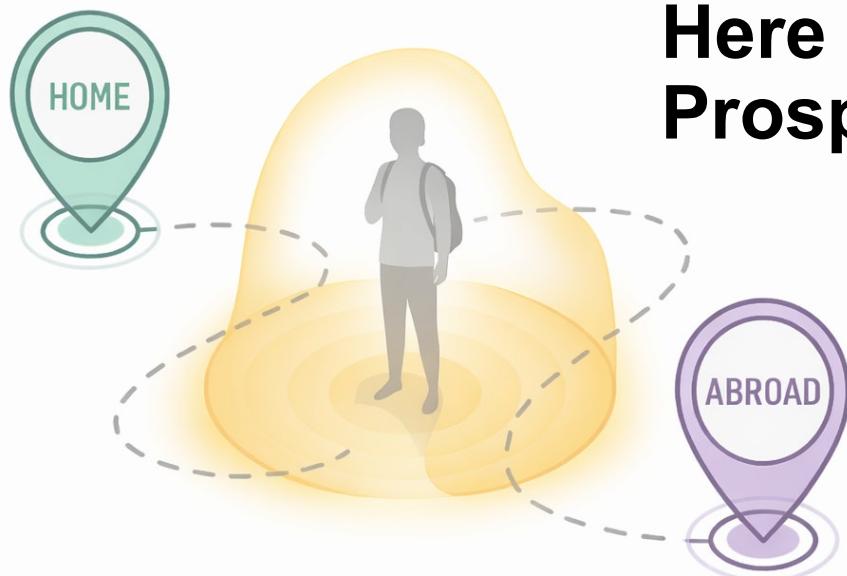




Here or There? Educational “In-Betweenness” for Prospective International Students in China



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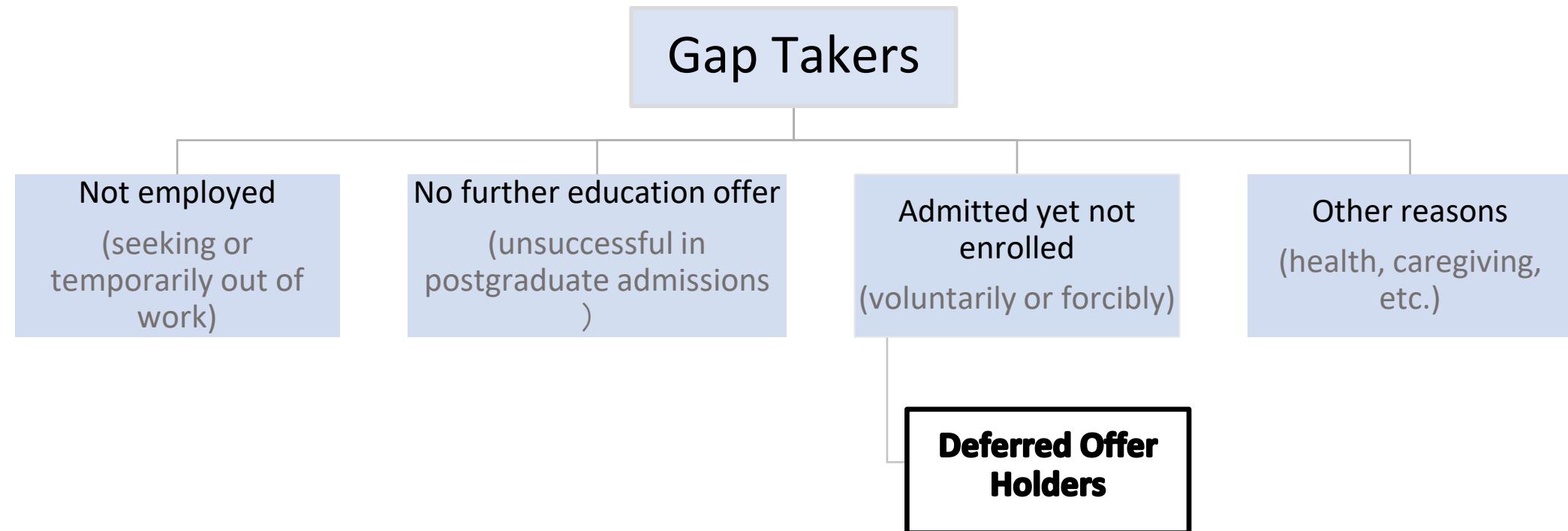
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Gap Experiences from Education to Work

Fresh Graduates in China (2023-2026)

Project Overview



Background – Global Disruptions & (Im)mobility

- **Pandemic & Geopolitical Disruptions:** Travel bans, visa delay or rejection, online classes, deferred enrolments (Schewel 2020; Marginson 2020)
- **“Sticky” Immobility:** Students feeling “stuck” in paused plans (Wang 2022)
- **Beyond Physical Movement:** Education continues online; immobility reshapes learning experiences (Raaper et al. 2022)
- **Time sensitivity** (Yu and He 2025; Wu et al. 2015)
- **Family Resilience:** Families support (Hu et al. 2022)
- **Education continued** – but identities and trajectories were unsettled.

In-Betweenness – A New Student Cohort

Who are “In-Betweeners”?

- Accepted overseas offers;
- Deferred enrolment due to pandemic, visa, or institutional disruption, etc.;
- Neither fully “domestic” nor “international” students;
- Largely invisible in mobility research

Research Aim & Questions



- How does educational in-between reshape students' trajectories and identities?
- How do students and families negotiate uncertainty during this period?
- What does “in-betweenness” reveal about mobility beyond the abroad/home binary?

Theoretical Framework – Liminality

- **Origin in Anthropology:** *limen*, rites of passage, transitional ambiguity
- **“Liminality” = Threshold State:** “Neither here nor there,” betwixt and between stages (Bhabha 2012; Bhandari 2020)
- **Key Features:** Ambiguity, instability, anxiety – old identity partially shed, new identity not yet attained

- **In Our Context:** Students suspended between home and abroad, waiting in uncertainty
- **Deferred Students:** No longer in Chinese system, not yet in foreign university – experiencing **uncertainty & “pause”**

Theoretical Framework – Third Space

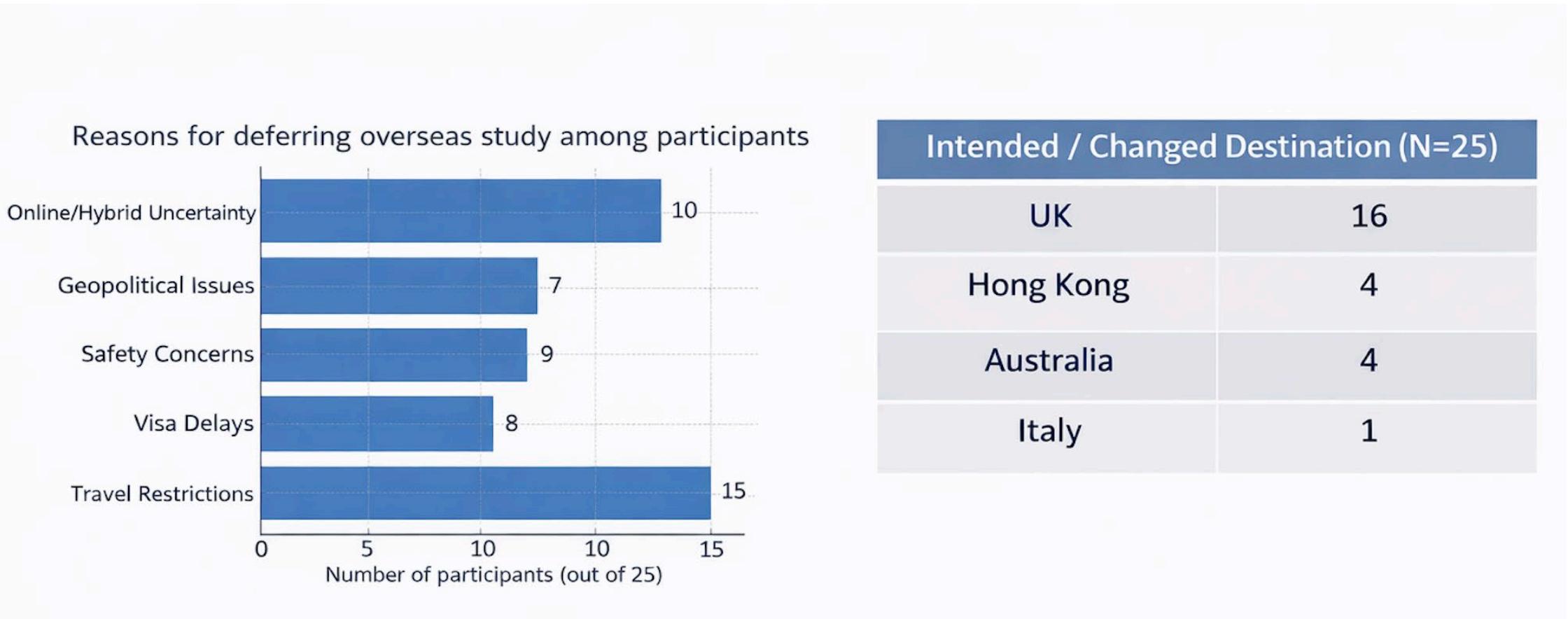
- **Third Space:** A productive, hybrid space emerging from being in-between (Bhabha 2012 ; Chakraborty 2016)
- **Beyond Binary:** Not just home vs host culture – an intercultural, creative mix of the two
- **Focus on Agency:** How new meanings and identities are actively forged in liminal contexts
- **In Education:** Previously used to examine cultural identities of students studying abroad (cultural adaptation) (Kramsch and Uryu 2020)

- **Extended Here:** Even without physical mobility, students create new identities/purposes while still at home
- **Key Idea:** Liminal periods can be **productive**, not just empty or holding patterns

Methodology – Participants & Sampling

- **Qualitative Study**
- **25 Interviews:** Prospective Master's students from Mainland China (offer-holders who deferred)
- **Criteria:** Accepted overseas Master's offer in last 5 years; formally deferred enrollment
- **Sampling:** Recruitment via online ads & snowball referrals
- **Profile:** 18 female, 7 male; diverse fields (Education, Computer Science, Geography, Arts, etc.)

Methodology – Participants & Sampling



Findings – In-Between Experiences



- Liminality experienced as *both loss and possibility*
- Students actively worked to give meaning to “waiting”
- Family context shaped how in-betweenness was lived
- Three Identity Trajectories

Typology 1 – The Self-Explorer

“Discovering through Disorientation”

- Psychological & Social Dislocation
- Cultural Stigma of Pausing
- Exploratory Actions
- Perceived as “Off-Track”

“Being in-betweeness means you are delayed... left behind [by peers]. In China, people prefer not taking any delays...” (Qian, female)

“Had no job for a year after graduation, felt derailed... not on the right track” (Wei, male)

I kept trial and error... I I didn't know myself in university... I started to know myself and find what I really want (Dan, female)

Typology 2 – The Preparer

“Gaining Readiness through Practice”

- Shift to Structured Routine
- Reframing the Gap
- Skill-Building
- Peer Networks: Connecting with others in same boat, forming support groups before departure

“Now I am renting a flat by myself for my internship. Later I will learn in a new country, this means I need to live independently too. So at the moment, I am getting used to that, living by my ownI have worked in Shenzhen, Beijing, met a few friends who are just the same as me. I think I adapted well, I have friends here.” (Ping, female)

Typology 3 – The Transformative Navigator

“Reimagining Futures”

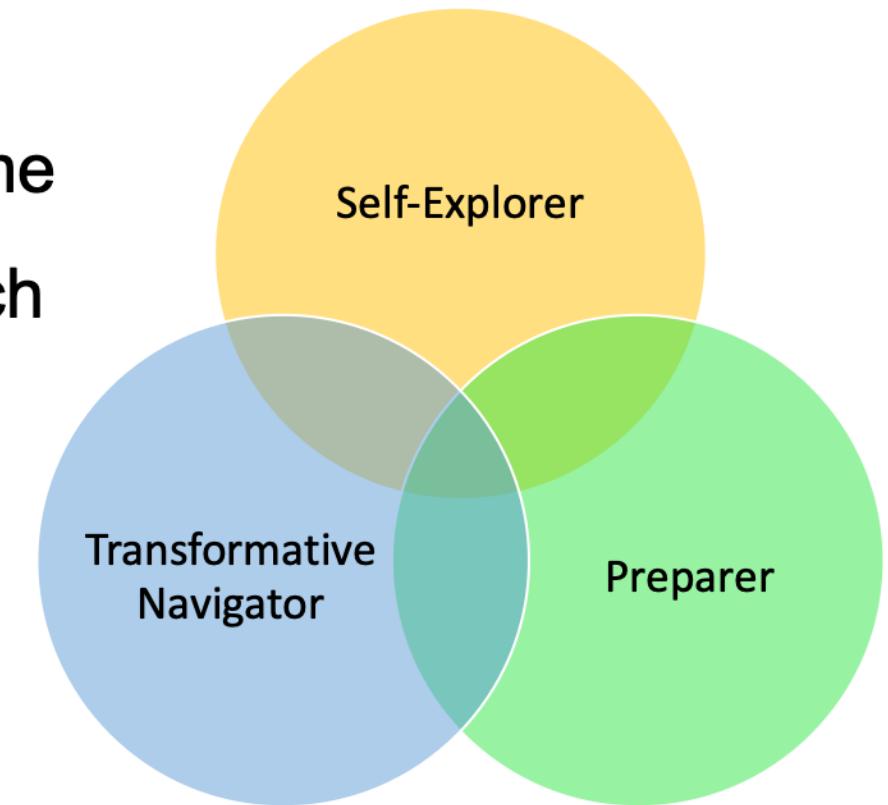
- Critical Reassessment:
- Triggers
- Decision Shifts
- Empowered Agency

The cross-border regulation caused a significant delay in my admission to the Japanese program. I reconsidered it at that time and realized that the international influence of universities in Japan is not as strong as that of those in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., and Australia. So I decided to switch paths and apply to universities in other countries instead. (Kai, male)

Fluid Identities in the “In-Between”



- Students move *between* typologies over time
- Roles often overlap rather than replace each other
- In-betweenness is a **process**, not a stage



(Yu and He, forthcoming)

Discussion – Rethinking Mobility



- In-Betweenness as a New Normal
- Beyond Mobility Binaries
- Mobility beyond Geography: emotional, social, and digital movement (*affective and discursive mobility*)
- Micro-Mobilities within Immobility
- Productive Waiting
- Third Space in Action



Discussion – Cultural Stigma

- **Cultural Scripts of Success:** In China, continuous educational progression is usually expected (pause = “losing momentum”)
- **Moral Significance of Liminality:** Delay interpreted through values of filial duty and achievement
- **Intensified Pressure:** Fear of “falling behind” amplified by societal expectations (not culturally neutral)

Discussion- Family Mediation



- **Family as Both Key Support and Key Source of Pressure:** Parents provided emotional support/pressure & usually financial backing for idle months
- **Practical Involvement:** Families leveraged networks to secure internships/jobs for students
- **Intergenerational Negotiation:** Staying home led to dialogue about future between students and parents
- **Collective Third Space:** Both students & parents collaboratively navigating uncertainty (shared agency)



What should institutions do differently?

- Recognise deferred offer-holders as a student group
- Maintain contact during deferral periods
- Offer pre-departure mentoring and online communities
- Provide mental health and career guidance during in between

Conclusion – Key Takeaways



- In-betweenness is not failure, but transformation
- Students exercise agency even in immobility
- Families are central actors, not background context
- International education must account for pauses, not just movement

Final Thought



International education is not just about the journey from point A to B, but also the growth that happens “**here or there**” in **between**. Supporting that journey at all stages will lead to more resilient and prepared global students.



- Yu, Y., & He, R. (2024). The ‘chosen’UK? Remapping of international education mobility for prospective Chinese master’s students during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. *Higher Education*, 1-17.
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- He, R & Yu, Y. “It was quiet dark tunnel...but I see the dawn” Investigation on Chinese international master students’ time sensitivity and posttraumatic growth. *Current Psychology*. (forthcoming)

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