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International Students Pathways Between Open and Closed Borders: Towards a Multi-scalar Approach to Educational Mobility and Labour Market Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex and changing relationship between academic capitalism that encourages global mobility of highly-skilled international students on the one hand and recent changes to immigration policy in the UK that prevent such mobility on the other. The paper is based on a longitudinal study that traces the experiences and aspirations of postgraduates from three Asian countries and their pathways from the UK universities to post study work and realities. Taking a multi-scalar approach, the analysis of international students' narratives unpacks the unevenness of career opportunities, barriers to settlement and various "assemblages of power" that shape students' life trajectories. The paper illustrates how the individual-scale projects intersect with states' policies of both receiving and sending countries and other institutions and structures of power that operate within and beyond the nation-states.

INTRODUCTION

The growing internationalisation of education and economies encourages students to be more mobile to develop skills that are considered essential to being competitive in an increasingly global labour market for highly skilled individuals (Tremblay, 2005). However, the increase in student mobility is not only the result of individual decisions. Higher education institutions increasingly see international education as an export activity that yields economic returns and market their tertiary education programmes internationally (She and Wotherspoon, 2013). For most countries, international education reflects the integration process between higher education and the knowledge economy conceptualised as "academic capitalism" (Kauppinen, 2015). Demographic, labour and market changes in the last few decades, combined with a transition to knowledge economy, created demand for high-skilled workers in OECD

countries. International students have been considered a significant source of skilled labour for host societies and international education is recognised as an important channel of labour migration (Liu-Farrer, 2014: 185). The OECD countries have increasingly sought to attract international students as part of a strategy to expand their knowledge economies, while students' source countries have expressed concern about the development consequence of losing human capital (Findlay, 2011). In the most recent decade universities have become key facilitators of skilled migration flows, reflecting their engagement in "academic capitalism" (Hawthorne and To, 2014). Findlay describes the student flows as being heavily influenced by the financial interests of those who organise, supply and market elite higher education opportunities within the global economy (Findlay, 2011: 162).

Despite this valuable body of work that illuminates the breadth, complexity and impact of international student subjectivities and practices (for example, Brooks and Waters 2011; Findlay et al., 2012; King and Raghuram, 2013), less attention has been paid to the intersection of the multi-level policies with social imaginaries that shape their mobility (Geddie, 2015: 236). There has also been surprisingly little research into exploring their employment outcomes (Hawthorne and To, 2014) and the factors affecting their post-study choices, aspirations and realities. Drawing from a multi-site qualitative study that follows Asian (Chinese, Indonesian and Thai) graduates from UK universities, this paper contributes to further understanding of the students' experiences and their labour market outcomes.

The students are positioned at the intersection between the self, the state and various other "assemblages of power" that enable and constrain students' life trajectories (Robertson 2013). "The "assemblages of power" represent multiple and interconnected sets of forces, that include the regulatory authorities of the state who establish the immigration regime, but also institutions and structures of power that operate both within and beyond the national level, such as the institutions and actors involved in the governance of immigration at the regional or city level, universities and student's recruitment agencies and transnational companies. The concept of "assemblages of power" enables us to think beyond the nation-state and consider students' outcomes at the intersection of different scales. Recently debated multi-scalar approach (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2011; Glick Schiller 2015) offers to explore migration across different socio-spatial levels. By using a multi-scalar thinking, the paper sought to advance a more nuanced theorization of students' migration as embedded in and produced through a range of mutually constituted scales, including national, local, regional

and global structural conditions and agencies (Williamson 2015).

The following sections describe the study context of the international student's mobility to the UK. This paper places such mobility within the intricate and changing relationship between academic capitalism that encourages global mobility of high-skilled international students, recent restrictive immigration policies in the UK that prevent such mobility (see also Moskal 2015) and the effort of "source" countries to bring overseas-educated graduates back.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT FLOWS TO THE UK

The total number of international students continues to grow in developed OECD countries. These developed OECD countries attract 73% of all international students enrolled abroad in 2013, according to OECD (2015). Among these countries, the United States hosted the largest number of all international students (19% in total), followed by the United Kingdom (10%), Australia and France (both 6%), Germany (5%) and Canada and Japan (both 3%). The United Kingdom, similar to other developed countries, is engaged in the global competition for skills-driven labour, in part, by the changing demographics of their workforces (Hawthorne, 2010). The increase in the number of international students has been encouraged by the recruitment efforts of UK universities, many of which have focused on Asian countries, particularly China. Thomas and Inkpen (2016: 5) argue that for China, in particular, the attraction to foreign education in the West is partly associated with the country's transition to a capitalist economy and its growing need for international competencies.

Students from Asia represent 53% of international students enrolled worldwide, with China being the first supply country, followed by India. Asia is also the largest region of origin for international students in the UK, covering 54% of all international students' origin (OECD, 2015). A statistical release from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA 2016) shows that the number of 3% to 436,585 in the academic year 2014–15. This constituted almost 19% of all students and 58% of full-time postgraduates. Most students, in fact 13.5% of the total population, come from outside of Europe, with the number of Chinese students far exceeding that any other nationality at 89,540 students in 2014–15. Indian students form the next largest cohort with 18,920 students, although their number has systematically dropped since changes in the UK visa policy (47% since 2010/11).

The vast majority of non-European mobile students struggle with visa issues and lack of opportunities to gain valuable post-study experience in the UK. She and Wotherspoon (2013: 11) argued that this relatively high level of openness and control in managing international student mobility combined with the strategy to recruit international students, in particular from non-EEA countries, is not well integrated into the UK's skilled immigration plan compared with other top receiving countries such as Australia, Canada and Japan might be seen as countries with a clear study to residence pathway. The country like the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany are characterised by more staggered and significantly more uncertain journey to the permanent residency (Robertson, 2013; Liu-Farrer, 2014). Going beyond this view, the next section explains the paradox of national government seeking to simultaneously remain competitive in the international education market, meeting the skills demand of the labour market, and appeasing populist and historically entrenched paradigms of how entry into the nation-state should be managed (Robertson, 2013: 15)

ACADEMIC CAPITALISM BEYOND THE SCALE OF THE NATION-STATE

The trends in the development of global capitalism and the knowledge economy have fundamentally undermined the economic (and political) power of the nation-state, as argued by Rizvi and Lingard (2009). On the other side, global capitalism requires 'strong, reliable nations that can influence and co-ordinate the behaviour of their citizens (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009: 29). As Williamson (2015: 22) argues, constructing migration as a national phenomenon can serve particular interests and justify certain modes of governance for both progressive and conservative ends. For example, the increasing rhetoric in many Western countries around the heightened securitization of territorial borders in which migrant subjects are aggregated to represent threatening flows of human movement. Thus, while the shifting scales at which human mobility is given meaning in an age of globalisation, the nation-state undoubtedly remains a powerful scalar lens through which migrant bodies are regulated. The critical multi-scalar approach proposes the notion of 'scaling' (Çağlar and Glick-Schiller, 2011) to study the process through various socio-spatial constructions. The city, the region, the nation-state, the world region and so forth are positioned as a result of processes of capitalist restructuring and changing relationships of power between different political entities (Çağlar and Glick-Schiller, 2011). Some scholars, therefore, have contested that the state's capacity to control education has been significantly limited by for example transnational companies (Ball, 2007). Bauman and Bordoni (2014) suggest that the globalised

integrated economy and migratory flows (including highly-skilled migrant workers and international student movements) have been separated from the state, which continues to operate at the national and local levels. Promoting the instrumental values of competition and choice across national boundaries includes the education sector, which had once been marked by its largely national character (Rizvi, 2011: 693). Specifically, concerns over international students using the student migration system as an entryway into the labour market prompted the British government to restrict the rights of students to work in the UK (Devitt, 2014: 457).

The recent changes in immigration policy in the UK and the increased “politicisation of migration” (Mavroudi and Warren, 2013: 262) have created a “liberal paradox” (Hollifield, 2004) with states that are caught between open and closed borders. On the one hand, open borders are deemed beneficial to the economy, but on the other hand, borders are selective, with workers being categorised and facing different types of restrictions (Wills et al., 2009). Madge, Raghuram and Noxolo (2015: 683) describe this paradox in the HE context as one in which policies involve an explicit drive to use international students’ fees as a mode for enhancing income (Mulley and Sachrajda, 2011) while having increasingly stringent visa restrictions.

Under the points-based scheme, non-EEA migrants who travel to the UK to study have been classified as Tier 4 applicants who need a valid confirmation of acceptance for studies and sufficient funds to attend to apply for a visa. Further, the recent development of restrictive immigration policy produces a hostile environment for these who require immigration permission to be in the UK but do not have it: the Tier 1 Post-study visa has been abolished as of April 2012. This visa enabled international students to remain in the UK for up to two years after obtaining a UK degree. Since April 2012, international graduates have only been able to remain in the UK by switching into Tier 2 of the system or if they have a strong business proposition, which now falls under the new provisions for student entrepreneurs (Devitt, 2014: 451). Finally, the Immigration Act of 2014 removed the right of appeal, introduced the migration health surcharge and residential landlord check.

The paradoxical situation, in which international students have become problematised by migration authorities, while simultaneously being vital to the higher education and academic life of the UK, could be observed (Madge, Raghuram and Noxolo, 2015: 683). International students have a significant impact on the HE sector given that formal study is the most

common reason for net migration into the UK (Migration Statistics Quarterly Report, November 2014). Universities in the UK note that international students bring significant economic benefits to the UK, which in fact helps to finance higher education for domestic students. The recent report shows that the HE sector generated an estimated 11.7 billion pounds of export earnings for the UK in 2011–12 from fees and accommodation expenditures as well as goods and services bought off-campus by non-EU students (In Focus, 2014). In the higher education sector, “academic capitalism” (Kauppinen and Kaidesoja, 2014) links economic globalisation, new technologies and reduced state funding. This multidimensional integration between higher education and the knowledge economy is based on blurring the boundaries between higher education, states and markets. The higher education institutions have increasingly begun to commodify knowledge to finance their core functions, research and instruction (Kauppinen, 2015: 336). Thus, international students lie at the heart of a tension between, on the one hand, the opening up of all kinds of mobility (of people, goods, capital, mass media, ideas) in a global knowledge economy and, on the other hand, the reflex action of closure towards foreigners, leading to increasing controls over immigration (King, Findlay and Ahrens, 2010: 47).

SENDING COUNTRIES’ PERSPECTIVE

Individual students’ life projects are being negotiated not only within the frames of the UK universities’ internationalisation agendas and UK immigration policy. Many countries in the Asian region are becoming increasingly competitive in attracting students but have different approaches to these of Western destination countries, both currently and historically, to labour markets and skilled migration policies. These nations are encouraging their outgoing students to return when they graduate, while simultaneously competing to attract incoming students (Robertson 2013: 14). Some governments and higher education institutions, like those of Indonesia or Thailand, have strategically invested in their human resources development by sending students and academics to accomplish their postgraduate training abroad and by imposing financial sanctions that aim at deterring brain-drain. Additionally, Thomas and Inkpen (2016) noticed that, more recently, China has enacted policies to improve its higher education infrastructure to counter the increasing trend of Chinese student migration to other countries. As research indicates, these policies helped to increase domestic student enrolment in Chinese institutions (Gribble, 2008), but they still appear to have had less significant impacts on Chinese student emigration (Poston and Luo, 2007). The Chinese local governments also offer special incentives to encourage overseas students to return, such

as tax breaks, subsidised rent or residency permits. Increasing number of Chinese cities are making policies to make life easier for returnees as their entrepreneurship should yield concrete results down the road in the form of jobs created, and tax bills paid, suggests Zhou (2004).

Against this socio-political backdrop, the paper casts the light on Asian international students' trajectories into the labour market. Rather than taking the nation-state as the main spatial frame, the student-participants' accounts are framed within a multi-scalar approach (Glick-Schiller and Çağlar, 2011; Glick-Schiller, 2015; Xiang, 2013) that puts forward a more relational idea of place and the role of the migrant subject within it and engages with a range of scales that shape migration (Williamson, 2015:22).

STUDENT NARRATIVE OF POST-STUDY CHOICES, ASPIRATIONS AND REALITIES

The paper draws on longitudinal and multi-sited research that explored the complex ways in which postgraduates move between education and work and between host and home destinations. The importance of tracking the movement of people, images, information and objects, has been previously articulated by Marcus (1995) in multi-sited ethnography. More recently, Xiang (2013) has proposed a multi-scalar ethnographic approach to migration. Going beyond multi-sited ethnography, this method identifies a descriptive and analytical approach to identifying the multiple sites at which migration is enacted (Xiang, 2013: 284-85). The qualitative study presented in this paper draws on elements of the multi-scalar approach by following students' flows and connections; it seeks to trace their concerns, calculations and strategies and to 'articulate the meanings of sites to the actors' (Xiang, 2013: 294-5).

52 in-depth interviews were conducted between November 2012 and January 2015 with international students and graduates during their stay in the UK and upon return to their countries of origin. The participants from three Asian countries (China - 10, Indonesia -28 and Thailand - 14) who undertook a full postgraduate degree programme (Master's or Doctoral) in the UK were approached with the assumption that through previous study and maturity, postgraduates are likely to have a stronger sense of their place in the world and their employment and mobility futures than undergraduate students. All of the alumni were interviewed in their home countries one year in average after they had returned. This group

included 14 people who participated in the longitudinal study and who had been interviewed multiple times (at least twice) during and after their international study periods. Some participants worked as academic staff in their home countries upon their return. The project included only the postgraduates who studied in the UK and who returned to their home countries. Thus, interviewing those who returned after graduation produced a possible underestimation of the factors that help people stay after their studies.

The students' plans about where they intend to go and where they go upon completion of their studies are critical policy questions (Kim and Sondhi, 2015: 22). Students' decisions to stay or return home are influenced by the same interplay of factors as decisions to migrate for education, including career and employment opportunities, family, experiences of discrimination and familiarity (Glaser and Habers, 1974). Relatively young and self-funded students represented the Chinese group in the study. They were distinctive in contrast with the most mature students from Indonesia and Thailand where only the minority of the students were able to support themselves while studying overseas. In many cases, these participants were deprived of free-choice and further mobility because to some degree; funding agencies imposed the obligation for students to return to their countries of origin and work for extensive periods of time. This was the case of participants who were supported by Indonesian or Thai government scholarships or human resource development programmes provided by large national companies. For Chinese students, the situation was slightly different because many of them often had more flexibility in their plans. The heterogeneous group of student-participants have however some common features: they all arrived to the UK on student visas and all returned home after graduation. Most of the students who travel freely (without scholarship agreement obligations to return and work in the home country) made tried to stay on and work (at least for some time after graduation) in the UK. None of them achieved this goal.

In some cases, their home countries or their funding conditions required international students to return to their countries of origin (Kim and Sondhi, 2015: 22). Only some of the students from Indonesia and Thailand supported themselves as they studied overseas, but most of them had founding from their governments or work institutions under the condition of returning upon graduation. The Chinese group was characterised by the highest proportion of young free-movers in comparison with Indonesian and Thai participants, who were often more mature and tied to their home countries.

The question about the complex social consequences of international students/graduates' mobility requires consideration of how mobility interacts with other factors, such as growing international students market, state policy or local governance. The following sections discuss Asian students' narratives to demonstrate how the participants engage with a range of scales that shape their educational and post-study mobility.

STUDENT EDUCATIONAL MIGRATION AND THE NATION-STATE

In the most of the cases, it was difficult to categorise whether a particular individual strategy follows “the immigration for education” or “the education for immigration” pathway, as desires, challenges and opportunities change and develop across the student's journeys (Robertson 2013). Some participants who undertake overseas education with a motivation to stay did not intend to stay in the host country long term in the end. The acquisition of residency was for them related to some foreign work experience before returning home or going on to work or further study in a third country. Most of the participants thought that employment experience in the UK would enhance their employability back at home. For instance, Lily (24, MSc in education, English language teacher) reports: “When I finished my degree there, I was thinking about the possibility to get a job there. But then I realised that I'm not that excellent, you know, who really deserves a visa so and I also kind of see the other realities, it's really not that possible for us to stay, so I kind of started to look for a job in China and got a job offer in Shanghai before I moved back”. A significant number of interviewees intended to apply for a work visa to work for a short time to get experience in the UK, after which they proposed to return to their countries of origin. This was either because they thought the job market was better there or because of the evolving UK immigration policy, as Sarah explains: “I went back to Indonesia and I met with all my friends, and 90% of my friends asked, ‘Why did you not find a job in the UK? Why did you come back to Indonesia?’ and I needed to explain to them, ‘It's not about my capability; it is about the restrictions on having a job there.’” (30 years old, Indonesia, studied one year for MSc in international accounting). Because these Asian migrants' entries are linked with education, most of them return upon graduation. This was the intention behind the withdrawal of the post-study work visa in 2011.

Many participants highlighted the tied visa rules and the lack of sufficient time to find relevant employment. For instance, Yun (25 years old, studied for two years in the UK for

her final undergraduate year in Finance and MSc in consulting and management), comments that few opportunities exist to gain work experience in the UK after they complete their studies: “It is hard for us to stay because our visa is limited to three months after graduation, so it's a very short time for us to find a job”. The students mentioned a lack of local networks and local experience, weak English language skills, a lack of familiarity with the UK job seeking procedures, as well as lack of employers' trust as the significant barriers to their transition into the local labour market. For example, Chen (age 24, studied one year for her MSc degree in marketing) admitted: “I just did some part-time job, like in a restaurant. So, it was not related to my degree because it's hard, especially for Asian people, to find an internship regarding the short time left before the visa expires. I distributed my resume, but there were no replies, after that, I didn't try anymore. I just continued the part-time job, because I only had three months' approval to stay in Britain.” Chen is also aware of other factors such as the “language ability and culture, with which we are not quite familiar” that might put Asian graduates in an unfavourable position compared to home graduates. These factors echo the findings of the Arthur and her colleagues' qualitative study in Canada that examined students' experiences, as they were moving into the labour force. They identified job-related and job search barriers, cultural barriers and status issues (Arthur and Flynn, 2011). Job-related and job search barriers included a lack of experience and difficulties with the application process as well as the lack of social networking skills. Cultural barriers referred to concern about employers' perceptions of international students as being less desirable than at home and concern about English language proficiency, which affected their level of confidence. Finally, the student's status as a temporary resident did affect the employment prospects of study participants. Unsuccessful experiences of the labour market subsequently affect longer-term plans to stay. Both Chen and Yun have soon found work back home in international companies based in one of the biggest city in China. When I met them back in China, both have work for over a year and were planning to move abroad again, either to New Zealand or Australia, countries with a more open than the UK visa policy for highly skilled Chinese citizens.

WITHIN OR BEYOND NATION-STATE: INTERNATIONAL COMPANIES

International companies and the cities are increasingly becoming important actors in making structural conditions and opportunities for graduates choices and mobilities. The study participants admitted that although the prospects of working in the UK were very limited, their experiences in the UK provided them with the opportunities to work for international

companies in their home countries. International education is sometimes presented as helpful in meeting the employer's requirements for people with the skills needed to operate in an international environment. This illustrates the following account by Chen (24 years old, China, MSc in Marketing) "I think in China today, many international, multicultural companies want to recruit people who have a high level of English, so the year I spent in Britain just enhanced my language ability". Chen's example demonstrates the link between advanced English ability and early professional employment, also noticed in Hawthorne and To's studies (2014). Drawing on her social network developed abroad, Chen started working in an international market research company in China and moved to the new city immediately upon return. International orientation is understood, however, not only as foreign language proficiency but also in term of intercultural skills. In this way, some participants found that their experience and exposure from studying abroad had been very useful. Jane (24 years old, China, also completed her one-year postgraduate marketing degree in the UK) admits: "I think, especially for an international company, they want to hire somebody who not only can speak English but knows the culture because they have foreign staff, so it's actually that they need people who can work with different people with different backgrounds. So if the students have experience abroad, they may have more experience in communicating with different groups of people".

In addition to the skills mentioned, participants felt that employers did value an international perspective, both in terms of technical knowledge and ability to adapt to a globalised work environment. On the use of comparative knowledge: Sarah (30 years old, Indonesia. MSc in international accounting, works as a manager for a Japanese company in Indonesia) reported: "My company is the Japanese company, works for a Japanese client; it's a 100% Japanese company. I majored in international accounting, so this my specialism. It's useful there. When I had the interview, they asked me about accounting. I did it in reference to in Indonesia and Japan, after that, my boss had the expectation that my knowledge would be useful for the company." She gave an example of specific skills: "I studied eight different countries' models, not all the eight models were useful, but the point of view, the communication, how to explain our ideas, how we solve the problems, I think I learned from the University."

Yun (25 years old, studied for two years in the UK for her final undergraduate year in finance and MSc in consulting and management), after coming back from the UK, worked for an

international market research company in one of the major cities in China. She perceived herself as being “very lucky” to find a job immediately on return. According to Yun, most of her friends spent three months to one year looking for a job. With regard to the competitive market, Yun comments, “There are more and more graduates having degrees from abroad, so you have to compete not only with Chinese students but with many others having degrees from abroad, so the company or whoever employs you looks at which country you have a degree from or which university.” According to Yun, an influx of graduates with foreign degrees makes many companies, particularly international ones; select only international degree students for interviews.

WITHIN OR BEYOND NATION STATE: THE CITIES

Commonly, the largest and most developed cities act as “talent magnets” both in the student receiving and sending countries. In the context of educational migration, a Western education is conceptualised as making students more able to success in highly competitive markets for university places or jobs when they return home (Robertson 2013: 22). The emphasis on mobility as a source of “added value” is notable here in the student’s observation that further distinction accrues those who move considerable distances to study abroad (Seller and Gale, 2011: 119–20) and those who move to the more and less popular destinations among international students. The following account by Liang (24 years old, China, studied in the UK for an MSc in educational studies) illustrates his concern about the hierarchy of places to study and to work: “I guess when you are an international student; you want to go to recognised places. I would say London, for sure. If I had another chance, I would probably have chosen London.” According to Liang, large, “recognised” cities bring more opportunities, including job opportunities, but also more competition. He justifies his choice: “The most excellent people go to London and maybe less excellent people like me maybe go to other places; I have more opportunities there. If I went to London, I would have to compete with students from many universities, but here, where I am studying, I do not have to compete so much. I mean there are probably fewer job opportunities but also there is less competition.” Liang’s narrative is evidence of the fact that the choice of destination among international student migrants is not random (Thomas and Inkpen, 2016) and reflects particular “social imaginaries” (Rizvi and Lingrad, 2009) linked to the individual’s view of opportunities and barriers in the global and local scale.

Although Chinese students were free to move, only some were willing to travel widely to find the best employment prospects. Chinese participants expected to deploy the assets they accumulate in the UK in navigating the complexities of the domestic employment market. Attracting foreign university graduates becomes a strategy for these cities, which aspire to be the “talent hubs” for highly skilled and well-educated potential candidates. Lily (24, English language teacher), who moved to a new city after graduating in the UK, admits: “It is like to live in Shanghai because it's a cosmopolitan city and the government introduced privileged positions for people with foreign degrees to apply for the local ID card [Hokou, which is the local household registration system in Mainland China and Taiwan, required by law, determines where citizens are allowed to live], so we have a better chance to settle and to get a job than Chinese graduates.” Similarly, Jane (24) admitted: “I live in Shanghai. It's so expensive. If I would work in my home city, I wouldn't need to pay rentals, in my city it's much cheaper so there would be less pressure for me to work, and also my parents are there. But actually for us who are international students, to find a good international company is much easier. I had that advantage, so I just targeted those kinds of companies. These companies like larger cities which offer more opportunities.”

However, the Shanghai residential policy to attract foreign graduates appears to open many new possibilities for social and residential mobility. The policy also appears to conflict with Shanghai's reputation as being exclusive and bounded regarding possibilities for other Chinese. As Liang (24 years old) reported: “I would say that Shanghai is like an independent country in China because the local people feel proud to be from Shanghai. My Shanghaies friend said, “Actually, I don't understand why you guys want to come to my city. I know you want to come and work, there are more opportunities, you can work in Shanghai for maybe few years, and then you should go back where you come from’. The large cities such as Shanghai appear to attract due to their diversity, as Lily reflects: “It's great how all these different people live in the same city and do different stuff, but they enjoy the same environment, so it's really good too. So there is a lot going on in Shanghai. Yes, a lot of things, like a lot of the famous bands come here; they wouldn't go to my hometown, but they will come to Shanghai. And also shopping, you can get most of the things that you want like you can in the UK and London, so it's not really that different, but probably in my home town, they don't have this choice.” Lily's aspiration is to become a Shanghai resident by applying for a city ID card issued as an element of local policy to attract the “talents”. Although she is not originally from Shanghai, the study abroad provided her with the opportunity to start a

career here and become a citizen of the deserved locality. The formal ID/ citizenship would allow her to access privileges reserved only for Shanghaies, including buying a house, registering a car, getting local medical insurance, getting married or giving birth in the city.

Many participants reflect, however, on the changing socio-economic situation, which leads young people to rethink their choices: “You know, for international students like us, we want to go to a big city to develop our careers because it's a big city with huge potential and stuff. But I went to Beijing two months ago, and I wanted to leave immediately. It's too crowded and too polluted”, reports Mei (24 years old, China, MSc in Sociology). Liang (24 years old), who currently enjoys working in a smaller Chinese city as a junior manager in transnational education business between the UK and China reports in the similar vein: “Among my friends, I think the majority of them go back to work in the hometown now. Maybe five years ago, people would say, ‘OK, I’m from town C, but I studied in the UK, and I want to find a job in Beijing or Shanghai’, but I think Beijing is no longer a very popular option for many graduates. Also, the competition is very intense because all the top people go to Shanghai”. The awareness of overpopulation and pollution that influence the quality of life in the cities, such as Beijing or Jakarta, features in the Chinese and Indonesian students’ narratives.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to illuminate how the individual desires and aspirations intersect with both receiving and sending countries’ policy and other institutions and structures of power that operate within and beyond the nation-state. The analysis of narratives and strategies of Asian international students of UK universities helps to unpack the unevenness of career opportunities, barriers to settlement and various “assemblages of power” that shape students’ life pathways. The paper demonstrates that multi-scalar thinking can provide useful insight into the vexed problem international graduates mobility, post-study work and realities. Rather than taking the nation-state as the overriding spatial frame, the student-participants accounts are framed within multi-scalar approach (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2011; Glick Schiller 2015; Xiang 2013) that put forward a more relational idea of place and the role of the migrant subject within it, and engage with a range of scales that shape their educational and post-study mobility (Williamson 2015).

While many international students embark on their international education with high hopes of gaining employment in the UK, their experiences made most of them accept these plans as

unrealistic. The paper shows disjuncture between the “imagined” outcomes of studying abroad and the students’ reality in the UK and home countries. The disjuncture in the narratives of students illustrated the complex and often contradictory scaling of the place of Asian/ non-EEA international students in the UK: many students would expect that international experience would reduce the barrier to entry into the UK labour market, allowing these highly-skilled migrants to secure job corresponding to their skills and education (Kim and Sondhi, 2015). In reality, many students are struggling to gain access to jobs and positive labour market experience. The heterogeneous narratives of participants had in common that they all arrived to the UK on student visas and most of them who travel freely (without scholarship agreement obligations to return and work in the home country, wanted to stay on (at least for some time after graduation) in the UK. None of them achieved this goal. In some ways, these students follow the same pathways, as Robertson (2013) argues, they are subject to particular kinds of relationships to the state and the “power assemblages” brought about by the globalisation of education and labour, and by the nationally and locally specific policy frameworks linking education and skills with mobility.

Finally, the paper outlines the changing connection between international education and skilled migration policy in the UK and the global context. It argues that the restrictive immigration targeting international students goes against the global knowledge economy and the internationalisation of education and disrupts the pathways for international students to become skilled migrants in receiving countries like the UK. In such a context the UK’s HE becomes just a lucrative export. Making harder to obtain a visa to study is an element of immigration control as the students’ numbers are included in the net migration count and the non-EEA students are treated as “other” immigrants.

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