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# International and transnational learning in higher education: a study of students' career development in China

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## Abstract

During the past few decades, there has been a significant increase in international mobile students. With a strong intention to enhance their competitiveness in the global labour market, a growing number of students embark on their learning journeys through studying abroad or enrolling in transnational higher education programmes, expecting that the international learning experience will enhance their future job searches and career advancement. However, whether this kind of learning experience enables students, especially degree pursuers for study abroad, to secure promising positions in the global labour market and make their investments in higher education worthy remains debatable. The current literature renders differentiated or even opposing results. Drawing on both student surveys and in-depth interviews, this paper aims to explore how international or transnational higher education affects job searches and career development, with particular reference to the perspective of employable skills and contextual influences. We find that the respondents of the present research highly rate their learning experiences for hard knowledge, as well as

soft skills and cross-cultural understanding. The majority of our respondents suggest that the international and transnational learning experience positively contributes to their career development. However, most of the graduates from international or transnational higher education institutions come from advantaged family backgrounds, and attained their first job through their social network after their graduation. Transnational and overseas study may perpetuate social inequality. The article ends with some sociological reflections on this study.

**Key words:** transnational higher education, international learning, graduate employment, employable skills, contextual influences

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## **Background: increasing international mobility and transnational higher education development**

During the past few decades, globalisation has appeared as the most pervasive and powerful factor leading social, economic, political and cultural changes all over different parts of the globe (Knight, 2006). Central to the term 'globalisation' is free trade without national borders, encouraging people's mobility and free flow of information and capitals (Kromidha, 2014). As McNally (2001) stated, 'no country is immune from the globalisation process and/ or its impact' (p. 96), with the growing impact of globalisation radically transforming nearly all the aspects of the human society (Albrow, 1996; Bauman, 1998; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990; Gray, 1998; Mok and James, 2005; Robertson, 1992; Sklair, 2002; Yang, 2005). Having experienced the significant impacts of globalisation, especially confronting underemployment and unemployment resulting from the globalising economy, intensified competition for jobs when the labour market is fighting for the war of talent, as well as management issues related to cross-border migration and people mobility, anti-globalisation movements have emerged in recent years. The outcry for domestic interests first commonly shared among citizens in the UK and the USA in their recent elections has clearly suggested the dilemmas and tensions between national protectionism and the call for internationalisation and globalism (BBC, 2012, 2016<sup>1</sup>; the New York Times, 2017<sup>2</sup>).

Despite the contentious relationship between globalism and localism, a strong tide of international learning has become increasingly popular, especially when parents and students realise how important international learning experiences are to future job searches and career development. Van der Wende (2007) interprets the process of internationalising higher education as 'a strategic response to the demands and challenges of social, economic, and labour market globalisation,' whereas Kerr (1994) simply regards such a process as the global flow of people, information, knowledge, technology, programmes, education services, and financial capital. To enhance their students' global competitiveness, governments around the world, not only in Asia

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.bbc.com/news/business-18104024>; <http://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-35836102>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/05/22/world/europe/europe-right-wing-austria-hungary.html?r=0>

(Kuang et al. 2012; Stiasny and Gore 2012; International Consultants for Education and Fairs, 2014; Mok and Yu 2014; see also Common Space of Higher Education in Association of Southeast Asian Nations for regional mobility<sup>3</sup>), but also in traditional magnets for international students (European Region Action Scheme (+) for the Mobility of University Students (hereafter Erasmus (+)) in the European Union in general, UK Strategy for Outward Mobility in the UK in particular<sup>4</sup>; Generations Study Abroad in the USA<sup>5</sup>) are placing more emphasis on internationalising student learning experiences to foster the global knowledge, skills, and languages necessary to perform professionally and socially in international, multicultural environments.

It is against the above wider political and economic background that we have found the number of international mobile students has increased significantly. The figure surged to around 5 million in 2014 from 2.1 million internationally mobile students in 2000, with a 10 per cent increase annually. The OECD went further to predict that due to the global demographic changes, the number of international students may reach 8 million by 2025 (Oxford, 2015). Currently, the USA remains the most desirable destination for international students, followed by the UK, Germany, France and Australia, demonstrated by their more than half market share (Oxford, 2015). For the source countries/ areas, the number of mobile students from the Asia-Pacific region keeps increasing and thus it is ranked as the top region in the world for sending out students for overseas study. The Asian student proportions accounted for 53 per cent of all the mobile students worldwide in 2011 (OECD, 2013). It is anticipated that India and China will contribute 35 per cent of the global growth in the number of mobile students during the forecast period (from 3.04 million in 2011 to 3.85 million in 2024) (British Council, 2012).

When analysing the increasing popularity of student mobility, Knight rightly argued (2014) that as the first generation of TNHE, student mobility has observed a meteoric rise during the past few years as mentioned before. Indeed, TNHE cannot be

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<sup>3</sup> For more details, refer to

[http://www.unescobkk.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/apeid/workshops/macao08/papers/1-p-1-3.pdf](http://www.unescobkk.org/fileadmin/user_upload/apeid/workshops/macao08/papers/1-p-1-3.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> For more details, refer to <http://www.erasmusprogramme.com/>, [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/node\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/node_en), and <http://go.international.ac.uk/sites/default/files/UK%20HE%20International%20Unit%20UK%20Strategy%20for%20Outward%20Mobility%20Version%201.0.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> For details, refer to [http://www.iie.org/Programs/Generation-Study-Abroad#.WHV\\_tIN96Uk](http://www.iie.org/Programs/Generation-Study-Abroad#.WHV_tIN96Uk)

confined to the simple description of the physical movement of students, but also the movement of programmes and providers across the national boundaries, or the formation of education hubs, as ‘a concerted and planned effort by a country, zone, or city to build a critical mass of local and international actors to strengthen the HE sector, expand the talent pool, and/ or contribute to the knowledge economy’ (Knight, 2014, p. 19), including both the first- and second-wave of transnational activities. It is worth noting that the most active participants in establishing education hubs are Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and the United Arab Emirates (Knight, 2011), most of which are concentrated in the Asia-Pacific region. The ever-mounting number of students overseas highlights the severe problem of ‘brain drain’<sup>6</sup> and compels them to participate actively in importing educational resources and establishing education hubs, for the purpose of reversing the tide of ‘brain drain’ but engaging in ‘brain gain’ or ‘brain calculation’ endeavours (Mok and Han, 2016).

Studies in international and transnational higher education institutions have become more and more popular, and parents and students expect the learning experience has potential to enhance students’ career development. However, it remains debatable whether the experience helps graduates to secure promising positions in the labour market and make their investment in their study worthy. To fill this gap, the study draws on both student surveys and in-depth interviews to investigate whether and how international or transnational higher education affects job searches and employment. The empirical evidence generated from the present research suggests that the international and transnational learning experience could enhance graduates’ hard knowledge, as well as soft skills and cross-cultural understanding. More importantly, the experience could positively contribute to graduates’ job searches and career development. However, most of the graduates in our study come from economically relatively better-off families. The young people from these families were able to capture the opportunity to study in overseas or transnational higher education institutions, and the majority of them obtained their first job through their family’s social networks. The transnational and overseas study may thus perpetuate social inequality.

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<sup>6</sup> With reference to the Brain Drain Index<sup>6</sup>, China’s scores fluctuated from 2.93 to 4.07 between 2005 to 2015 while 0 indicates severe brain drain and 10 indicates no problem, which means the brain drain situation in China is worse than its Asian counterparts, such as Indonesia (5.93), Singapore (5.73), Thailand (4.88), India (4.87) and Japan (4.49), (The Institute for Management Development (IMD) World Competitiveness Center, 2015)

In the following section, this paper begins with an intensive literature review related to international learning and graduate employment, highlighting the research gap and major research questions of the present studies. The second part of the paper presents the major research design and research findings. The paper ends with critical sociological reflections of this study.

## **International education experience and graduate employment**

Without the impractical calculation of innumerable cooperation programmes (twinning/franchise, joint/double/multiple locally supported distance), co-founded or co-developed institutions (Knight, 2015), the number of international branch campuses<sup>7</sup> has surged from 84 in 2000 to 311 in 2017 (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2017)<sup>8</sup> and absorbed at least 180,000 students (the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, 2016)<sup>9</sup>. Among them, 188 are located in Asia while China ranks as the top host (56 branch campuses including those in Hong Kong).

The history of Chinese TNHE can be retraced to 1988, when the 'first degree-conferring joint programmes in China', the MBA course offered by Tianjin College of Finance and Economics (renamed as International Center of MBA Education of Tianjin University of Finance and Economics) with the approval of the Academic Degrees Committee under the State Council (Huang, 2010, p. 272) was established. During the past three decades, its number has increased from 2 to 2,040 (Huang, 2010; MOE, 2017). In 2013, 0.45 million students were enrolled in TNHE, representing 1.4 per cent of the total students in Chinese HEIs. By the end of 2013, the graduates from TNHE grew to 1.5 million (MOE, 2013).

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<sup>7</sup> Even though there is no consensus among scholars on the definition of international branch campuses (Han, 2016), here we follow the data offered by two international organisation/ research team: the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education based in the UK and Cross-Border Education Research Team based in the USA. The conceptual clarification of 'branch campus' will also be offered in another working paper of ours, exploring the capacity of students' aspiration in employment who graduated from one sampled 'branch campus' in China.

<sup>8</sup> For more details, refer to [http://cbert.org/?page\\_id=34](http://cbert.org/?page_id=34)

<sup>9</sup> For more details, refer to [http://www.obhe.ac.uk/documents/view\\_details?id=1032](http://www.obhe.ac.uk/documents/view_details?id=1032)

The other side of this promising development of internationalisation in HE is the changing nature of HE from public good to private commodity (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Tooley, 1996), which renders international education to be ‘the biggest investment’ of families, in both developing or developed countries (QS, 2011, p. 15). If we hold an optimistic viewpoint, the whole picture seems like a win-win situation: on the one hand, countries charging full cost of education from mobile students can gain significant financial benefits (OECD, 2016) or enhance their international profile (Han, 2016). For instance, the US economy reaped more than \$35.8 billion from international students in 2015 (Institute of International Education (IIE), 2015) while the income from tuition fees of non-EU students in the UK was around £4.23 billion in 2014/15 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016). On the other hand, the international experience is expected to secure employment opportunity, improve social mobility, promote further study possibility, sustain high average salaries and improve academic performance (UK Higher Education International Unit, 2016). The figures cited above are vividly embodied in the OECD’s comments in 2011:

One way for students to expand their knowledge of other societies and languages, and thus improve their prospects in globalised sectors of the labour market, such as multi-national corporations or research, is to study in tertiary education institutions in countries other than their own.

(p. 318)

Data derived from surveys and interviews conducted by universities, commercial entities, international organisations and researchers seem univocally focused on the benefits exclusively granted to international students. The employer survey conducted by QS in 2011, synthesising more than 10,000 respondents’ perspectives from 116 countries in five continents, has confirmed around 60 per cent employers prefer the international studying experience during talent recruitment (QS, 2011). More specifically, 1,041 out of 10,344 recruiters clearly place priority on international experience, considering it as a ‘formal part of the shortlisting/ interviewing process’ while 1,034 consent to apply this principle in ‘all new hires’, based on the belief that international mobile students will outperform their locally-educated peers generally (QS, 2011, p. 8). In view of the above trends, Duke University Career Center recently stated:

What do international employers really look for in employees and what skills will be needed by professionals to perform successfully in the global marketplace? A study commissioned by the College Placement Council Foundation surveyed 32 international employers and colleges to determine what international employers seek in prospective employees. The three most important skills were cognitive skills, social skills, and 'personal traits'. Problem-solving ability, decision making, and knowing how to learn are highly prized generic skills. Social skills were described as the ability to work effectively in group settings, particularly with diverse populations. Personal traits mentioned frequently included flexibility, adaptability, and the capacity to be innovative.

(The official website of Duke University, Career Center<sup>10</sup>)

More supporting evidence derives from the regional research: for Europe in general, the research on the impact of Erasmus (+) reveals that participants highly value their international experience in gaining a first job (Teichler and Janson, 2007). The employers' perceptions further confirm this point as over 30 per cent employed in the study experience as one recruitment standard and considered mobile students to be more competent performers (Bracht et al., 2006); for the UK in particular, the benefits are self-evident, with the lower unemployment of mobile undergraduate students (5 per cent to 7 per cent) and higher annual salary (£21,349 to £20,519, six months after graduation) compared with their local-trained peers (UK Higher Education International Unit, 2016). For Australia, the evidence proved that graduates who have studied overseas have been placed in a privileged career promotion path (Lawrence, 2006; Crossman and Clarke, 2010). In the US, employers in general and 'some classes of employers in particular, place significant value on studying abroad' (Trooboff et al., 2008, p. 29), which is further reinforced by the survey that two thirds of Institute for International Education of Students (IES) Abroad alumna acquired their first jobs within two months, 89 per cent within six months (Preston, 2012; see also IES official website<sup>11</sup>). Orahood et al (2004) in America (exchange programme), Fielden et al (2007) in the UK (including both the exchange programme and degree pursuit), Tiechler and Janson (2007) in the Europe, King et al (2010) in the UK have

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<sup>10</sup> For more details, refer to <https://studentaffairs.duke.edu/career/online-tools-resources/career-center-career-options-guides/international-opportunities>.

<sup>11</sup> For more details, refer to <https://www.iesabroad.org/study-abroad/why/career-benefits>.

also generated similar results showing international learning experiences would have enhanced graduate employment and employability. Yielding positive relationships between studying overseas and graduate employment, IIE concludes 'Study abroad is essential to future employability, earnings potential, and the economic well-being of students and communities' (2014).

Tillman, M. (2011) has various reasons why applicants with international experience are in advantageous positions when compared with their non-mobile counterparts, including the requests of the current global market (adaptability, cross-cultural sensitivity, political awareness and intellectual flexibility), the blurring of national borders/ cultures under the impact of globalisation, and the employers' preference, especially 'those doing business internationally' (p. 2). His argument is based on the research conducted by Bikson and his colleagues in Rand Corporation, affirming the attributes making a successful career professional in an international organisation could be built and strengthened by international learning experience, especially the top five ones (Tillman, 2011). More specifically, the top five attributes are: general cognitive skill (e.g., problem solving, analytical ability), interpersonal and relationship skills, personal traits (e.g., character, self-reliance, dependability), written and oral English languages skills, foreign language fluency<sup>12</sup> (2003, p. 25).

Similarly, the managing director Laurette Bennhold-Samaan at Aperian Global observed the reciprocal relationship between employers and the staff with international experience through his personal communication with Tillman, and stated that 'international experience has become a critical asset for all global organisations and will continue to create a competitive advantage—both for the individuals and for the companies that hire them' (cited from Tillman, 2014, p. 28). Recruiters from China, Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong and Singapore also demonstrate their positive attitudes toward global learning experience (QS, 2011). More specifically in China, ranked as the top source country with 712,157

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<sup>12</sup> Others include substantive knowledge in a technical or professional field, knowledge of international affairs and geographic area studies, managerial training and experience, cross-cultural competence (ability to work well in different cultures and with people of different origins), internet and information technology competency, ability to work in teams, general educational breadth, multidisciplinary orientation, ambiguity tolerance and adaptively, empathy and nonjudgmental perspective, innovative and able to take risks, competitiveness, ability to think in policy and strategy terms, and minority sensitivity (ranking in descending order) (Tillman, 2003, p. 25)

students studying abroad (UNESCO, 2016), 65 per cent of the surveyed returnees estimated they could cover the financial cost of international learning within five years (New Oriental Group, 2016).

Most important of all, the relationship between overseas study experience and the employment outcome in local labour markets is far more complicated when considering the differentiated or even opposite results in another cohort of reports and scholarly works (even in a smaller quantity). For instance, even though the Norwegian graduates with foreign diplomas could obtain higher economic rewards a few years after graduation, they have encountered more difficulties in entering the national labour market (Wiers-Jenssen and Try, 2005). Such a situation is commonly found in other Nordic countries such as Denmark, Finland and Iceland (Saarikallio-Torp and Wiers-Jenssen 2010). The online survey results completed by 304 American employers also reveals that while the international experiences were indeed rated and ranked highly by recruiters, particularly the long-term, Western experiences studying abroad only comprise one part of a complicated picture of recruiters' evaluations (Turos, 2010). Pietro (2015), though the exploration of the short-term exchange programme in Italy, identifies an insignificant positive correlation between studying abroad and the subsequent employment rate while Cammeli (2001, cited from Peitro, 2015) reached the conclusion of no effect occurred.

## **Major research focus of the present research**

The extensive review of literature related to international learning presented above has highlighted the importance of 'skills' as the key to explain the heterogeneous or even stark antithesis when exploring the impact of international education on labour market results. If we agree with Tillman's (2014) explanation that 'international experience by itself is not enough' (p. 29), as echoed by Gardner et al. (2009), and Hall's (2014) conclusion that employers indeed value the skills gained or enhanced through international learning experience, instead of the experience per se, the seeming disagreements over overseas study's effect on labour market outcomes could reach be reconciled, with emphasis placed on the term 'employable skills'.

Gardner et al (2008) and Trooboff et al (2007) in the US have elucidated the same trend that employers may not connect valued skills to international learning experience. As confirmed by Michigan State's Collegiate Employment Research Institute (CERI), international learning experience itself is not the vital component of hiring criteria (Hall, 2014). Even for the employers who indeed recruited graduates studying overseas, only 32 per cent of this kind of employee could display skills more frequently than their local counterparts (Blahnik, Hall, Lory, Perman, Rinehart, and Sorenson-Wagner 2007).

The intensive literature review outlined above clearly suggests the difficulty in reaching consensus on whether international learning or studying abroad would have enhanced individuals' career development and job advancement, while the existing literature is also criticised as 'labour market outcomes of Western mobile students who take the entire degree or greater parts of it abroad is hardly ever addressed' due to the difficulty in data collection (Jessen, 2008, p. 104). The same is true for Asian mobile students pursuing higher education overseas. In addition, the different study types (majorly undergraduate and master), which are believed to influence the skills acquired (Crossman and Clarke, 2010) and the employment outcome (Lee and Brinton, 1996) have not been separated for comparison. Thirdly, while Crossman and Clarke's (2010) have pointed out that employers distinguish candidates based on the candidates' Alma Mater (p. 605; see also Brown and Scase, 1994), no matter if it is due to the signaling effect (Spence, 1973) or what Cox and King (2006) called a 'virtuous circle' (p. 263), the capability of a certain HEI to attract more competent applicants based on its good reputation, the empirical evidence is not sufficient.

Furthermore, while China witnessed cohorts of students graduated from branch campus of overseas universities since 2008, labour market outcomes of these graduates have not been thoroughly examined. The present study aims to fill these lacuna through offering both quantitative data on students' employment outcome, employable skills improvement and qualitative exploration on contextual – familial and institutional influence on students' employment choice.

## Data and methods

To address the research gaps identified above, this study draws on both quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine how international and transnational higher education affect students' job searches and career development. While selecting the respondents for survey, we considered two important dimensions: (a) overseas / transnational learning experience; and (b) undergraduate and graduate (master degree) study. Specifically, we conducted a graduates' employment survey with three different types of Chinese graduates: (a) master graduates with international learning experience: 106 master graduates from UK universities (both elite and non-elite higher education institutions), (b) undergraduates with transnational learning experience: 80 undergraduates who graduated from one Sino-foreign cooperation university (University A, hereafter) and directly entered the labour market, and (c) master graduates with international and transnational learning experience: 237 master graduates who were undergraduates in University A and attained overseas master degrees before their entry to the labour market. The survey was conducted during November 2016 to January 2017.

University A is a good case for studying the transnational learning experience of students and their graduate employment. This university collaborated with a relatively high-ranking HEI from the UK, and has been successfully operating for a long time. It is featured by the weak linkage with the Chinese partners, as all the administrative and teaching staff are recruited on its own instead of sharing the human resources with either Chinese or foreign partners. In addition, the percentage of undergraduates in this university continuing to study abroad reached over 81 per cent in the recent three years (The Graduate Employment Report 2014, 2015, 2016)<sup>13</sup>. It thus renders us a good opportunity to examine graduates of both transnational and overseas learning experience and their graduate employment.

In addition, we recruited 20 interviewees through snowball sampling for in-depth interviews, so as to gain deeper understanding about students' learning experiences and their employment.

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<sup>13</sup> We conceal the name and links to the Reports to protect our collaborator's interest.

The interviewees are 10 graduates of type (a), five undergraduates of type (b) and five of type (c). Both respondents of the survey and interview participants are well informed about the project purpose, methods and their rights. Consent was obtained from interviewees and survey respondents before the interviews/ survey were conducted.

## **Major findings**

### **Descriptive statistics**

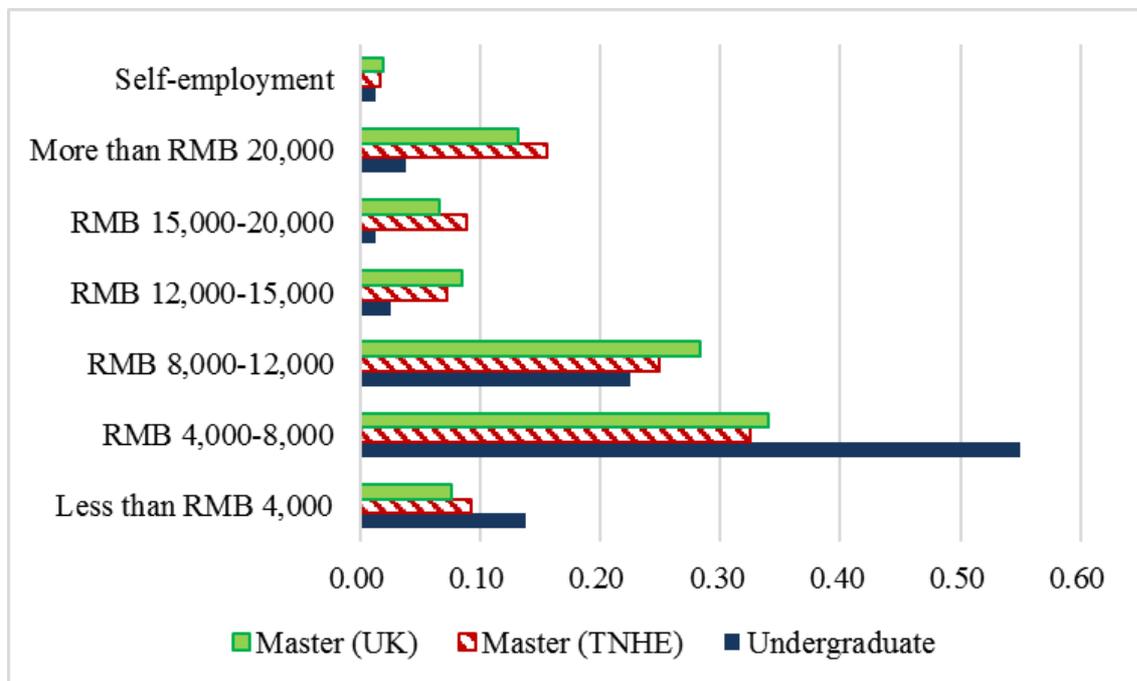
The total number of respondents in our survey is 423, including 106 master graduates from UK universities (Master (UK), hereafter), 80 undergraduates from the Sino-foreign cooperation university (University A), and 237 master graduates who were undergraduates in University A and attained overseas master degrees (Master (TNHE), hereafter). 56 per cent (237) of the respondents are female and 44 per cent (186) of them are male. All of them are graduates from the recent 10 years, and around 70 per cent of them graduated within the recent five years (i.e., since 2013).

### **Graduate employment outcomes**

Recent studies suggest that university graduates in China and even East Asia experienced challenges in their graduate employment during the massification of higher education (e.g., Mok and Jiang, 2017). However, our study shows that more than 90 per cent of the respondents in our survey found their jobs within six months of their graduation. In particular, the percentage of undergraduates from a Sino-foreign university is 94 per cent. Only less than 2 per cent of the master graduates and less than 4 per cent of undergraduates in our sample took more than one year to find their first jobs.

Combining with Figure 1 representing the starting salary of our respondents, our data further confirms Wiers-Jenssen and Try's (2005) conclusion that 'though admission to relevant jobs [for international students] is somewhat constrained, but the economic returns are higher' (p. 701). This argument could be further confirmed when drawing insight from Chinese local graduates' employment rate six months after graduation (92.2 per cent in 2015, MyCos, 2016). In addition, the highest proportion of the

relatively high payment (between 15,000 to 20,000 RMB) occurred in master with TNHE undergraduate qualification, from the other side, corresponded with the heterogeneity between overseas and local education may lead to the lack of country specific skills (Friedberg, 2000; Duvander, 2001; Chiswick and Miller, 2003) required by the domestic labour markets (Wiers-Jenssen and Try, 2005). Masters trained domestically as undergraduates who continued their study overseas could benefit from both human capital increase both in general aspects and country specific requirements.

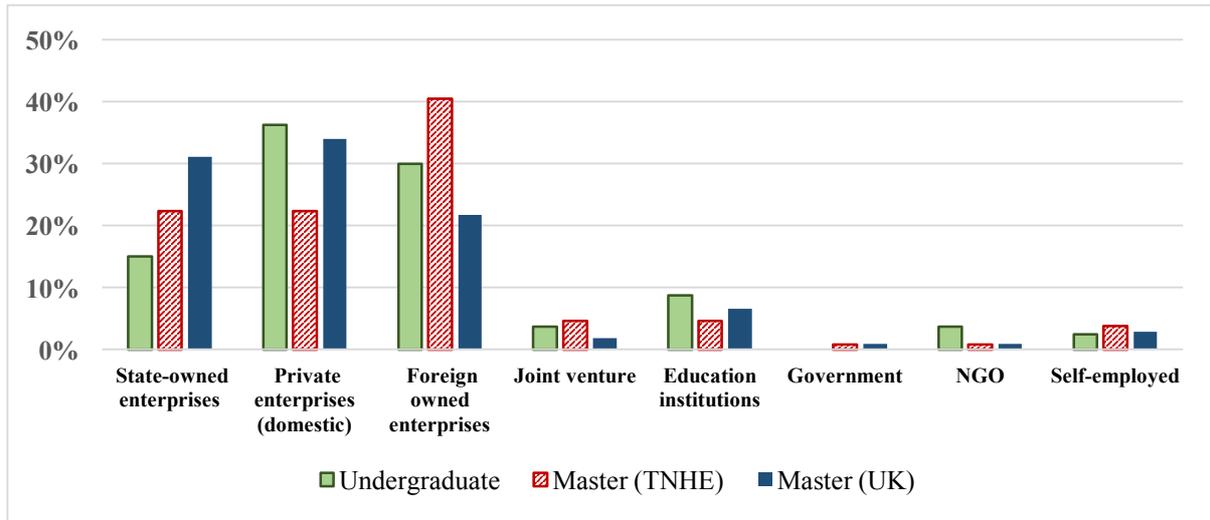


**Figure 1 Starting monthly salary**

It is also worth noting the distribution of employment sectors of graduates (as shown in Figure 2). Most of our respondents attained their jobs in private enterprises or foreign owned corporations. More than 40 per cent of master graduates from transnational higher education (TNHE) work in foreign owned enterprises (largest among three types of graduates), while around 35 per cent of undergraduates and 30 per cent of master graduates from the UK work in private enterprises.

One interviewee who graduated from one of the top five universities in the UK has frankly stated that the 'relatively low salary' and the 'gloomy career development' has driven her away from such positions while another returnee from a mass UK

university (rather than Russell Group) expressed his expectation of potential employers, ‘they [private or foreign owned enterprises] may be more inclined to recruit workers with proficient English and comprehensive scope...the government seems prefer domestically trained graduates [to us]’ (Interview, 2017). The students’ autonomy in choosing employers due to ‘democratisation of capitalism’ (Brown et al., 2003, p. 113) has been well revealed by our respondents’ remarks.



**Figure 2. The distribution of employment sectors of graduates**

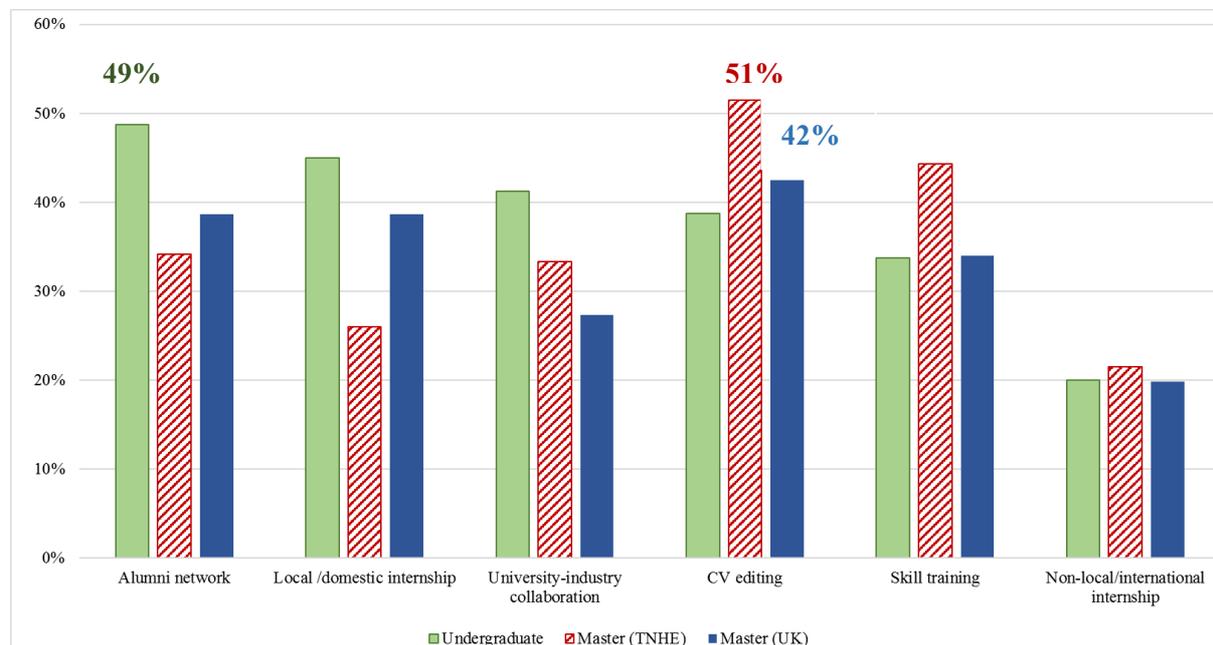
## Self-evaluation of overseas and transnational learning experiences

As we argued elsewhere (Mok and Han, 2017), without a clear criterion for ‘employability’, this nomenclature stays vague in academia, so do the ‘return to education investment’ and ‘employable skills’. So in this paper, we measure these terms from students’ self-evaluation. Our results suggest that the majority of the respondents think the TNHE/ overseas learning facilitate their career development. In particular, more than 90 per cent of master graduates from the UK agreed or strongly agreed that their overseas learning experience facilitates their career development.

However, it is interesting to note that when looking at master students with undergraduate training in TNHE, 17 per cent of them expressed a neutral attitude towards their undergraduate study. Our follow up interviews revealed students’ unconsciousness about country-specific skills, not to mention attributing these skills to undergraduate studies. As describing these kind of skills as ‘natural’, our findings

both confirm and expand Bourdieu’s *habitus* argument (1986, 1996, 1998), supporting the broader social environment’s impact on *habitus* development. The comparatively high satisfaction regarding learning experience may be not only due to the academic knowledge acquired, but also the career services they received. Shouldering the transferred employability responsibility, HEIs, both in China and the UK, have focused on imbuing skills in classes (Speightetal, 2013; Yorke, 2010; Mason et al., 2009), and providing services out of classes. Our survey shows that more than 40 per cent of undergraduates and more than 50 per cent of master graduates occasionally or frequently resorted to career services in their university.

In fact, the universities both in the UK and the branch campus in China (University A) in our survey offer comprehensive career services. Figure 3 below shows a relatively high percentage of graduates in evaluating if the career service is helpful or very helpful. In particular, around a half of the master graduates think the CV editing service is helpful for them, while around 50 per cent of undergraduates evaluate the alumni network as helpful for their career development.



**Figure 3 The percentage of graduates in evaluating the career service is helpful or very helpful**

However, the synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data has revealed another intriguing finding: when students in interviews generously offered high assessment to the job-seeking facilities they receive, the questionnaire demonstrates the neutral attitude of most respondents; in addition, when interviewees mentioned they only resorted to the help of the career office in times of need (approaching the end of their study), survey results represent the relatively high frequency of students' usage of such services. One possible explanation to this seemingly controversial finding is the differentiation between universities, or more specifically, the Russell Group and mass ones.

The empirical data reveals this variety is not because of the insufficient services offered by mass HEIs, but students in Russell Group universities are always more actively engaged in seeking and employing career services. As one interviewee, in another top five UK university, said, 'even before I entered the university, I have a clear plan for my future career...searching the related information, contacting alumni in the same field [his desired working area] and polishing my CV with the help of university staff', which manifests as the stark opposite to another subject, 'I have heard of such service [from my school mates] but never resort to their help...maybe because I do not think they are helpful...' (Interview, 2017). Once more, his capacity to aspire (in utilising the career service) or *habitus*, becomes a hindrance for him to explore more possibilities. The 'navigational capacity', from this perspective, should not be confined to describe the disadvantages of the poor, but should be expanded to include all the social classes, as long as they confront the barrier in 'exploring the future' (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69).

**Table 1 self-evaluation of employable skills improvement**

Employable skills	Undergraduate	Master (TNHE)	Master (UK)
Tolerance of Ambiguity (acceptance of other people's culture and attitudes and adaptability)	5.16	4.54	4.93
Curiosity (openness to new experiences)	3.26	3.08	3.21
Confidence (trust in own competence)	3.74	3.43	3.65
Serenity (awareness of own strengths and weaknesses)	2.67	2.68	2.67
Decisiveness (ability to make decisions)	3.21	3.23	2.92
Vigor (ability to solve problems)	3.61	4.05	3.61

*Note: Higher score means more improvement in a certain skill.*

*The score is measured by the equation:  $(\sum \text{frequency} \times \text{weights}) / \text{num. of respondents}$ , where frequency is num. of the option selected; weights indicate the ranking of the option, ranging from 6 to 1, indicating most improvement to least improvement.*

Following the Erasmus Impact Study (2014, 2016), we also employ six factors to detect students' employable skills. However, without complicated psychological tests, we relied more on students' self-reporting due to the fact 'the tests could only demonstrate our capability, compared with domestically trained graduates; however, the higher index may not be due to our learning experience, but the difference of our characteristics', in other words, 'I rank confidence as the least improvement is not due to my non-confidence, but I am a self-dependent person even before going abroad' (Interview, 2017). When students were asked to rank the six elements, all three cohorts positioned the tolerance of ambiguity as foremost, as one student clearly stated, 'you can never imagine what kind of guys you will meet during study abroad...university is a good place to experience, or I may say, endure different cultures and you will become more acceptable for differences' (Interview, 2017).

Soft skills, as argued by some scholars (Clarke, 2007; Jone, 2014; Ripmeester, 2015) are also essential to employability/ employment, we thus collected students' reflection on their soft skill improvement. Not surprisingly, the most obvious part occurred in the foreign language proficiency, as 'you have to make yourself survive in the country...many incidents may happen and you are alone there...no parents, not relatives...all your Chinese friends are new-comers as you are...I remembered one time when I was forced to seek another apartment, I made every effort to express my ideas clearly to the agents and the landlord. Of course, you paid no attention to the grammar, sentence structure and pronunciation...it is totally different from studying English for test in China' (Interview, 2017). The ability to speak fluent English was taken as their major advantage during the job-seeking process.

Tables 1 and 2 present the self-evaluation of employable skills and soft skills improvement during respondents' international or transnational study. The results suggest that respondents agreed that their experience improved employable skills and soft skills. In particular, both undergraduates and master graduates suggest that the greatest improvement is the tolerance of ambiguity, i.e., accepting other people's culture and attitudes and adaptability. For employable skills, both the undergraduates and master graduates evaluate their greatest improvement as foreign language proficiency.

**Table 2 self-evaluation of soft skills improvement**

Employable skills	Undergraduate	Master (TNHE)	Master (UK)
Foreign language proficiency	4.64	4.57	4.43
Communication skills	4.31	4.34	4.34
Critical thinking and analysis	3.99	4.11	4.08
Knowledge of other countries	3.83	3.59	4.01
Creativity	3.24	3.32	3.07

*Note: Higher score means more improvement in a certain skill.*

*The score is measured by the equation:  $(\sum \text{frequency} \times \text{weights}) / \text{num. of respondents}$ , where frequency is num. of the option is selected; weights indicate the ranking of the option, ranging from 6 to 1, indicating most improvement to least improvement.*

## Social inequality and mobility

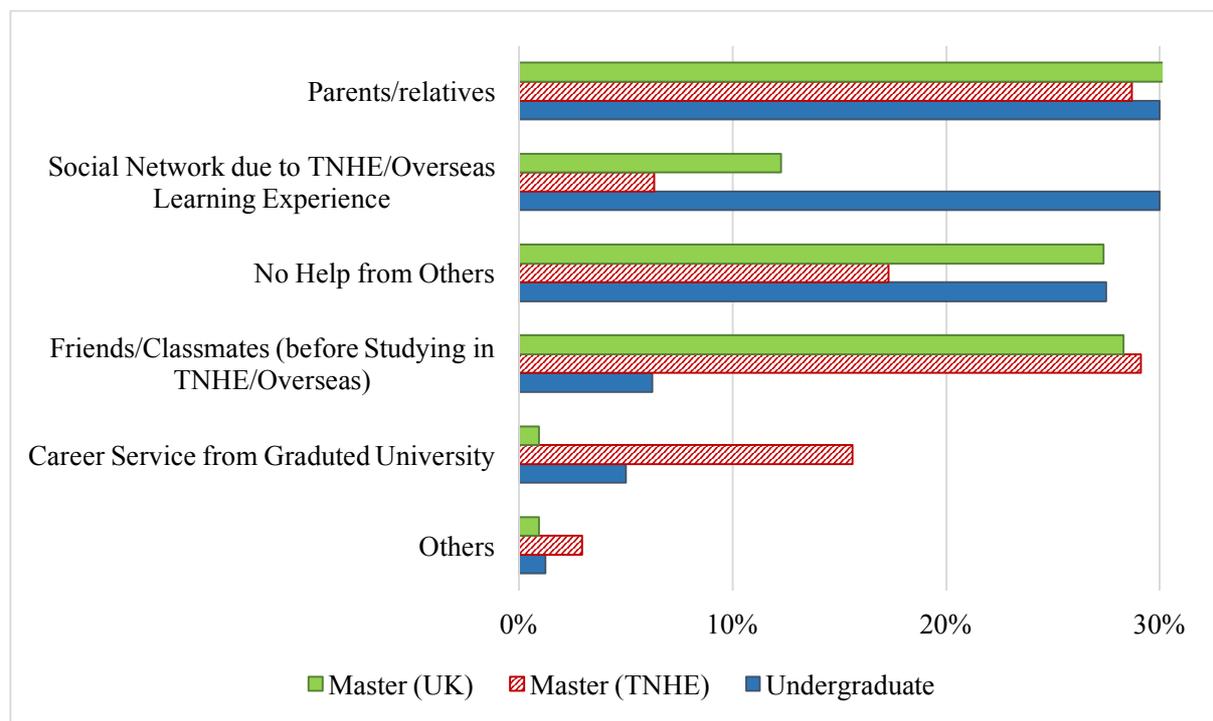
In our survey, over 40 per cent of respondents' parents have a higher education degree or above. It means a large proportion of the respondents experiencing international or transnational learning come from well-educated families, and their family is usually relatively well-off. This may partially explain why they could afford the higher tuition fees and living costs in pursuing TNHE/ overseas study rather than enrolling in public universities in China. As one interviewee from Anhui, an economically disadvantaged province in China added, 'my father is a university graduate and he could thus enjoy better career development and financial return [as before 1999, Chinese HE system was in elite phase]' (Interviewee, 2017).

The family background effect does not only affect respondents' enrolment in overseas university or their branch campus, but also has a great impact on their graduate employment. Figure 4 presents the sources of main help for the respondents to attain their first job. Around 30 per cent of the respondents found their first job through their parents or relatives. The proportion was even higher when we conducted interviewees, which also disclosed another compelling phenomenon, the parents/ relatives may not be confined as in blood, but also in law, or, potentially in law.

A respondent has shared her experience in employment when she accompanied her boyfriend to his hometown. She said it seems reasonable for the boyfriend's parents/ relatives to find a decent job for her, as she leaves home and thus has no concrete

relationship with the local community. By ‘decent’, she meant with relatively high social status (as in state-owned enterprises) and with an undemanding workload, while the salary is not the first concern. We thus argue the employment outcomes or employability exploration should be further expanded to encompass the national environment/ tradition. It is more complex than the ‘relative employability’, linking more to the labour market demands and national policy (Brown et al., 2003).

It is worth noting that a large percentage of the graduates in our survey attained their first jobs through their social network (or in Bourdieu’s term, social capital (1986)) of their friends or classmates. The findings of the importance of social networks echo early research about the importance of *guanxi* in seeking jobs (Bian and Ang, 1997).



**Figure 4 Main help for attaining the first job**

When the number of returnees increases, from 6,570 in 1996 to 409,100 in 2015, the reports about the value of international qualification, the unemployment problem and the static or even decreasing social mobility are seen everywhere (China, 2016; People, 2014; 2016; Youth, 2017)<sup>14</sup>. However, both the quantitative data and interview results offered the opposite opinion of our respondents. Most of them, more than 90 per cent of the respondents (both undergraduates and master graduates), believe their social status could be increased or substantially increased within three years.

<sup>14</sup> For more details, refer to [http://news.youth.cn/jy/201703/t20170303\\_9214485.htm](http://news.youth.cn/jy/201703/t20170303_9214485.htm);  
<http://edu.people.com.cn/n/2014/0508/c1053-24989452.html>;  
<http://news.0898.net/edu/n2/2016/0414/c231202-28144228.html>;  
[http://news.youth.cn/jy/201703/t20170303\\_9214485.htm](http://news.youth.cn/jy/201703/t20170303_9214485.htm).

One interviewee even claimed the reports were due to the ‘incapability of person but attribute the problems to the society’, ‘it is our responsibility to strive for upward social mobility...if you waste time during international study, you could imagine the results when returning...the reason is personal talentless, rather than employment environment’ (interview, 2017). His remarks, on the one hand, demonstrated the ‘politics of blame’ (Thrupp, 1998, p. 195) is now well accepted by individuals who consider unemployment is personal problem, while on the other hand, illustrates the self-reflection of intensified ‘global war for talents’ (Brown and Tannock, 2009).

In short, although transnational higher education and overseas study become new opportunities for individuals to pursue higher education, the new opportunities are not equally distributed. Our study suggests that most of the graduates from transnational higher education or overseas come from advantaged family backgrounds. The main source of help for them to attain their first job is the help from their family / relatives. In the current arrangement, transnational higher education and overseas study may perpetuate social inequality.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper has reviewed the increasingly popular trend of students from China embarking on overseas learning journeys not only through studying abroad but also enrolling in TNHE programmes offered by Sino-foreign cooperation universities in the mainland. Our above analysis has suggested the majority of respondents consider their international learning experiences, no matter how they have secured them, from studying abroad or participating in TNHE in China to be positive. Most important of all, our respondents highly rate their learning experiences not only for hard knowledge and skills but also soft skills and cross-cultural understanding. The majority of our respondents consider their international learning experiences will have a positive impact on future upward social mobility. Such positive job search and career development experiences are supported not only by the respondents’ perceived job prospects but also by their experiences in terms of the relatively short period of time spent on securing their first job. Meanwhile, the salary level and job nature / job venues our respondents obtained are competitive when compared to their counterparts who graduated from local universities. With these positive job venture experiences, it is not surprising that the majority of our respondents consider overseas studies and transnational higher education productive to their career development and job search.

Critically reflecting upon the above findings from a sociological perspective, the present research has provided strong empirical evidence to show how international learning experiences contribute positively to graduate employment and job searches. However, we must realise that students and families who cannot afford to pay for studying abroad or enrolling on TNHE programmes will encounter far more difficulty

in job searches and graduate employment. The growing popularity of international education has intensified education inequality, leading to the emerging trend of anti-globalism and anti-internationalisation, especially when university graduates without overseas learning or international education face diverse job searches and employment experiences. Further research should be conducted to compare graduate employment and job search experience of graduates with local university qualifications and those holding non-local qualifications.

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