. Whilst this is likely to result in a socially reproduced dominated position in both old and new space(s), the construction of an international career was largely influenced by his eagerness to 'leap abroad' and venture into new terrain.

Career progression was similarly a strong motivation for Nathan to engage in an international career which he defined as 'working outside Japan [his home country]'. When I asked Nathan about what he did after the completion of his study in the UK, he recounted a series of work experiences across different countries including Jordan, Sudan and Egypt. He indicated that all of these work experiences lasted between three and four months mainly because of the visa issues. Nathan highlighted that NGO workers tended to get paid a relatively low salary due to the voluntary nature of work. This often made them not eligible for work visas, leading them to rely on tourist – temporary – visas during their stay. Although none of these were smooth transitions, he believed that such international experiences would be necessary for his

career prospects in the long-term. In fact, he partly attributed the failure in his job applications after the completion of his Masters in the UK to the lack of professional experiences abroad valued in the international development field. This was one of the reasons why he was constantly motivated to venture into different countries for his work.

Moreover, having higher degrees – both Masters and PhD – overseas was integral to his plan for an international career: 'I really want to be on the field [in developing countries] to do the type of [counselling] job. So, in that case, I think it's better to have, um, internationally well known… universities'. The perspective on international higher education akin to Nathan's was not uncommon, given the rise of mass higher education and associated overcrowding of graduates in the labour market across the world (see, for example, Bowman, 2005; Brooks & Everett, 2008; Mok & Neubauer, 2016). On the basis of her research on overseas-educated graduates in Hong Kong, Waters (2009) suggests that in the context of credential inflations and growing competitions for graduate jobs, individuals are seeking academic and occupational distinction through specialised postgraduate degrees such as the Master of Business Administration (MBA). However, unlike her research participants, many participants in my study indicated that a Master's qualification abroad would not necessarily suffice to secure promising positions in the labour market. In fact, this was precisely what motivated Nathan to pursue his PhD overseas in the future. The following narrative is illustrative of this:

> So, like, [in] five years, I want to go back to school to study psychology. And then [ultimately I want to] counsel [as a professional in the field]. […] I talked to some graduate schools [in the UK and the US] and then they told me having research experience in a professional position is a big advantage. That's one of the reasons why I decided to work for this company because I can obtain research experience as a professional position. But, at the same time, I really want to see the like their situation in the field, uh, especially for refugee children. […] I don't know how long I am gonna work for this company, but maybe after I work for certain period, maybe I will consider moving to an NGO

or something which works on education and social support particularly. (Nathan, Research Officer, Japan, MA Education and International Development, UCL)

Nathan was acutely aware of the value attached to such international experiences and the benefits that are likely to accrue to him. This resonates with Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) notion of 'mobility capital' which she defines as 'a sub-component of human capital, enabling individuals to enhance their skills because of the richness of the international experience gained by living abroad' (p. 51). With Nathan, an international career – as well as international higher education – was envisioned as a means to accumulate 'mobility capital' to capitalise on later in his life. However, it seems that the possession of mobility capital would be rendered only effectual in contexts outside of his home country. As he indicated in the following, his desire to move is largely shaped by no or little opportunities in Japan relating to his specific interest areas: 'I do not want to work in Japan as a counsellor or something because I think there is no, uh, there are not many opportunities in Japan to work for refugee children as a counsellor'. Partly grounded in his ostensibly free mobility decision, and the pursuit of an international career, was the limited work opportunities that forced him to move. These examples lend support to a growing body of literature on student mobility which demonstrates how students draw on international mobility in order to escape academic failure or unemployment in their home country (see, for example, Kim, 2018; Szelenyi, 2006; Waters, 2006; Yang, 2018).

Pursuing a (hyper-)mobile lifestyle

In their study of elite schools across different countries, Kenway et al. (2016, p. 171) refer to 'students [who] leave one elite school in their home country and travel to attend another elite school internationally' as 'elite circuits'. They go on to suggest that these elite circuits are part of what Bauman (2009) calls 'global hierarchies of mobility'. Similar to those students who are constantly on the move by choice, there were some participants in my

research whose aspirations for transnational mobility were driven by the pursuit of doing what they like in the place of their preferred choice. Henry (Taiwan, PhD Architecture, UCL), who was in his mid-30s at the time of interview, was one of those participants who fit into such a portrait. When I asked if he ever thought about having an international career after graduation, he explained this as follows: 'My priorities [would be] to have an international career because I enjoy see[ing] differences… the diversity of, uh, culture in different areas and regions. I mean if I stay in, uh, the same area or place for a long time, I get bored. That's my personality'.

In fact, Henry's dispositions towards mobility relates to his extensive – albeit short-term – overseas experiences, ranging from a student exchange during summer in Japan, an academic conference and research for a month in the US, a summer school as well as an exhibition in the UK. Importantly, these experiences were all facilitated by the financial and practical support of his father who is a professor in the same field at a university in China. This accords with Brooks and Waters's (2010) research, which suggests the propensity for educational mobility is often implicitly inculcated by parents and family members who engage in overseas travel for family holidays, work or other personal reasons (see also Pimpa, 2005; Singh et al., 2007). Following his privileged background, he could easily find a position and maintain his territorial class advantage through his established social contacts in Taiwan. Nonetheless, he believed that an international career would better serve his cosmopolitan outlook and lifestyle needs. In other words, it is considered 'normal' for him to pursue a career abroad and deal with new cultures. Also, his interest in working at his current institution in the UK or the universities of similar prestige in other countries after graduation made it a preferred choice for him.

Similar remarks were also found amongst those with little or no experiences abroad prior to their postgraduate studies in the UK. Aaron (India, DPhil Engineering) is typical of this group in explaining how his time in the UK affected his attitude to onward mobility more generally:

> Aaron: I just came directly from India. I've just visited but never lived abroad.
>
> Jihyun: Where do you think you will be able to work?
>
> Aaron: I think, every... everywhere through[out] the world? I don't think it's [work opportunities] geographically limited. The degree is universally accepted, I suppose. […] And engineering... you can study anywhere else and land a job.

Having prestigious engineering degrees from both India and the UK, it was a matter of choice for Aaron to pursue his career in his home country, in the UK or elsewhere. Importantly, he believed working in a different country could open up more opportunities to transfer to many different countries than going back to India: 'More or less one of the main reasons [why I wanted to get a job in Europe] is because I didn't get any jobs in the UK. Also, I have been in the UK for a long time, so I wanted to come out and explore other parts [of the world]'. Notably, both Henry and Aaron were drawn to an international career by what these careers would offer them in lifestyle and personal experience terms rather than by any narrow economic calculus. Furthermore, whether or not their aspiration for an international career was developed before or during their studies in the UK, studying in the UK has been central 'to enter[ing] an international career and hav[ing] an internationally mobile trajectory' (Marcu, 2015).

For some, the attraction of an international career is to allow one to combine lifestyles or experiences which working abroad could afford with career progression. For example, Natalie believed an international career would provide her with the opportunities to live and experience countries 'other than your native country'. Like Henry and Aaron, she elaborated that her interests in an international career were largely shaped by engaging in international higher education over the years rather than being part of the plan upon the completion of studies in the UK. More specifically, she underscored that such aspirations were developed only after she spent one year in Italy during her Master's study in China. This was further facilitated by her current doctoral study in London:

I wasn't really like a person who likes traveling a lot. I wasn't that kind of person. But through all these years, I've been to these different countries and cultures, [and] I've become gradually really interested in changing the environment from time to time. And I would like to have the opportunity to have this career where I can, for example, work for two years in this country and then move to another place to try different kind of life there and then move to another city. (Natalie, China, PhD Urban Design and City Planning, UCL)

It is worth noting that career advancement is not entirely secondary to overseas living and working experiences. Distinguishing UCL from elite universities such as Oxbridge, Natalie described her degree as 'not quite recognised' and 'not very distinguished' and went on to underline the need for pursuing a career abroad: 'I think I will actively look for the opportunity to stay here [in the UK] or in other countries just to gain more experience. Well, in another way, if you want like teaching or other jobs in academia in China, it's very useful to have experience in overseas institutes'. In other words, she equally saw an international career as a window of opportunity that would add more value to the institutionalised cultural capital and therefore enable her to apply for higher-level positions upon return. Furthermore, as an only child, she pointed out her caring responsibilities for parents and imagined an international career within the context of eventual return to China. Having an international career was therefore perceived by her as a vital and circumscribed practice rather than the opportunity solely to explore unlimited personal and professional possibilities elsewhere. This example reflects Tu and Xie's (2020) work on female Chinese student migrants in the UK, which elucidates how the extent to which these 'privileged daughters' can achieve upward social mobility and geographical mobility through overseas education and career is circumscribed by traditional gendered expectations (e.g., marriage, childbirth) in China.

Evidently, the pattern of pursuing a 'mobile' form of international career was largely gendered. Single, male participants were more likely to envisage a future international career than were female counterparts who voiced more strongly caring responsibilities and relationship concerns. When asked about

the possibility of returning to Taiwan, Henry indicated that he may have to go back 'one day' – which he vaguely referred to as maximum 20 years – to take care of his parents in Taiwan unless they are willing to move abroad with him. Echoing Henry's opinion is Aaron who envisaged his return in 'probably 10-15 years'. Relationship concerns did not figure prominently in any of their narratives. In contrast, female participants like Natalie indicated their plans to stay and work overseas only for a shorter period of time in order to gain work experience and eventually land a job in her home country. This was not an exception for graduated participants like Esther (USA, MSc Education and International development, UCL). Despite having worked for non-governmental organisations in the Philippines and then Cambodia after completing her degree in the UK, she began to question the footloose nature of her work. She explained that as she grew older, she felt responsible for taking care of her mom and her younger brother. This gendered difference in the pursuit of an international career partly reflects what Yeoh and Huang (2011, pp. 681–682) describe as the attributes of 'the perfect global corporate citizen':

> This virtual being who floats effortlessly between cities should be between 35 and 38 years of age, speak no fewer than three languages, and be single with no children. […] No need for a partner (and especially a wife) because partners only cause trouble.

Given the emphasis on transnational mobility these participants placed on an international career, female participants regardless of their institutions tended to exclude themselves from having a 'mobile' international career in the long-term, and such a career seemed to be less integral to their projected future. As Geddie (2013) underlines in her research on international science graduates in London, the UK and Toronto, Canada, gender continues to play an important role in shaping post-study mobility decisions of many female international students (cf. Kim, 2016; Sondhi & King, 2017).

7.2 International career 'at home'

In *Class, Self, Culture*, Skeggs (2003) argues that 'mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship'. Of particular relevance to the discussion are dominant assumptions about mobility which are often grounded in masculine understandings of 'the mobile subject' who also tends to be racialised and classed (i.e., white, male and privileged). As briefly discussed in the previous section, not all the participants subscribed to the mobile form of international career in the long term. Neither were they able to embark on such a career even if they did so. Here I concur with Cresswell (2000) who underlines the importance of understanding mobility in relation to specific contexts where mobility or immobility takes place – such that what is a practice of domination in one context may be an act of resistance in another. In this section, I draw attention to the narratives of the other half of interviewees (27) who neither plan to be internationally mobile nor engage in transnational mobility post-graduation. I first present a range of different emotional, moral and practical considerations of participants, which highlights how their perceived or relative immobility is not always a reflection of disadvantage or disempowerment. I then illustrate alternative pathways of pursuing an international career amongst ostensibly 'immobile' participants.

Negotiating emotional, moral and practical concerns

Previous research on international students indicates that their work aspirations and transitions after study are closely intertwined with various relationship and practical concerns. For instance, Geddie (2013) contends that their migration and career decisions are balanced out by relationship considerations including family (e.g., parents and siblings) as well as partners (see also Marcu, 2015). Practical issues faced by international students after graduation were also highlighted by Mosneaga and Winther (2013) who indicate that the study-to-work transition of international students and graduates in Denmark are significantly conditioned by structural factors such as Danish immigration policies (see also Tu & Nehring, 2020). This

suggests that internationally mobile students may not be able to, or choose to, be mobile professionals or workers at the end of their studies abroad (cf. Li & Lowe, 2016; Urry, 2012). Unsurprisingly, this sentiment was more prevalent amongst female students and especially those with caring responsibilities (e.g., parents, children) who felt obliged to return to their home country. For many of these participants, having an internationally mobile lifestyle or trajectory post-graduation was not considered a real option. One participant, Nichole, felt attracted to an international career which she believed would be beneficial for personal growth, as it requires her to be anywhere at any time for the service of people and the greater good. Nonetheless, the way she anchored her identity as a mother (and potentially a wife in the future) led to her active dis-identification from an internationally mobile career:

> In another life, international careers would be perfect. I would be everywhere in the world and try and help almost everybody. […] But in my realistic life, I would not like to move around a lot. I'm also fulfilling my duty as a mother and maybe a wife [in the future]. Um, I would like to have, like, a permanent place where I can raise my daughter [and children] all that. As much as I would love the [personal] growth [through an international career], I want to settle [down for my family] in the future. That's, kind of, my culture. (Nichole, Kenya, MSc Applied Human Nutrition, Brookes)

Nichole's understanding of an international career as 'self-sacrificing' was understood in relation to her responsibility to take care of his daughter as a single mom. She went on to explain that this would disturb her orientation towards family which was regarded in her culture as 'the unit of everything'. However, as shown in the narratives of female participants in the previous section, their orientations towards an international career varied greatly depending on the extent to which the participants negotiate their family orientations and/or caring responsibilities.

Also, there were some caveats that the perception of an international career was largely dependent on participants' subject areas. Linking it to one of the

outcomes of globalisation, the pursuit of an international career in itself was 'antithetical' to Amelia, an anthropology Masters student at Oxford: 'Having studied Anthropology this year, I became slightly obsessed with different forms of knowledge. My fear is that we are saying these things [international careers] are valid because the market recognises them and everything else is getting pushed to the background, that's very very terrifying as a prospect'. Given that Amelia had originally majored in law in India before starting her study at Oxford, the influence of academic disciplines was evident in how she understood and felt about an international career:

> The ones that are flying all over the place… trying sort of closely working with clients in different parts of the world, like finance lawyers, seem [to be an] exhausting life [laughs]. It seems like a very high stake, high pressure way of living a life. [...] I have a lot of reservations with international [careers] as an idea as well. I just philosophically don't agree with that. […] The one thing that I have decided is that [as an anthropologist] my research area is always going to be tied to, in some way, like, it's going to be rooted in India. […] It's gonna mostly be based around home. (Amelia, India, MSc Social Anthropology, Oxford)

Juxtaposing 'high flying' lawyers with 'rooted' anthropologist, she highlighted that her prospect of having an internationally mobile career would be unlikely. This partly resonates with Cheng's (2018) study of private degree (i.e., non-elite) students in Singapore that what individual students study largely shapes how they make sense of the world and develop their cosmopolitan identities and sensibilities.

In fact, the manner in which the participants negotiated their career aspirations was also influenced by their own evaluation of locations which can be beneficial for their career. For example, undergoing an uninterrupted medical training was inevitable in the case of Adam whose ultimate goal would be to become a clinical doctor. To him, onward mobility for work to a third country or across different countries would be of no use: 'It's difficult to see what progression that I can make out of it because I could not fix to a place for a long time. I am saying if you stay in one place you'll see yourself,

uh, a progress that you can make. Like, you know, you'll be finishing your training at this point and what can you do after the training'. In addition, the responsibility to stay with his partner and start his own family alongside other structural factors figured prominently in his decision to return:

> It's actually because of the stage of my life [He was in his 30s at the time of interview]. […] Um, in the UK, I have fewer choice for my clinical interest. […] I want to do [specialise in] neurosurgery. All the positions [for neurosurgery] will be taken in the first round, because it's a popular one. First round is only open to British or EU people. So foreigner [non-EU people] doesn't stand a chance. […] So that'll put me out for [an] international career for now. You know, after I've become a specialist, then I can go anywhere I want. So for now it's [impossible]. That's the difficulty. (Adam, Malaysia, DPhil Population Health, Oxford)

Although indicating a degree of possibility to move around in the long-term, Adam doubted that pursuing a high-flying international career upon the completion of his doctoral study would make a significant difference to his career advancement in the sector. Instead, pursuing a stable high-status, high-pay career at 'home' – a place where he plans to eventually settle down after the completion of his studies at Oxford University – was more practical, and the benefits of staying in that place were clearly seen to outweigh those associated with pursuing a career overseas. Moreover, the fact that he would not be able to work as a clinical doctor in the area of his interest meant no reason for him to stay in the UK after graduation. This supports previous studies which demonstrate how capital accumulation strategies in the UK are constrained by an individual's national origins (Brown & Tannock, 2009; Sin, 2016).

Similarly, returning home was not a question for Abigail (Singapore, MSc Geography, Oxford). Given that she was a Singaporean government scholarship holder, she was expected to return and work a local civil service job after the completion of her study at Oxford. Her future career trajectory is clearly outlined, with jobs in the government lined up and waiting for her. This

was contrasted with the uncertainty over those studying overseas without any concrete plans after graduation, which she believed to be of high risk and confer little return on investment. Also, having a degree from a public university in Singapore, Abigail saw good chances of finding opportunities in her home country: 'At least I know, in Singapore's case, a lot of companies including international firms [would recognise your degree] if you are from a public university. But if you are from a private university, um, it's a little bit tougher'. For Abigail, having international careers – what she interpreted as 'working overseas' – is therefore a less secure route than taking up local jobs in Singapore to consolidate her positional advantage. These examples are parallel to the findings of Forsberg's (2017a) study on young people in Kalix, northern Sweden. She argues that the decision to stay – or what she calls 'the right to immobility' – may not necessarily be made from a disadvantaged position but based on the possession of different forms of capital that is recognised locally.

Between 'local' and 'international'

With a few exceptions as such, most of the participants constructed their ostensibly parochial work aspirations in ways that are equally 'global/international'. In other words, the negotiation of different considerations produced orientations towards an international career that oscillate between 'local/national' and 'international/global'. Although having thought about staying and working in the UK after graduation, Felicity explained that she decided to return to China after considering the practicality of pursuing her career there and the sense of responsibility for her parents: 'Because becoming a lawyer in [the] UK you have to do two year's more study and two year's trainee programme. That's add up as four years [in the UK]. And my parents want me to stay closer with them. So that's part of the reasons why I come back'. Like other female participants, it seemed that having an international career would not be a feasible option for her. However, when I asked her about the extent to which her job was similar

or close to such a career, talked about how her job in her home country was in itself an international career:

> I think the current job I am working for totally matched all the elements [of an international career] because I was doing, um, cross border disputes. Basically I was working on cases where they are trialled in the UK. I have three cases last year once in the UK, once in Hong Kong and once in Singapore. And the people I was working for, uh, can be found [in] different offices. Right now, I work with London office and Hong Kong office. But I also previously worked with Australian offices very closely. (Felicity, Associate lawyer, China, MSc Law, Oxford)

In Felicity's case, an international career meant simply working in an internationalised work environment where the scope of her work involves everyday dealings with clients and colleagues from other parts of the world. She described her work as 'exciting and fun' because 'it's, like, dealing with people from all over the world. And then [you can] see the differences in the way they think [and] work'.

The emphasis on the nature of work in constructing an international career was also evident in other participants. Matthew (China, MSc Environmental Systems Engineering, UCL), for instance, explained that as long as his work involves 'collaborating with companies in other countries', he would be having an international career. This was also echoed by Chloe (Japan, MSc Business Administration, Brookes): 'My opinion is working in the international global company. For example, using English for doing conference and, um, like, negotiat[ing] something with English speaker'. The way they understood an international career closely relates to how they perceived the field(s) of work – in this case, the UK and China/Japan. Planning return home after graduation, Matthew also pointed out the difficulties of working in the UK: 'Because it's very difficult for, um, Chinese students to seek a job here. Uh, even for [those with] the engineering background'. However, it is important to note that the following response from Matthew exemplifies how these expectations were not solely shaped by more job opportunities in their home

country: 'These [indirect] experiences, um, are from my, uh, English friends. They told me that the companies tend to, um, give jobs to the local people rather than the students overseas'. Although Matthew did not elaborate further the extent to which their claims about his low chances of gaining employment reflect the actual practices in the UK job market, such a perception speaks to the Resident Labour Market Test (RLMT)[45] in the UK, which requires employers to demonstrate to UKVI that no 'settled worker'[46] is available for the role they wish to recruit with a Tier 2 visa worker.

It also transpired that interactions with not just local British students but also other students from the EU countries contribute to the impression that they have low chances of securing a job in the UK after graduation. Chloe's narrative is illustrative of this:

> Because it's really hard to find a job here I think. It doesn't have any opportunities for us. […] For Asian people. I think people who come from EU have [a] bigger opportunity than us. Because I heard from everyone. They really don't recommend me to stay here. Like, "Because your English is not so good". Like "You don't have any job experience [in the UK]". […] Compared with them, Japan is completely different [culturally from European countries]. It's hard to understand each other. Then, why the company wants to hire Asian people, for example, like me? […] And then, yeah, mostly English is, kind of, one of the problem. I couldn't stay here. I couldn't speak English very well. So that means it [the company] doesn't have any worth it to hire me. Yeah, I think that is, kind of, [the] reason [why I am thinking about going back to Japan].

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[45] From 1 January 2021, the new Tier 2 Skilled Worker visa system replaces the existing Tier 2 route for applications to work and no longer requires the Resident Labour Market Test (see https://www.gov.uk/skilled-worker-visa).

[46] A settled worker is defined by the Home Office as a UK national, an EEA national, a British Overseas Territories citizen, a Commonwealth citizen or someone who has Indefinite Leave to Remain (see https://workpermit.com/immigration/united-kingdom/tier-2-resident-labour-market-test).

These narratives show how British and EU students constructed an 'employable' subject within the UK context in a manner that excludes those from non-EU, and especially non-English speaking, countries. Non-EU students were constructed as lacking embodied cultural capital (e.g., English language proficiency, confidence, sense of humour), alongside the right to work, deemed essential to be employable in the UK. Moreover, they displayed not only low expectations about getting employed but also the active exclusion of themselves from the UK job market. Central to this process is Bourdieu's (1999) notion of *doxa* (i.e., unquestioned shared beliefs), which illustrates how the socially arbitrary nature of power relations conditions and informs the internalised sense of limits or the appropriate 'feel' for the game of social agents and, by extension, their perceptions and practices (i.e., habitus). This is what Bourdieu suggests as the very mechanism contributing to the stability of the objective social structures. However, some of these perceptions or claims of discrimination should be interpreted with caution. Cross-cultural experiences are closely intertwined with subjective interpretations, which may be cultural misperceptions on the part of the interviewees rather than reflecting the actual reality of the situations international students find themselves in (see also Lee & Rice, 2007).

Contrary to the restrictive border regimes in the UK, these participants considered their home country as offering more job opportunities (Gopinath, 2015; Han et al., 2015; Li, 2015; Zweig & Wang, 2013). This sentiment was particularly shared by the majority of Chinese participants in my study who saw their country of origin as a rising economic superpower and political influence. As Li et al. (2019) have highlighted, this shifting perception in the local and transnational socio-economic environment – that is, China is no longer seen as a less developed country with fewer career prospects than other major Western economies such as the UK – results in an increase in the number of overseas graduates returning in recent years. Moreover, the rapid growth of international firms in China means that their degree in the UK provided prospects for filling the gap in this transnational space (see also Collins et al., 2017). Tu and Nehring (2020) have taken this further to

suggest in their study of Chinese returnees and student migrants in the UK that those who returned upon graduation expressed their disappointment about the exchange value of capital accumulated through overseas study in China's labour market. This, they go on to highlight, sometimes led some of their research participants to re-interpret the exchange value of overseas capital accumulation over time.

In fact, the perceived limitations of the convertibility of overseas cultural and social capital was not an exception for participants who seemed to carry exclusive symbolic capital as a graduate from an elite institution. Take the example of Harry. When I asked about his experiences after completing his doctoral degree at Oxford, he explained that he was prepared to return – like other participants – upon graduation. He attributed this to the fact that perceptions of ethnic preference for native English speakers in recruitment and promotion persist in his academic field meant little prospects of him staying and working in the UK:

> I also applied jobs in [the] UK, but to be frank it's very competitive in [the] UK. You know, especially if you want to become like, uh, a lecturer in [his subject area] department, why do they want to have a Chinese instead of British, right? [laughs]. And you have also a competitor from European countries and [the] US, Australia... so it's not that easy to get a job [in the UK]. (Harry, Academic staff, Hong Kong, DPhil Social Sciences, Oxford)

Despite Harry's ownership of a high level of institutionalised cultural capital, it was made ineffectual when he '[had] run up against schemes of racial difference and hierarchy' (Ong, 1999, p. 93). Although whether his claim that those from EU countries or other Anglophone countries would be more qualified than him is questionable, he firmly believed that his ethnic classification (i.e., Chinese) would lower his chances of employment in the UK. In other words, when it comes to life chance possibilities in the UK, holding exclusive institutionalised cultural capital in itself did not seem to matter as much as his racial/ethnic origin. This echoes Ong's (1999)

argument that the effectiveness of capital accumulation strategies is conditioned and limited by the racial and social origins of agents.

Nonetheless, the perceived disadvantage of his ethnicity within the UK labour market did not prevent Harry from pursuing an international career upon return home. Shortly after finishing his DPhil at Oxford, he secured a full-time academic job in one of the universities in China. What prevented him from entering the UK labour market was no longer a barrier, because coming from Hong Kong gave him 'an insider perspective' or local cultural capital which helped him assert status distinction against other foreign candidates. Moreover, when asked about his current work, he invoked an image of his workplace as a multinational environment and drew parallels between his work and an international career: 'I mean, it's quite similar [to an international career] because we have colleagues from other countries; we speak English as a common language; and we have colleagues doing research on other country'. Continuing to espouse an 'international' outlook, he believed that he could pursue an international career 'at home' despite being grounded: 'You feel like you are at the top of the world. Like you are communicating with people from different part of the world, looking at the same issue... that's something very cool. And also [you can] take the opportunity to learn more other cultural experience'. Overall, framing an international career in this way allowed the participants with various priorities and concerns to traverse spatial boundaries whilst being grounded in their local contexts.

7.3 International career as 'becoming'

The previous sections demonstrate how participants' binary perceptions and experiences of transnational mobility as (dis)advantage impact on their understanding of an international career. However, mobility also entails change. For example, the notion of mobility has been analysed in the field of mobilities research more broadly to denote fluidity, flow and dynamism (Sheller, 2017; Sheller & Urry, 2006). This approach focuses on how mobility articulates with the process of becoming 'at the expense of the already

achieved, the stable and static' (Cresswell, 2006, p. 47). A small number of studies on international education have similarly explored the extent to which cross-border mobility brings about transformation on the part of students (Marginson, 2014; Tran, 2016). Building on the extant literature, I define 'becoming' here as change in perspectives brought about by international mobility for education and/or work. The following section examines what an international career meant for those who had a sequence of long-term mobility experiences across various countries prior to their studies in the UK. This is followed by a discussion of how transnational mobility was regarded by these participants as both advantage and disadvantage and the way in which this ambivalent view towards onward mobility across borders shaped their understanding of an international career as 'becoming'.

'Finding or losing yourself?'

For those who experienced multiple border(s)/field(s) crossing for an extended period of time prior to their studies in the UK, an international career meant neither being physically mobile outside the country of origin nor rooted in a local context. Rather, what seems to be more important to them is a process of 'becoming' through accumulated overseas experiences. Some of them did not feel comfortable when their experiences abroad were automatically associated with the dominant notion of an international career. There was also indication that these participants preferred to use the term 'global' in describing their work aspiration or 'an international career person', both of which they believed could signal less attention to physical mobility across national borders. Nonetheless, embedded in the understanding of an international career as becoming were different ways of negotiating multiple – and often dissonant – fields accompanied by habitus interruptions (Ingram & Abrahams, 2018; see also Soong et al., 2018). Moreover, given that some of these participants experienced both limitations and transferability of capital accumulated through their cross-border geographic mobility, the meaning of transnational mobility also *changes* over time and across different contexts.

The way in which an international career is perceived as becoming is particularly evident in the account of Harriet: 'I would think that any career could be international if an international person [a foreigner] worked in it'. In fact, her construction of such a career reflects her work experience as a full-time English teacher in Japan followed by her postgraduate studies at Oxford University. Her decision to go to Japan came with a recession in the US, during which she finished her undergraduate study and had hard time finding stable job opportunities. This decision was mainly driven by 'socio-economic reasons' as she indicated in the interview, which was far from what she would otherwise have pursued (i.e., research) and where she would have liked to be (i.e., in the US). Although she found the overall work experience in Japan culturally and linguistically challenging, neither did she feel 'fitting in' upon return to the US for a research job as she used to: 'While working on the research job for three years [in the US], I was just, kind of, bored, and I wanted to have a bit of a cultur[al] challenge'. Anticipating a less uncomfortable transition when she began her postgraduate studies in the UK, she again encountered the habitus–field disjuncture in a new social field:

> I knew that [the] UK, compared to [the] US, will [would] be the same. But there are some linguistic differences and cultural differences [between the UK and the US] that over time I've become more aware of as well. […] The longer I stay in the UK, the less I like many characteristics of Americans. I feel much more comfortable here [in the UK]. […] I feel like [I am] someone who used to be an American who wants to be British and who is now, sort of, still shaking up American identity. And it's not fully accepted in the British context because I am not a citizen. (Harriet, USA, DPhil Education, Oxford)

Despite a relatively smooth transition in terms of language and academic study, Harriet's narrative points to the difficulties of being integrated into British society as American. Her frustration was exacerbated as she had started to become distant from other Americans and closer to people at university including her British fiancé. Her habitus is caught in a tug across multiple conflicting social fields, which Ingram and Abraham (2018) describe

as 'destabilized habitus' in which the individual is not a 'fish in water' in any of these fields. Bourdieu (2000) also argues that when a habitus is outside of the structure in which it develops, reflexivity occurs. These contradictory experiences led to greater reflexivity on her part and influenced how she perceived an international career: 'I guess because, um, I think from the outside people would say I have an international career because I am an American who moves around a bit. But when I am looking from my side, I just feel like a person who has found where I want to be'. Her conflicting experiences as a migrant worker in Japan and an elite international student in the UK not only generated ambivalent views about an international career which were neither deprived nor privileged. Also, feeling 'out of place' in both fields, place(s) associated with mobility was less salient in her understanding of such a career.

Echoing Harriet's opinion that an international career is a process of 'becoming' is Thomas. When I asked him about his intention to pursue an international career after graduation, he replied, 'I'm an international person. I think by any definition of international [careers] that I can think of, I, kind of, embody that. My closest friends are from around the world. My wife is Korean. And I've studied in many different countries… so yeah'. His construction of an international career was also largely influenced by his prolonged overseas experiences to which international study has been central. Whilst his habitus is also a result of internalising structures of multiple fields, what distinguished Thomas from other participants was he had experienced upward – though limited – mobility both within and across the fields. Like Harriet, financial remuneration was a main drive for teaching English in South Korea after he had completed his bachelor's degree in Canada. He recalled how he made as far as he could in a new social field, although his lack of cultural capital in terms of legitimate and higher (i.e., postgraduate level) degree certificates from overseas institutions (e.g., mainly, the US and the UK) ultimately prevented him from being upwardly mobile further in South Korea:

When I was in Korea [for almost ten years], I started from like the lowest round and got to the highest round of what I can do. Um, I started from doing [his previous work], like hagwon [for-profit private institute/academy/cram school], to working at a university [in South Korea], which is fantastic. They [The university] really take care of you, but, actually, [in] couple of years, I was like, "This is it. I gotta do more". […] I remember talking to a fellow teacher at the university about my career as a teacher. He, kind of, scoff[ed] at the idea of us [foreign English teachers like him] being in a career. So, for him, you are [I was] just there, having fun. Um, for me, it was more than that. But I can understand why it would be viewed, um, kind of, with scorn or disdain. […] I was actually effective in doing what I was doing. But how I do really show it? So I looked at what language testing [postgraduate] programmes were out there [in other countries]. (Thomas, Canada, PhD Culture, Communication and Media, UCL)

Thomas's account demonstrates how embodied cultural capital (e.g., command of Standard English) initially capitalised on by Thomas fell short of social recognition as he progressed in the status hierarchy. In fact, he admitted that this sense of disadvantage in South Korea pushed him to pursue and obtain institutionalised cultural capital in Australia and subsequently in the UK. However, he emphasised that the habitus–field disjuncture was less pronounced in South Korea than Australia or the UK: 'I had no culture shock going to Korea. I thought that was very interesting. I have more culture shock coming here to the UK. I had more culture shock going to Australia, yeah'. This can be explained by his longer-term stay in South Korea – up to ten years – in comparison to the other two countries, which arguably helped him to successfully navigated through the new field and minimise the potential for habitus clivé (Bourdieu, 1999b).

Underscoring how he built up competences and knowledge in his topic area through the process of learning in different countries, Thomas explained that a series of overseas study experiences formed the fundamental idea of what occupational and life success are to him. What an international career meant to him was therefore to win over himself and learn through various contexts:

> So I did a [Master's] degree in applied linguistics [in Australia] to, kind of, tie that together. And now [a PhD in the UK is to do with] having a more general interest in education and how that can be applied in general. I've been building that scholarly background for quite some time. […] I think that in terms of what I've done and where I'm going, I will be constantly looking at what I should be doing to become a self-reward, yeah. (Thomas, Canada, PhD Culture, Communication and Media, UCL)

Importantly, it was not the immediate material and social returns of investment in social space that pushed Thomas to engage in international study. In a similar way, he did not associate an international career simply with working abroad or transnational mobility for its own sake: 'If we [my wife and I] found that this is the best place for us, this is where we'd stay. If Canada provided that opportunity, it would be Canada. If the US, [then the] US. […] The older you get the more you find that it doesn't matter. Anywhere you go, it's all of the same'. This partly resonates with Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) analysis that travel becomes more arduous for those who pass a sociological threshold of youth and enter adulthood (marked by taking up full-time employment and embarking on a long-term relationship). However, instead of 'experiencing this parenthesis in life [the lengthy period of overseas education] in a negative way' (ibid., p. 75), the experiences he accumulated *en route* gave him a sense of moving towards a rewarding self in the future or what Giddens (2003, p. 77) calls 'self-actualisation'. Moreover, like what Bauman (2009, p. 88; emphasis in original) depicts as 'residents of the first world [who] live in *time* because 'spanning every distance is instantaneous', space does not seem to matter for participants like Thomas who are mobile across borders yet stay long enough to confront misalignments between habitus and field.

Daisy also believed that whatever career she would choose, she would have a global career because she is 'pretty global already'. When I prompted her to explain what she meant by global, she reflected a series of her previous studying and living experiences abroad. This included her bachelor's degree in the US, a Master's study in the UK and a further business degree in

France, which she described as a process of finding the self, that is, 'what I [she] want [wants] to do'. In spite of the seemingly individualised nature of her decisions to move across different countries, these movements were nevertheless embedded in her social networks. Not only did the institutional ties affect her decision to pursue her student exchange at Oxford and subsequently a Master's degree there, but her recent move to Paris was also facilitated by the information about a French business school she obtained from the university's career fair and her French fiancé (now husband) who she met during her study at Oxford. This parallels research by Brooks and Waters (2010) who maintain that mobility is often socially embedded, grounded within networks of family and friends (see also Beech, 2015; Findlay et al., 2017; Geddie, 2013; Jayadeva, 2019; Marcu, 2015).

Although her movements across different fields (i.e., the US, the UK and France) seemed seamless, this did not mean Daisy was undeterred by habitus interruptions in the processes. For example, she revealed how she felt distanced from both fields while studying at Oxford as well as in Paris:

> It's just a bit weird [to be a non-white person at Oxford University] especially coming from America where it's less white. Even though it feels pretty white in my school area, my school [in the US] was also close to New York City. When you go to the city, at least, it really feels like international. […] The integration [in France] is way worse than my experience in the UK or in the US. It's different cos I can't tell if it is racism or just because we don't speak French very well. Um, because international students can take courses in English. So it's a programme where you can either do it in French or English or combined. […] But I do understand that language is a problem, like, if you can't really properly communicate, then it's difficult to integrate. (Daisy, University student, MSc Learning and Technology, Oxford)

Although at first Daisy could not successfully integrate into both fields as indicated in the above quote, she made active and conscious efforts to adapt to the new fields by attending social activities to mingle with people at Oxford and taking courses in French. She also highlighted that she 'can now read,

listen and do a lot of things in French'. Despite the initial disruptions caused by the misalignment between her habitus and the field structures, she successfully navigated these fields by internalising the structures of the new fields and developing a 'feel for each game'. This is reminiscent of Abraham and Ingram's (2013) discussion of 'chameleon habitus'. However, instead of seamlessly switching their habitus to match with whichever field(s) she is in, her habitus is not necessarily wholly attuned to either. Her following narrative is illustrative of this: 'I, kind of, have a weird accent. People say [it sounds] mostly American, but in some words I pronounced in British ways [and in] some words in French accents. And I also have, a bit of, Chinese accents'. This accords with 'reconciled habitus', a term coined by Ingram and Abraham (2018) that builds upon Bhabha's (2004) concept of a 'third space' in the context of class migration to explain how the competing fields can be reconciled in a person's habitus – such that 'those caught between two worlds are accepted and feel at home' (p. 155).

Whilst Daisy was aware of the central role that transnational mobility played in forging a new sense of self, it is worth noting that the multiple border-crossing experiences led her to re-interpret the way in which she perceived transnational mobility, as illustrated here:

> When I first study abroad, I was only 17. And this [France] is my third foreign country. Cos, you know, I spent three years in the US and then I changed the country [the UK]. And then two years [later], I changed the country [France]. Um, I did it [moving to different countries] when I was younger. I didn't know what it means. I didn't really know what it means to suddenly lose all your friends and then start making your friends. I was young. Everything was exciting. But now, I am trying the other way, I guess. I want some more, um, more local [life]. I want to get to know my environment, my friends and everything around me better.

Daisy's narrative throws light on the importance of place-making practices, although this rather sits uncomfortably with her decision to further engage in cross-border mobility to France after the completion of her studies in the UK.

Moreover, her previous mobility experiences were portrayed as desirable only during the youthful stage of her life, as her gendered identities as a wife[47] were no longer seen as compatible with her prior mobile or 'traveling' identity (Desforges, 2000). This example is also parallel to Soong et al.'s (2018) research on 'middling transnationals', which highlights how gendered and racialised bodies can generate a highly differentiated transnational experience by complicating their trajectories in host societies.

Richard is another example of a participant who had extensive overseas experience before embarking on his study in the UK. Despite having greater job prospects as a graduate in a top engineering university in India, he decided to pursue his academic interest in theoretical physics in the UK where the area of his interest is well established. Because he did not have a qualification to prove his knowledge in this field, he had to redo his undergraduate degree in the UK. The availability of funding made him further his Master's study in the US, during which he worked as a teaching assistant and got exposed to, and became interested in, physics education. He then took gap years to build up his teaching experiences and savings in India. Envisioning his future as a tenure-track position in academia, he came back to the UK for his PhD study followed by another Master's degree in science education at UCL. Throughout the process, he learned early on the limitation of capital accumulation across contexts, which were caused by the lack of recognition of his previous degree certificates from both Indian and the UK – that is, institutionalised cultural capital – partly due to a change of his subject of study. This mirrors the relative value of cultural capital across different geographical contexts (Kim, 2016; Robertson et al., 2011; Sin et al., 2017; Tu & Nehring, 2020; Waters, 2006; Wiers-Jenssen, 2011). Nonetheless, he summed up his relatively long journey of international study as follows: 'Um, so this whole journey… I think it's all about me trying to understand what sort of person I am, what sort of inclinations I have, and what sort of thing I want to do'.

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[47] The participant indicated her upcoming marriage during the interview.

The positive evaluation of his accumulated international experiences did not rule out the possibility of Richard's experiencing habitus-field dissonance over the years. However, what distinguished him from other participants in the earlier examples was his strong disassociation from his field of origin. Instead, he felt it was easier to build social relations with British or Europeans than Indians:

> I like England. I like the UK overall. I don't have problems, uh, culturally. In fact, I probably have more problems in interacting with Indians, uh, in general. Because [of] cultural things… connect more quickly with Europeans than with Indians. Yeah, so even in the UK, actually, I don't go out of my way to find other Indians. I don't. I'd prefer to find other people. […] It's mainly about values right? I'm a strong atheist, for instance. I don't follow any religion and basically [I am] faithless. Um, a lot of these things. […] In a way, they [the previous international experiences] are making [India] more alien? Even now, I find Indians more alien than, let's say, British people to me [laughs]. I sometimes think that I'm more alien in India than anywhere else. (Richard, India, PhD Science Education, UCL)

Richard's narrative evokes Ingram and Abrahams's (2018) notion of 'abandoned habitus', that is, habitus divided from its field of origin. They contend that as the structure of new fields becomes a dominant part of habitus, original structures are usurped or overwritten. Having encountered the structures of multiple fields, he consciously or unconsciously internalised the manners and attitudes of his foreign – British and European – peers. This led him to believe that his dispositions and beliefs were culturally more aligned with them than Indians. This distance from his original field, alongside the experiences of capital mobilisation across borders, were also reflected his perspective on an international career. When asked whether he intended to pursue such a career after graduation, Richard indicated that what mattered to him was to utilise and synthesis different perspectives gained from his international experiences rather than relying on 'the Indian perspective'. Overall, these examples bring to the fore the various ways in which participants managed the tensions caused by habitus interruptions

when they encountered new social fields. More specifically, I argue that their experiences with disjuncture influenced how they (re)defined who they want to be and, ultimately, how they perceived an international career.

Conclusion

This chapter contributes to the conceptualisation of 'an international career' by unpacking its meanings from the perspectives of international students in UK higher education. The findings mirror – to some extent – the dominant framing of an international career in extant literature whose value is defined by the scale of transnational mobility and a narrow economic calculus, although the pursuit of such a career is more complex and multifaceted (cf. Bozionelos et al., 2015; Findlay et al., 2012; King & Sondhi, 2018; Packwood et al., 2015; Wiers-Jenssen, 2011). For instance, many participants are drawn to an international career as much by what it would offer them in lifestyle and personal experience terms as by the need to (re)produce their class advantage across borders. Also, the notion of an international career which centres on onward international mobility is not always accepted positively amongst participants, especially those with practical, emotional and moral concerns. In this case, the prevailing idea of an international career is contested and refashioned in a way that is simultaneously 'local' and 'international'. For those who continuously moved across different countries other than their country of origin for a longer period of time, an international career is more to do with fostering a new sense of self. The understanding of international careers as 'becoming' is explained by a sequence of field–habitus clashes experienced by the participants.

The complex ways in which an international career is imagined make it difficult to extrapolate the impact of various factors, ranging from the participants' social characteristics to their academic disciplines and institutions, on the pursuit of an international career. However, the negative reception of a 'mobile' international career – close to the dominant framing in the literature – from some participants who tend to be female and/or have caring responsibilities resonates with the conditions of the perfect global corporate citizen (Yeoh & Huang, 2011). The findings also suggest that

participants who can mobilise economic and cultural resources are better able to fulfil their aspirations for any forms of international career as described in this chapter. In addition, the orientation of the participants, especially those in social sciences, to international careers are reflective of their academic disciplines, although their attitudes vary greatly depending on the focus of their study (e.g., international development as opposed to social anthropology). In this sense, simply pointing to the growing interest of international students in an international career ignores their differentiated understandings and experiences of such a career. However, I also recognise that participants may found it difficult to admit that they did not have an international career, because it is often valorised and expected as a taken-for-granted trajectory for internationally mobile students after graduation.

As a final point, Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital and habitus enable a critical investigation of the ways in which an international career is perceived and realised by international students in the UK. The participants' various position in the field, understood not only as the field of origin but as the new field(s), illuminates different instrumental and transformational motivations that are sometimes entangled in the pursuit of an international career. Similarly, whether to fulfil their aspirations for such a career is contingent on the possession of a range of resources or what Bourdieu (1986, 2010) describes as 'forms of capital'. The notion of habitus is also employed to indicate how students' aspirations for onward mobility are complicated by their embodied dispositions which intersect with social characteristics. Similarly, the disjuncture between habitus and field(s) provides a better understanding of the effects of habitus–field clash(es) on the perceptions and/or experiences of an international career. Making visible differentiated understandings of an international career through a Bourdieusian perspective therefore serves as a tool for critiquing the dominant framings of an international career that valorise post-study international mobility. It also shows alternative ways of pursuing such a career, which point towards the horizontal differences within the ostensibly privileged group of international students.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I will begin by highlighting the key findings drawn from this study. On that basis, I outline the original contributions of this study to the relevant research fields. I then suggest ways forward for future research on international student mobility to complement the limitations of this research project. Finally, I move on to the implications of this study and make recommendations for policy and practice before closing the chapter with some concluding remarks.

8.1 Key research findings

The objective of this study was to examine the extent to which, and the way in which, international student mobility is nuanced by individual and institutional characteristics. To this end, I carried out an empirical study of non-EU international students who have pursued or completed postgraduate degrees in three different universities in the UK. Through a Bourdieusian lens, I looked into the different choice process of higher education within the UK (Chapter 5). I also investigated the role of individual institutions in mediating – albeit to a different extent – the way in which current and graduated participants developed and realised their post-study aspirations (Chapter 6). This was followed by an investigation into the meanings and interpretations of an international career which is frequently associated with one of the outcomes of international higher education (Chapter 7).

Firstly, I demonstrated the fine-grained and contextual differences in the way in which international students engaged in higher education choice-making. Whilst such a decision often involves post hoc rationalisation, the findings nonetheless indicated several different dimensions to the students' choices of institutions within the UK. I brought attention to the unequal access to cultural capital amongst the participants, which partly explained variation in the way in which they made university choices. It was obtained through different spheres of the participants' lives, traversing family members, previous educational institutions, and social life/work. Also, reflected in the

diversified choice of institution was the participants' dispositions and preferences that were closely intertwined with their social characteristics. Indeed, studying in an elite university seemed to be a natural choice for many internationally mobile students. Notwithstanding, this study pointed out that the less academically and socially advantaged participants considered relatively lower tuition fees and living costs offered by some institutions – either through alumni discounts or partly due to the place of study – to be of utmost importance to their choices of university in the UK. Although there seemed to be few gender differences in the institutional choice, the perceived racial/ethnic diversity within the institution was believed to ease or sometimes deter the transition to the field of international higher education, making some choices essentially (un)thinkable.

The exploration of the participants' aspirations and transitions after graduation uncovered the different influences of the individual institutions on international students' experiences during and after their studies. Oxford participants were generally more confident, than those from the other two universities, of gaining employment in any parts of the world partly because of its educational status in the global and national field of higher education. These perceptions were reinforced by the quantity and quality of careers resources provided by the university. On the other hand, a finer distinction from more prestigious universities such as Oxbridge made by the participants at UCL and Brookes suggested that they tended to operate within narrower range of possibilities post-graduation. However, the whiteness and class privilege associated with Oxford alienated some participants, generating the sense of otherness and affecting post-study plans. Such a tension was hardly found amongst the participants at UCL and Brookes, as these institutions were perceived as relatively less racialised and classed. In fact, the diverse body of students and staff at these institutions was linked to both advantages and disadvantages in facilitating exposure to diverse cultures and, at the same time, hindering access to valuable cultural and social capital that can be converted into economic capital (i.e., employment).

Findings on the conceptualisations and practices of an international career showed that participants' understanding was not always in line with the

dominant discourse that romanticises transnational mobility after graduation. The need to juggle familial commitments and practical considerations led some participants to contest the prevailing idea of international mobility as a taken-for-granted trajectory and instead seek after an international career in their home country. Others went as far as to claim that the pursuit of such a career was deemed much more insecure and risky than having 'nationalised careers from welfare-states with stable pay-offs at home' (Favell et al., 2007, p. 17). There were nevertheless perceived preferences for a 'mobile' international career amongst a few participants, although their motivations were as much related to enhancing life chance opportunities and outcomes as maintaining a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Furthermore, those with the extended period of experiences abroad constructed an international career in a way that placed greater emphasis on a process of becoming and making sense of self through those accumulated overseas experiences. In doing so, this study brings to the fore the multifaceted understandings and/or experiences of an international career that extend beyond onward mobility across national borders.

8.2 Original contributions to the existing literature

This thesis has contributed to existing scholarship on ISM by probing in detail the experiences of internationally mobile students within the same popular study destination. Firstly, this study offered important insights into non-EU international students in the UK – a significant but under-researched group of international students. Whilst rarely scrutinised, the experiences of non-EU international students in the UK have been analysed in the small number of studies under the broader category of international (i.e., non-UK) students (see, for example, Beech, 2014, 2015). However, there has been crucial differences between non-EU students and EU counterparts in the UK context. Up until Brexit, EU students had been subject to the same home fee status as domestic students; they also had had the right to free movement after completing their studies in the UK. With changes to immigration and fee status of EU students expecting to take effect in the upcoming academic year

2021/22, those arriving in the UK before 1 January 2021 will be able to maintain the same status through EU Settlement Scheme (British Council, 2020). Ultimately, these differences were translated into the processes whereby these students made higher education choices and, subsequently, negotiated post-study plans. Moreover, the diversity of non-EU international student population enabled the detailed examination of a range of social characteristics (e.g., nationality, race/ethnicity, gender, class) that assisted or impeded those processes, which would otherwise have remained hidden.

Secondly, I provided a fine-grained analysis on international student mobility in UK higher education by incorporating into the research both current and graduated international students in the fields of Social Sciences and STEM. The separation of current and graduated students facilitated an important differentiation between imagined possibilities and actual experiences upon graduation. Building on the growing body of research which links ISM to the wider life course of students (Findlay et al., 2012, 2017), this study expanded on empirically the heterogeneity of student mobility aspirations and outcomes such as onward mobility to a third country or across many different countries and, in so doing, complicated traditional stay-or-return portrayals. I further unpacked the complexity of migration and career decisions of international postgraduate students by including in the interview sample those in the field of Social Sciences, which to date has not received as much attention in extant literature as those in STEM disciplines – the main targets of skilled migration policies – despite its growing popularity amongst international students (Geddie, 2013). This research design therefore allowed for more visibility of not only the study-to-work transitions envisioned or actualised by those who were studying or had completed their studies, but also the experiences of international students across various academic disciplines.

Moving onto the third contribution, I expanded the scope of analysis of prior research by drawing attention to the often underestimated role of individual institutions. Instead of limiting the discussion to *where* students have pursued or completed their studies, this research threw light on the uneven distributions of various forms of capital at the institutional and individual level. In particular, this study illuminated the ways in which three universities

differently influenced the post-study aspirations and transitions of internationally mobile students. Just as the exchange value of an overseas degree is not easily defined by the country of education or the mode of study (Robertson et al., 2011), so too not all the degrees obtained from universities in a key destination country such as the UK would be 'the one-way ticket to global elite status' (Favell et al., 2007, p. 21). Similarly, whilst the individual institutions certainly played a part in framing the range of possibilities international students could envisage or realise, I underlined that these institutional effects were moderated by the social characteristics of international students. In this way, I questioned the fundamental assumption that studying in Western, Anglophone countries would ensure greater accumulation of cultural and social capital than pursuing overseas education in situ or in less popular destination countries (Collins et al., 2014; Leung & Waters, 2013; Waters & Leung, 2013a, 2013b).

Furthermore, this study made an original contribution to ISM literature through a critical exploration of the meanings and interpretations of international mobility for education and/or work from the perspective of international students. Prior research tends to emphasise the privileged nature of transnational mobility whereby it is based on, and confers, distinct and tangible advantage. However, I demonstrated that the perceptions and experiences of cross-border mobility for education and/or work are more complex and multifaceted than they are portrayed in extant literature. This study suggested that international mobility is not always a reflection of privilege; for example, there are important differences between students in access to, and mobilisation of, various resources that are necessary for furthering their mobility across borders. Neither is the intention or decision to return home after graduation necessarily made from a disadvantaged position. Just as students aspire to be mobile at a global scale, so they have 'the right to immobility' (Forsberg, 2017a). By paying close attention to potential tensions and contradictions pertaining to their aspirational mobility, this research problematised the simplistic conflation of (im)mobility with (dis)advantage and underlined the need to be attentive to various

perceptions and/or experiences of transnational mobility amongst international students.

Lastly, this research contributes to the conceptual development of Bourdieu's (1990b, 2010) theoretical framework. By deploying his key theoretical concepts of field, habitus and capital, it underscored the importance of analysing the issue of ISM across different levels and brings to the fore the interplay between individuals and institutions. I attended to the multiplicity and fragmentation of student experiences in relation to the fields of international higher education, individual institutions, and transnational social fields. In addition, the thesis has cast light on some of the unconscious and habitual aspects of international students' expectations and choices that implicated the experiences before, during and after their studies in the UK. Moreover, my study elucidated the institutional effects in these processes and thereby unsettled the value of cultural capital obtained from universities in traditional destination countries such as the UK (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Findlay & King, 2010; Waters, 2012). Furthermore, this research illuminated the transformative, as well as reproductive, roles of international higher education by exploring the extent to which individuals' positions characterised by uneven access to various forms of capital can be enhanced or reinforced through attending institutions which are themselves endowed with different level of symbolic and economic capital.

8.3 Limitations and future directions

There are several limitations in my research which present opportunities for future research. Amongst these were the sampling issues and especially the collection of specific data about social class. The fact that my research participants mostly came from – albeit not restricted to – top 10 non-EU sending countries puts some limitations on an objective measurement of participants' socio-economic backgrounds. To illustrate this point, my interpretation of participants' socio-economic backgrounds was mainly based on their subjective perceptions of class positions. As explained in Chapter 4,

this was sensitised to the diverse national origins of the participants without glossing over variations of class categorisation by different national contexts. Despite the potential diversity of their perceived class locations, it did not deviate significantly from the existing portrayal of international students and particularly those studying in the UK as generally privileged and endowed with certain levels of economic, cultural and social capital. Consequently, this relatively weakened the overall aim of my research, which was to capture social diversity at work in international students' experiences before, during and after their studies in the UK. In this sense, the fact that I did not explicitly operationalise social class – however incomplete and simplified – was one of the distinct limitations of this study.

Whilst the research design allowed me to look at geographical mobility post-graduation across different places (e.g., home, host, a third country or onward mobility), the extent to which there is any change over time in the participants' perceptions and experiences is still open to question. This can be complemented by incorporating a longitudinal element into the study, whereby the same participants are followed up in various intervals. This would not only provide the fuller and more accurate pictures of individual life trajectories. It would also be of high relevance considering the prevalence of short-term contracts and employment opportunities in contemporary careers (Sullivan, 1999; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Relatedly, the introduction of novel methods such as mapping (for example, Donnelly et al., 2019) would facilitate the visual representations of students' geographical imaginings in relation to their choices of international higher education, post-study aspirations, understanding of an international career. Other qualitative and 'mobile' methods, such as photo diaries/elicitations and walking interviews, could also enrich international students' understanding of space and place within and around particular institutions, as demonstrated in the growing body of work in the field of student mobility in general (Finn & Holton, 2019; Holton & Finn, 2018; Pötschulat et al., 2020; Wainwright et al., 2019).

In addition, future research can benefit from developing further the scope of this study. Firstly, I attempted to focus mainly on top ten non-EU sending countries to UK higher education. In hindsight, the focus of my research was

still broad. By centring on the smaller number of non-EU countries, the implications for particular social characteristics (e.g., class, gender, race/ethnicity) on students' education and work trajectories within and across countries could be delineated, as evidenced by extant literature (Kim, 2016; Sin, 2016; Sondhi & King, 2017; Tu & Xie, 2020). Moreover, further suggestions could be made about the choice of case universities. Whilst my research usefully delineated some of the institutional differences in the UK, there is a relative lack of diversity in terms of the reputation and location of these institutions. As a post-1992 university, Brookes is relatively different from the other two institutions. Yet, it is nevertheless one of the largest TNE providers in the UK (see Chapter 4). Similarly, although forming a distinctive cluster from Oxford (Boliver, 2015), UCL is still regarded as one of the top-ranked institutions in global and national university rankings[48]. Also, London and Oxford are two of the most expensive cities to live in the UK, although the former ranked first and the latter third after Brighton (Rice, 2020). The diversity of higher education institutions can thus be maximised by including institutions in 'cold spots' – that is, less well-known institutions in terms of academic prestige and/or place of study.

The findings of my research supported the significance of *relational* aspects of transnational student mobility (Beech, 2015; Brooks & Waters, 2010; Sin et al., 2017; Waters, 2018). In other words, student mobility is embedded within social (e.g., spheres of family, education and work/social life) and spatial (e.g., local, TNE and international education) relations. However, the main emphasis on international students means that only one-sided accounts can be provided through this study. The inclusion of perspectives of family members (e.g., parents, partners and/or children) could potentially shed light on what Waters (2014) calls 'dysfunctional mobilities' – that is, the disruptive effects of international mobility for education and, I argue, onward mobility for work after graduation – amongst internationally mobile, and especially female, students (see, for example, Tu & Xie, 2020). Worthy of attention is

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[48] Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2021 (see https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2021/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/locations/GB/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats)

also the role of recruitment agents in participants' decision-making processes (Beech, 2018; Jayadeva, 2019). I identified that the extent to which the participants relied on education agents varied greatly. For instance, several participants from UCL and Brookes revealed that they consulted recruitment agents when making applications, with most of Oxford participants having applied to universities based on their own research. Likewise, the use of agents in the choice process was particularly prominent amongst those from China, India and USA. Therefore, an investigation into what kinds of international students have greater propensity to depend on recruitment agents and whether there is any difference between the types of institutions they attend or their countries of origin can enrich a multifaceted picture of international student mobility.

In future research, this study could also be extended to articulate the linkage between UK onshore and offshore education – an aspect which I did not pay attention to in the initial stage of analysis. In prior research, TNE students are perceived as largely 'immobile' and 'disadvantaged' in relation to those studying overseas (Waters & Leung, 2013a, 2013b). Although this relates to the fact that my participants attend different types of TNE (e.g., the 2+2, 3+1, and 2+1+1 programmes) from those in the above studies (e.g., 'top-up' programmes[49]) (see, for example, Knight & McNamara, 2017), a handful of participants with UK TNE backgrounds noted that their TNE experiences made their transitions to postgraduate studies in the UK much more familiar, easier, and sometimes even cheaper (see Chapter 5). Indeed, there are some evidence that TNE students have the potential of being mobile through their *in situ* experiences of international education (see, for example, Yu, 2020). Similarly, the relative 'immobility' of internationally mobile students should be given equal attention. Oxford participants, for instance, highlighted that their social interactions were limited to 'people from Oxford' and that intense workloads and schedules at the university made it almost impossible to engage in extracurricular activities or part-time jobs during term time. The

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[49] A top-up degree programme allows students who have completed Associate Degrees, Higher Diploma or other equivalent courses to gain a full Bachelor degrees in one or two years.

accumulation of valuable cultural and social capital by virtue of studying in the UK is also questionable, not least because of the stronger presence of international students in some of the programmes. Such a perspective can generate a more nuanced understanding of (im)mobility, international higher education, and social reproduction.

8.4 Implications and recommendations

The evidence from this study points towards the significance of visa and immigration policies on the pathways of international students after graduation. For a few participants, their plans for staying and working in the UK were largely frustrated by policies and regulations on immigrations at the time of graduation. Notably, some of the participants indicated that they only came to realise the difficulties of gaining employment upon arrival in the UK. Given that studying abroad often involves higher fees alongside the emotional costs of moving to a new environment, UK universities should make every effort to ensure that migration frameworks are communicated clearly to prospective international students and that they can make informed decisions prior to their studies in the UK. This is particularly important for those with limited financial resources to draw upon, as their plan to work in the UK is often motivated by the need to pay back student loans or advance life chance opportunities blocked at home. However, it is equally important to recognise that many participants decided to pursue their studies in the UK, even though they were already aware of such visa regulations at the time of applying to universities. This reflects the diversifying motivations of internationally mobile students in UK higher education, which are not always limited to employment or migration opportunities. It also throws light on the need for policy discourses of international student mobility in the UK to move beyond the education–migration nexus (Robertson, 2013).

Relatedly, student finance and tuition fee issues feature prominently throughout my research findings. As scholars such as Raghuram et al. (2020) and Tannock (2013) underline, the voices of internationally mobile

students are often silenced in discussions over these issues. However, international student fees raise important questions about higher education choices, experiences while in the UK, and post-study aspirations and trajectories. I have shown that those with restricted finances tended to operate within narrow circumscribed spaces of higher education choice. It is also worth noting that financial concerns influence students' experiences during their studies. For instance, some of the participants (particularly those from Brookes) indicated that they worked part-time to support their costs of living and studying. This compromised the time they spent on studying or socialising and, in some cases, affected their academic, social and cultural experiences in the UK. Likewise, the way in which international students envision and experience the field of possibilities after graduation largely depends on various resources they can utilise. The prominence of finance in international students' experiences before, during and after their studies in the UK also aligns with the new IES which aims to make UK higher education more accessible by providing alternative student finance (Department for Education, 2021).

Regarding study-to-work transitions of international students, the responsibility of individual institutions should be not be overlooked. As shown in my research, the participants' perceptions and experiences of their universities were closely intertwined with their anticipated and actual trajectories following graduation. Examples of practical suggestions for UK universities may include developing targeted support systems for international students with various concerns (e.g., student parents, mature students) and raising awareness of various careers support and resources that are already available for students. As I described in Chapter 6, those services and provisions would only be effective provided that international students are aware of these services. In addition, I concur with the view of one of the career staff that I interviewed during the fieldwork:

> At the moment, I think the UK is very focused on social mobility [at the national level]. So we are really worried [concerned] about bringing students in from pockets of deprivation and where they go afterwards

to ensure that they are getting a good graduate job. So lot of the data and the media is focused on that. […] We should have better data and tracking of where they [international students] are going. And, at the moment, universities aren't really accountable for that data, because the destinations [the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey] data does not require a certain proportion [of student leavers] to be international. [Again,] the UK [student] response is [considered to be more] crucial. […] [However,] I think we – at [my institution] but also nationally – are slowly working towards [and] waking up to the facts that joining the dots between recruiting international students and what happens when they leave is actually a really important issue.

As underscored by the career staff above, the current focus of UK higher education mainly lies in improving access to, and outcomes of, higher education for domestic students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. However, just as social diversities and hierarchies are played out in the formation of aspirations and transitions of local students, so too international students faced a wide range of structural barriers before, during and after their studies in the UK (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). In light of this, I argue that more attention should be given to the diversifying backgrounds of international students in UK higher education. As scholars like Tannock (2013) and Madge et al. (2015) have rightly pointed out, it is therefore imperative that universities should share responsibilities for international students and contribute to extending demands for educational equality and justice beyond national borders.

8.5 Concluding remarks

During the writing of this thesis, the UK higher education sector has undergone several changes. In September 2019, the Conservative government announced the Graduate Route for international students who complete a degree in any subject at an approved higher education provider (Home Office, 2019). This visa allows those who successfully graduate from 1st July 2021 or after to work in any job of their choice for two years – three

years for those completing PhD degrees – after the completion of their studies (BEIS, 2020; Home Office et al., 2021). The reinstatement of two-year post-study work visas are expected to have a positive impact on UK higher education by providing a much needed boost to the number of international students in UK higher education (Bothwell, 2020). However, as EU students will be subject to the points-based system for study visas from January 2021 and thus no longer eligible for UK home student fee and financial support from Student Finance England (Donelan, 2020), the actual impacts of new visa scheme on different groups of international students in the UK (e.g., those from, or outside, the EU countries) remain to be seen (Stacey, 2020c). Whilst this certainly eliminates the differences between international students, it is crucial to ask whether the maintenance of high fees to non-UK students continues to exclude less wealthy international students from UK higher education and confines its roles to the (re)production of social and economic advantage across borders.

In addition, the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic has posed immense and unpredictable challenges to the flow of international students to UK higher education. The ongoing lockdowns and travel restrictions across countries as well as the likelihood of further waves of infections have restricted students' ability to travel and pursue degrees abroad in general. As briefly discussed in Chapter 2, the impact of COVID-19 is particularly felt strongly by UK institutions which rely heavily on international student fees, such as Oxford and UCL. Conversely, universities like Brookes whose major incomes are generated by transnational education could be least likely to be affected by disruptions caused by the coronavirus. Nonetheless, the overall shift – albeit temporarily – of universities across the UK to online provisions or mixed modes of delivery necessitates debates about the sustainability of traditional forms of international student enrolment (Cheng, 2020a; Mitchell, 2020; Stacey, 2020b). Although data are limited, evidence suggests that international students prefer face-to-face learning to other alternative modes of delivery (Butler, 2020; Duncan, 2020). This points to the continued importance of physical mobility and, more specifically, space and place in the

experiences and outcomes of international students (Collins et al., 2014; Leung & Waters, 2013; Waters, 2006, 2018).

International student mobility, therefore, seems to be full of uncertainty yet remains a very important area of research. Whilst the coronavirus pandemic revealed already existing tensions and inequalities within international higher education, universities in the UK are likely to recover more quickly from the crisis than institutions in other low-income countries and especially those that are less recognised globally and nationally (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). This prospect is further bolstered not least by the introduction of the Graduate Route visa and the new International Education Strategy (IES), both of which highlight the importance of international students and international education more generally to the UK. However, such a focus on *where* students pursue or complete their studies has overshadowed the value of international higher education. As I have empirically demonstrated through the case studies of three different universities in the UK, the mobility of international students to and from UK higher education is spatially and socially differentiated. This, on the one hand, points to the significance of developing a theoretical framework that aids our understanding of transnational student mobility from various scales. On the other hand, the uneven student flow within UK higher education dismantles the idea of mobility as privilege and, conversely, immobility as disadvantage, which so far predominates in the conceptualisation of international student mobility. Circumstances may change, but it is critical that we recognise the transformative, as well as reproductive, potential of UK higher education by paying close attention to both individual students and institutions.

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Appendices

A. Semi-structured interview guide

a. For students

Interview guide (students)

- **Open questions about background**
  Could you, please, tell me a bit about yourself (for example, your academic and/or career trajectory)?
  Can you, please, tell me a bit about your studying/traveling/living experience(s) abroad prior to studying in the UK, if you had any?
  Why did you choose to study in the UK?
  Where else did you apply in the UK and/or in other countries?
  If you got accepted in those places as well, what made you choose the particular institution/the UK over the other institutions/countries?
  What do you think were the most important factors in your decision to study in the UK?

- **Questions about previous/current international study and work experiences**
  How did you find your studying experience – things that you liked/disliked about studying in the UK?
  What kinds of social life did you have – for example, nights out with your friends or regular activities such as sport, choir, book club?
  Can you, please, tell me about your working experience while studying in the UK, if any?
  How often did you contact your family or friends back home, UK, and/or in other countries?
  Based on your previous study experience in the UK, in what ways have your ideas and impressions of the UK been different from what you imagined back home?
  Would you recommend other friends or people back home to study in your university or in the UK?
  How do you find the working experience in your current job so far – things that you like/dislike about your current job?
  By any chance, have you ever considered changing your job in the near future?

- **Questions about future career and life mobility plans**
  What is your short/long-term plan in terms of life in general and career in particular?
  Where and in what kinds of environments would you like to live and work in the future?
  Where do you think you will be able to work with your UK degree(s)?
  What other career opportunities do you think will be available for you?
  Where do you usually get your information regarding potential job opportunities from?
  When deciding where to live and work, whom do you feel responsibility for and what kinds of responsibility do you feel you have, if at all?

- **Questions about global, international, and boundaryless careers**
  To what extent do you think is your current job similar or close to global/international careers?
  Could you give me any (other) examples of global/international careers?
  What are things you like/dislike about global/international careers?
  Do you feel global/international careers are different from national/local careers? If so, in what ways?
  If you are granted any opportunity, would you be willing to get involved in (another) global/international careers?
  What factors would you take into account when deciding whether to accept (another) global/international careers?
  If not, who do you think global/international careers are for?

b. For career staff

Interview guide (career service staff)

☐ **Questions about the type and range of career services provided for international students and graduates**
What career opportunities are generally available for international students and graduates?
Are these opportunities different from home students (UK nationals)? If so, in what ways?
Are these career services similar to those offered by other universities in the UK? If so, in what ways?
Which career services do you think are unique in your university?
Do you think that international students and graduates have competitive positions in these career opportunities compared to those students and graduates from other universities? What makes you think so?

☐ **Questions about the inclusion and exclusion criteria for international careers**
What kinds of career services are available for international students and graduates interested in international careers?
What are the characteristics of international careers that your university advertises on the website?
Are there any differences in such services between non-EU and EU students?
How do you categorise international careers? Is there any criteria set by the university or a career service to decide whether to be included in international careers?
Who do you think the advertisement for international careers are mainly targeting for?

☐ **Questions about the consultation experiences with international students interested in international careers**
Do you have any cases of international students and/or graduates successfully getting international careers? If so, could you give me some examples (e.g., their nationality, how they get it – is it through the university programmes/courses or the career service, how did you find this – through annual graduate tracking surveys at your university)?
Do you find any similar or different patterns in terms of interests in international careers among international students and graduates?
Do you think there are equal chances to access to international careers to every student and graduate?
If so, what are those factors that facilitate them to choose international careers?
If not, what are those factors that prevent international students and graduates from getting international careers?

B. Ethical approval

UCL Institute of Education Ethics Approval Email

From: "Samuels, Julia" <julia.samuels@ucl.ac.uk>
Subject: Ethics Confirmation
Date: 12 February 2018 at 16:03:03 GMT
To: "Lee, Jihyun" <jihyun.lee.16@ucl.ac.uk>

Dear Jihyun,

Thank you for sending over this document.

I am writing to confirm that ethics approval has been granted by
the UCL Institute of Education for your doctoral research project
titled: "Transitional and Transnational Opportunities? UK
Overseas Students' and Graduates' perceptions of and
involvements in International careers"

This ethics approval has been granted from 8th February
2018 and the document you provided has been saved to
your student file.

Please can you upload the approved ethics form to your UCL
Research Student Log https://researchlog.grad.ucl.ac.uk/.

I wish you all the best for your forthcoming research.

Best wishes,
Julia

Julia Samuels
Programme Assistant

UCL Institute of Education,
University College London,
20 Bedford Way,
London, WC1H 0AL

C. Information sheet

a. For student

Institute of Education

Transitional and Transnational Opportunities? UK Overseas Students' and Graduates' Perceptions and Involvements in International careers

Information sheet for international students and graduates

I am writing to request your participation as an interviewee in a project entitled "Transitional and Transnational Opportunities? UK Overseas Students' and Graduates' Perceptions and Involvements in International careers". I am conducting this research as a PhD Candidate under the supervision of Professor Simon Marginson and Dr Aniko Horvath in the Department of Education, Practice and Society at the UCL Institute of Education.

What is the research about?
The objective of this research is to explore the ways in which international careers are imagined, planned for and actualised by international students and graduates, and the role of higher education institutions and UK immigration regulation in these processes. In particular, I wish to investigate the meanings and interpretations that you have regarding international careers, and examine the external forces and processes influencing you to choose international career trajectories or not to do so. The study also aims to analyse the role of UK universities in shaping your imagination and actual practices of international careers in a context where post-study work opportunities are strictly controlled.

Am I eligible to participate in this study?
In this project, I will interview either face to face or via Skype around 60 non-EU international postgraduate students and graduates (30 each) in the fields of Science and Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics as well as Social Sciences from three UK universities: University of Oxford, University College London, and Oxford Brookes University. Face-to-face interviews will also be administered to career staff from the three institutions (one or two each).

How long will the interview be and what questions will I be asked?
The interview, which will last between 50-60 minutes, will be conversational in nature and will address topics such as your motivations for studying abroad, your international study and/or work experiences, your plans for future career and life after the completion of your studies, and your thoughts about and/or experiences with international careers. However, you are encouraged to bring up any issues that you feel are important and interesting. You are also entitled to refuse to answer any questions or to withdraw your participation at any time.

How will my interview be used and contribute to the research project?
The interview will be tape recorded with your permission and I alone will have access to hear the taped interview or read the non-anonymised transcript. My supervisors may also have access however only to anonymised interview transcripts. All information will be kept strictly confidential. No identifiable information, such as your name, position, and institutional affiliation, will be used in publication unless I contact you to ask for your permission to do so. The results of the research will be presented in my doctoral dissertation and will also be disseminated as academic papers in journals and conferences. A summary of results will also be made available to you if you wish. As an international student and/or graduate from the UK higher education institutions, your experiences would be a great contribution to my research as well as the current policy and practice relating to international students in the UK.

Please feel free to get in touch with me or my supervisors should you have any questions about the research. You can also reach the Research Ethics and Governance Board of the UCL Institute of Education (ioe.researchethics@ucl.ac.uk).

Jihyun Lee, PhD Candidate
Department of Education, Practice and Society
UCL Institute of Education
Email: jihyun.lee.16@ucl.ac.uk

Simon Marginson, Professor (Principal supervisor)
Department of Education, Practice and Society
UCL Institute of Education
Email: s.marginson@ucl.ac.uk

Aniko Horvath, Dr (Second supervisor)
Department of Education, Practice and Society
UCL Institute of Education
Email: aniko.horvath@ucl.ac.uk

UCL Institute of Education
20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AH

b. For career staff

Institute of Education

Transitional and Transnational Opportunities? UK Overseas Students' and
Graduates' Perceptions and Involvements in International careers

Information sheet for career service staff

I am writing to request your participation as an interviewee in a project entitled "Transitional and Transnational Opportunities? UK Overseas Students' and Graduates' Perceptions and Involvements in International careers". I am conducting this research as a PhD Candidate under the supervision of Professor Simon Marginson and Dr Aniko Horvath in the Department of Education, Practice and Society at the UCL Institute of Education.

What is the research about?
The objective of this research is to explore the ways in which international careers are imagined, planned for and actualised by international students and graduates, and the role of higher education institutions and UK immigration regulation in these processes. In particular, I wish to investigate the meanings and interpretations that they have regarding international careers, and examine the external forces and processes influencing them to choose international career trajectories or not to do so. The study also aims to analyse the role of UK universities in shaping their imagination and actual practices of international careers in a context where post-study work opportunities are strictly controlled.

Am I eligible to participate in this study?
In this project, I will interview either face to face or via Skype around 60 non-EU international postgraduate students and graduates (30 each) in the fields of Science and Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics as well as Social Sciences from three UK universities: University of Oxford, University College London, and Oxford Brookes University. Face-to-face interviews will also be administered to career staff from the three institutions (one or two each).

How long will the interview be and what questions will I be asked?
The interview, which will last between 50-60 minutes, will be conversational in nature and will address topics such as the type and range of career services provided for international students and graduates, the inclusion and exclusion criteria for international careers, and your consultation experiences with international students and graduates interested in international careers. However, you are encouraged to bring up any issues that you feel are important and interesting. You are also entitled to refuse to answer any questions or to withdraw your participation at any time.

How will my interview be used and contribute to the research project?
The interview will be tape recorded with your permission and I alone will have access to hear the taped interview or read the non-anonymised transcript. My supervisors may also have access however only to anonymised interview transcripts. All information will be kept strictly confidential. No identifiable information, such as your name, position, and institutional affiliation, will be used in publication unless I contact you to ask for your permission to do so. The results of the research will be presented in my doctoral dissertation and will also be disseminated as academic papers in journals and conferences. A summary of results will also be made available to you if you wish. As a career staff, your experiences would be a great contribution to my research as well as the current policy and practice relating to international students in the UK.

Please feel free to get in touch with me or my supervisors should you have any questions about the research. You can also reach the Research Ethics and Governance Board of the UCL Institute of Education (ioe.researchethics@ucl.ac.uk).

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Simon Marginson, Professor (Principal supervisor)
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D. Consent form

a. Initial consent form

Transitional and Transnational Opportunities? UK Overseas Students' and Graduates' Perceptions and Involvements in International careers

Consent form for research participants

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study as an interviewee. Before proceeding with an interview, it is important that you read and understand the purposes of the study and your rights as a research participant (please indicate your choices below).

1. I have read the information sheet provided by the researcher conducting the study.	Yes	No
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw myself or my data at any time, without giving any reason, and without penalty.	Yes	No
3. I understand that in case of withdrawal from the process of interview I give consent that partial data can be used for the research.	Yes	No
4. I understand that my participation will bring minimal risks or harm, and there is no obligation to answer any question that I may feel is invasive, offensive or inappropriate.	Yes	No
5. I understand that I may ask questions of the researcher and her supervisors at any point during my involvement.	Yes	No
6. I understand that if I agree to be tape recorded, only the researcher will have access to hear the taped interview or read the non-anonymised transcript. Her supervisors may be allowed to have access to interview transcripts given they are completely anonymised.	Yes	No
7. If I do not wish to be tape recorded, then I permit the interviewer to take notes during the interview.	Yes	No
8. I understand that all personal information will be treated confidentially and destroyed properly at the end of the project. My name will not appear in publications based on this research, nor will it be associated with any information I provide.	Yes	No
9. I understand that the research will be written up in the form of a doctoral dissertation and that the results of this study will be distributed in academic conferences and journals.	Yes	No
10. I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the UCL Institute of Education Research Ethics and Governance Board.	Yes	No
11. As indicated in my signature below, I acknowledge that I agree to take part in the interview.	Yes	No
12. I agree to have my interview tape/sound recorded.	Yes	No

Name of participant:
Signature of participant:
Date:

Please take a copy of this form with you for reference. For any questions, please contact the researcher or her supervisors (see below), or the Research Ethics and Governance Board of the UCL Institute of Education (ioe.researchethics@ucl.ac.uk).

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Simon Marginson, Professor (Principal supervisor)
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Email: s.marginson@ucl.ac.uk

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b. Modified consent form

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Transitional and Transnational Opportunities? UK Overseas Students' and Graduates' Perceptions and Involvements in International careers

Information sheet for international students and graduates

Dear all the interview participants,

I am writing to request your permission to use the name of your university in a PhD project entitled "Transitional and Transnational Opportunities? UK Overseas Students' and Graduates' Perceptions and Involvements in International careers". I am conducting this research as a PhD Candidate under the supervision of Johanna Waters and Aniko Horvath in the Department of Geography at UCL.

I am requesting your permission about using the name of your university in the thesis. In the previous information sheet, I stated that your institutional name would not be disclosed in any publication including my thesis. However, I found it much more helpful to identify your university name to provide a more nuanced picture of the different experiences which would otherwise be difficult to capture without revealing your institutional name.

The name of your university would be mainly used in the descriptions of case universities in general. If I have to quote your interview in any case, I would send you the quote(s) and ask for your further permission. If you are not happy about the quote(s) and are concerned about the risk of your being identified and hence your reputation, I would be happy to delete the information you would not wish to reveal in that quote(s) or not to use the quote(s) at all that you found inappropriate.

All the other information will be kept strictly confidential. No identifiable information, such as your name, current position and institutional affiliation, will be used in publication unless I contact you to ask for your permission to do so. A summary of results will also be made available to you if you wish.

As the interview participants for this project, your experiences would be a great contribution to my research as well as the current policy and practice relating to international students in the UK.

Should you have any questions about the research please feel free to get in touch with me or my supervisors. You can also reach the Research Ethics and Governance Board of the UCL Institute of Education (ioe.researchethics@ucl.ac.uk).

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