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ABSTRACT

A recurrent narrative in the recent literature on international student mobility is that overseas study is motivated by a desire for onward international mobility or oriented towards specific goals such as an international career. However, the way in which transnational mobility after graduation is perceived and experienced by international students is largely unexplored. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 55 current and graduated international students from three UK universities, this paper employs Bourdieu's central concepts of habitus and capital to explore differentiated mobility aspirations and experiences. In so doing, this article nuances, and calls for a need to problematise, the meaning and power associated with post-study mobility across borders.

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Introduction

It is well established that international education is often undertaken by many students and their families to reproduce their social advantage upon return home (Waters 2006; Brooks and Waters 2011; Xiang and Shen 2009) or secure residency rights or citizenship in the country of education (Robertson 2013; Baas 2006; Birrell and Perry 2009). These studies situate students' experiences in either the host country or the country of origin (see also Tu and Nehring 2020; Farivar, Coffey, and Cameron 2019; Van Mol, Caarls, and Souto-Otero 2020; Jiang and Kim 2019; Han et al. 2015). However, there is growing evidence that international students hold and/or develop aspirations for onward international mobility rather than staying or returning. For instance, previous research has shown that international education is motivated not just by a desire to study at a world-class institution but by the pursuit of an international career or an internationally mobile lifestyle more generally (Findlay et al. 2017; Marcu 2015; Packwood, Findlay, and McCollum 2015). It is also suggested that students are exposed in a new educational context to a wide range of ideas and opportunities through a diverse social network of domestic and other international students in the country of education, which leads them to reassess original future plans and sometimes consider new post-study destinations and trajectories (Collins et al. 2014, 2017; Findlay et al. 2017). Yet, considerably less attention has been paid to the meanings and interpretations of transnational mobility after graduation amongst those engaging in international study.

A small number of studies have indicated how international students' aspirations for onward mobility may vary markedly by study destination. For example, Collins et al.'s (2014) research on international students in Singapore shows how the country of education is seen as a place of transit from which they navigate further mobility to other more 'global' – rather than 'Asian' or

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‘semi-periphery’ – destinations (670). Similar future horizons have been documented amongst those studying in other countries such as Australia and New Zealand (Gomes 2015; 2017; Soon 2012). These countries are usually constructed as pathways to another destination, with the major cities of Europe and North America viewed as key nodes in their future imaginative geographies. On the other hand, the United Kingdom is regarded primarily as one of the most desirable destination countries, as it is placed alongside the United States at the top of an academic reputability hierarchy (Xiang and Shen 2009; Raghuram 2013). However, with a few notable exceptions (Przeres et al. 2017; Findlay et al. 2017; Packwood, Findlay, and McCollum 2015), very little existing empirical work situates the UK as a point of departure to explore aspirations for international mobility post-graduation amongst international students.

Scholars have also examined the influence of individual characteristics, including personal traits and backgrounds, on international students’ post-study mobility aspirations. Bozionelos et al. (2015), for instance, have underlined in their research on international (i.e., non-UK) postgraduate taught (i.e., master’s) students at a British university that individual (e.g., self-efficacy in working abroad), experiential (e.g., adjustment to international study) and perceived constraint (e.g., labour market perceptions) factors all contribute to the likelihood of their participants pursuing a career abroad after completion of their studies. King and Sondhi (2018) have also identified the differences between Indian and British degree-mobile students in terms of the importance of an international career in their decisions to study overseas. Accessing an international career features prominently in Indian students’ decisions, with UK students tending to consider it to be a secondary factor. Nonetheless, given the portrayal of international students and especially those studying in the UK as privileged and endowed with high levels of economic, cultural and social capital (Waters 2012; Tannock 2018), their quests for onward international mobility are widely accepted and expected, and potential tensions and contradictions pertaining to their aspirational mobility are left unchallenged.

This paper aims to close these gaps in the extant literature by unpacking the way in which transnational mobility after graduation is perceived and experienced by internationally mobile students in UK higher education. It draws on data collected in 2018 through in-depth interviews with 55 international postgraduate students who were studying in, and graduated from, three universities in the UK. Using Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and capital to interpret the empirical data, I demonstrate that aspirations for international mobility after study are nuanced by students’ habitus and their possession of forms of capital. In doing so, I attempt to unsettle the idea of mobility as privilege (and, conversely, immobility as ‘a negation or lack’) by throwing light on the meaning and power dynamics relating to post-study mobility across borders (Cheng 2018, 643). The aim is to explore how international students construct their aspirations for international mobility rather than identifying whether or not they move or intend to do so after completing their studies in the UK. In the following section, I will first present Bourdieu’s conceptual tools of habitus and capital, providing the theoretical framework for this exploration. This will be followed by an outline of the fieldwork on which this paper is based. I then examine various interpretations of transnational mobility aspirations amongst international students in the UK. The article will conclude with reflections on the contributions of the study.

Theorising aspirations for transnational mobility

Aspirations for onward mobility across borders are closely associated with a set of durable, transposable dispositions or what Bourdieu (1977) calls *habitus* rather than being shaped by isolated individual rationalities. As ‘structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures’ (ibid., 72), habitus is not only a product of particular social and economic conditions – especially, socialisation within the family and subsequently education. It also predisposes individuals towards certain practices in a way that often – but not always – reproduces the social conditions of one’s own production (Bourdieu 1990a). This makes only a limited range of practices probable, while rejecting

those unfamiliar to the cultural groups to which the individual belongs (Charlesworth 1999; Skeggs 1997). The literature on international student mobility has lent support to this claim by suggesting that dispositions towards international mobility for study and/or work are developed and reproduced through cultures of mobility embedded in social networks of family, friends and acquaintances who have gone overseas for study, work or travel (Marcu 2015; Brooks and Waters 2010; Beech 2015; Murphy-Lejeune 2002; Jayadeva 2019). Nonetheless, it is frequently argued that those dispositions are constrained by their past and present position in the social structure, which is reflective of one's social characteristics such as class, gender and race/ethnicity. The significance of these characteristics in mobility decisions both before and after study is well documented by prior research on international students (Kim 2011; 2016; Tu and Xie 2020; Xu 2020; Mosneaga and Winther 2013; Geddie 2013).

In fact, the way in which international students negotiate different future aspirations also articulates with their perceptions and/or experiences of the mobilisation or exchange of resources across borders. Bourdieu (1986; 2010) conceptualises those resources as *capital*, which can exist in three different forms: economic (e.g., financial assets), social (e.g., social memberships and networks) and cultural (e.g., skills and knowledge) capital. In particular, cultural capital can be *institutionalised* in the form of educational qualifications. Central to Bourdieu's notion of capital is its transposability or exchangeability within social space, which is related to the strategies aimed at ensuring the reproduction of capital and hence the position occupied in the social field(s). For instance, overseas credentials have long been considered as a means of (re)producing social advantage across borders, given that social and cultural capital obtained from studying abroad is frequently converted into economic capital upon return home (Findlay et al. 2012; Ong 1999; Waters 2006; Xiang and Shen 2009). However, studies have equally shown that the capital accumulated through international study is sometimes limited or even turns into a disadvantage in specific contexts (Wiers-Jenssen 2011; Brooks, Waters, and Pimlott-Wilson 2012; Robertson, Hoare, and Harwood 2011). Moreover, whilst the convertibility of capital in a third country or across many countries is rarely explored in the extant literature, it is nevertheless those already well equipped with various forms of capital who tend to navigate through the new field structures from a more advantaged position (Bourdieu 1999).

In *Class, Self, Culture*, Skeggs (2003, 49) argues that 'mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship', illuminating the importance of tracking the power of discourses and practices of mobility instead of privileging mobile forms of subjectivity (see also Sheller 2014; 2017). Of particular relevance to the discussion here are dominant assumptions about mobility which are often grounded in masculine understandings of 'the mobile subject' who also tends to be racialised and classed (i.e., white, male and privileged) (Yeoh and Huang 2011). This paper therefore draws attention to the way in which different social characteristics of international students, and the intersections of these social divisions, influence their perceptions and experiences of onward mobility after graduation. Arguably, this can be further impacted by the reputations of UK higher education in the global field of higher education (Marginson 2008; Findlay et al. 2012). In making these arguments, I suggest that Bourdieu's (1986; 1990b; 2010) concepts of habitus and capital provide useful tools to investigate how post-study international mobility is understood and pursued by participants. Specifically, I propose that these concepts not only help to analyse various interpretations of capital accumulation and convertibility across borders; they also direct critical attention to differences within the middle class where dispositions towards transnational mobility distinguish, rather than homogenise, 'international students'.

The study

This paper is derived from a qualitative research project conducted in 2018. It draws on semi-structured interviews with 55 international students from outside of the European Union (non-EU) who were enrolled in or had recently completed postgraduate degrees in the fields of Social Sciences (SS)

and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) from three universities in the UK: Oxford University (Oxford), University College London (UCL) and Oxford Brookes University (Brookes). It is important to highlight that both Oxford and UCL are members of the Russell Group, consisting of 24 research-intensive universities in the UK. However, Oxford is usually distinguished from UCL by forming a distinctive cluster together with Cambridge as the UK's two oldest universities (Boliver 2015; Brooks and Waters 2009). As one of 35 polytechnics which were granted full university status in 1992, Brookes is a relatively new university than the other two universities (Halsey 2000). Whilst my research also concerns how attending institutions with various prestige may affect students' aspirations and transitions after graduation (Lee 2021), this paper does not provide a detailed account of such differences, because aspirations for onward international mobility were typically found across all three universities. By drawing attention to different mobility aspirations within the ostensibly privileged group of international students, the perspective offered by this study will have resonance for other contexts.

Participants were recruited initially through my personal contacts and then via contacts of the interviewees. The recruitment also took place by meeting international students at career events or seminars targeted at postgraduate students on and off campuses. The interviews were conducted in English either face to face or via Skype. Skype interviewing was necessary for those who were unable to attend face-to-face interviews, including students in their final years as well as graduates working full-time and/or abroad. Most interviews lasted one hour, and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview data that formed the basis of this paper focused on students' future plans and/or experiences after the completion of their studies in the UK. The interview transcripts were analysed using NVivo 12 software, and the key themes on which this paper draws upon were identified through deductive and inductive coding (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). My initial analysis was informed by Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus and capital. As the data did not always fit neatly into these categories, I tried to be open to identifying emerging themes, issues and patterns or generating new concepts from the interviews. A small number of excerpts which were typical of the data set were included in the paper.

Table 1. Summary of interview participants

Nationality	Gender	Enrolled degree	Study/graduation status	Subject of study	Mobility intentions/outcomes
China (<i>n</i> = 17)	Female (<i>n</i> = 31)	PhDs (<i>n</i> = 23)	Graduates (<i>n</i> = 24)	SS (<i>n</i> = 33)	Return (<i>n</i> = 27)
Others ³ (<i>n</i> = 10)	Male (<i>n</i> = 24)	Masters (<i>n</i> = 32)	Students (<i>n</i> = 31)	STEM (<i>n</i> = 22)	Stay (<i>n</i> = 7)
India (<i>n</i> = 9)					Onward (<i>n</i> = 8)
USA (<i>n</i> = 5)					Stay or onward (<i>n</i> = 13)
Singapore (<i>n</i> = 4)					
Canada (<i>n</i> = 3)					
Malaysia (<i>n</i> = 2)					
Nigeria (<i>n</i> = 2)					
Thailand (<i>n</i> = 2)					
Saudi Arabia (<i>n</i> = 1)					

Out of 55 student interviewees, 31 were female and 24 were male. Twenty-four were recent graduates¹ and 31 were current students. The median age of the sample was 29 for those who had recently completed their postgraduate degree(s) and 27 for those studying at the time of the

interview. The students were not selected on the ground of their socio-economic backgrounds, although the higher costs of living and studying in the UK than their home countries meant that most of my participants at least had access to various resources necessary for undertaking overseas education. Notwithstanding, this paper focuses on how class is lived and experienced by different fractions of middle-class students and intersects with other social characteristics in shaping aspirations for onward international mobility after the completion of their studies in the UK. Interviewees were mainly from the top non-EU sending countries or regions (see Table 1), identified from the 2016/17 Higher Education Statistics Agency international student statistics, although ten interviewees from other non-EU countries were also included in the sample. The exclusion of those from EU countries was based on the assumption that their understanding and experiences of transnational mobility after graduation might be different from non-EU counterparts (see, for example, Courtois 2018). The former group of students have had until Brexit² the same access as UK nationals to employment, working conditions and all other social and tax advantages (e.g., tuition fees, loans, visas). All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Shared institutionalised cultural capital: ‘the world is your oyster’

Regardless of the institutions my research participants attend, many of them believed that ‘a degree from the UK’, which is an indication of a shared institutionalised cultural capital, would be easily converted into economic capital in myriad countries. The following quotes illustrate how the global reputation of UK and its higher education system influenced the way my participants imagined their future horizons:

It [the UK degree]’s recognised everywhere. Everybody knows that. If you want to be qualified, you go through [the] UK system. People, actually, take you seriously. If you go to [the] US, it won’t be the same. If you compare it [the US] with the UK, it’s just different – there’s just some seriousness in the UK education, yeah. (Nic-hole, Kenya, MSc Applied Human Nutrition, Brookes)

I just feel like I could just get a job anywhere. If you got a degree from the UK, that means a lot, especially in the Commonwealth, yeah. I think it’s [being] looked at pretty positively. (Emma, New Zealand, MSc Spatial Planning, Brookes)

I think everywhere through[out] the world? I don’t think it’s geographically limited. The degree [from the UK] is quite, uh, universally accepted, I suppose’ (Aaron, India, DPhil⁴ Engineering, Oxford)

I’m not sure if it’s naive, but I imagine most places would accept that [UK degree]. Even back in Singapore. Um, because I feel that it’s, kind of, recognised. (Daniel, Singapore, PhD Neuroscience, UCL)

As shown in the above narratives, some participants not only engaged in the explicit comparisons with other destination countries (e.g., the US) and claimed an advantage compared with those studying in other parts of the world. Its relative exchange value in certain countries (e.g., the Commonwealth) was also underlined, mirroring Waters’s (2006) observation that the value of cultural capital is geographically sensitive. However, this sense of being able to work in multiple countries is deeply rooted in academic imperialism where a UK degree is portrayed as carrying significant cultural, economic and emotional value (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2009; Beech 2014). This is unsurprising given that about two-thirds of the participants in this study (34) came from countries which used to be former British colonies. Notwithstanding the positive perception that the UK degree would be accepted in a range of countries, I argue that how this is translated into actual opportunities across borders depends on students’ habitus and the economic, social and cultural capital they can deploy.

‘Doing what I like in the place where I want to be’

Almost half of the participants (12 graduates and 16 students) either had the experiences of working in the UK and/or a third country or highlighted their intentions to do so after graduation. However,

what makes certain paths visible and achievable largely relies on the extent to which participants possess and mobilise different forms of capital alongside their dispositions towards international mobility. Take the example of Daisy. After completing her master's study in the UK, she decided to pursue a business degree in France. This decision, she explain, was not planned but partly driven by her fiancé whom she met during her studies in Oxford:

Um, because my [then] boyfriend [now fiancé] is French [laughs]. So I gave it 50 per cent of it [the decision to move to France]. Cos, um, after two years, we were thinking about where we wanted to be for [the] long term. And then, like, for the US [where she obtained her bachelor's degree], both of us will need to find a way to get a visa. So it's impossible, even though there's [a] more opportunity. And [importantly] he really doesn't like the political system [in the US], cos it's quite different from Europe and then the UK. Um, I knew after two years, I don't want to stay in the UK. It rained too much for me. Also, we were thinking that we were both foreigners in the UK. But, [in France] we'll probably have more connect[ion]. Um, at least, he will have more network[s] in France because of [his] family, and he know[s] everything better [there]. And as I mentioned, I studied French for two years in undergrad. And I had the chance to go to France to study French, but I couldn't [for administrative issues]. So it feels like, 'Um, maybe, this time, I should go'. (Daisy, China, MSc Education, Oxford)

Daisy's pursuit of transnational mobility can be interpreted as an 'aesthetic disposition', which according to Bourdieu (2010) is only 'constituted within an experience of the world freed from urgency and through the practice of activities which are an end in themselves' (47). In other words, the business school in France is in line with *what* she wants to do as well as *where* she wants to be. Nonetheless, this did not prevent her from accumulating additional advantages across borders. The fact that her fiancé is a French national made it easier for Daisy to explore not only possible but also the best options for business schools that would guarantee her educational and work prospects in France: 'It's [one of] the top business school[s] in France, and I know that they [her business school] have this apprenticeship programme [with different French companies]. The company would [then] pay for my tuition and give me salary [during my studies]. [...] Um, basically, if you graduated from our school and you can speak French well, it's not that difficult to find a job [in France]'. In addition, her previous experience of learning French while in the US added to the feeling that she would be comfortable living in France in the long term. Like UK students overseas in Waters and Brooks's (2010) research, Daisy who appeared to be disinterested in career and monetary gain nevertheless accumulated advantage 'accidentally' through leveraging social and cultural capital and reproduced her class privilege across borders.

Doing postgraduate studies in the UK provided a good reason not to go back to his country after working in the US for several years, but to stay abroad, for Oliver (New Zealand, MArch Architecture, Brookes). Unlike Daisy, the UK was an ideal choice to study and find job opportunities upon graduation: 'I was looking for a place that's, kind of, [a] big concentration for my industry. And that's why I went to New York as well, cos there's a lot of international architecture firms and so as in London. I think it's the biggest concentration in the world. Um, yeah, that's why [I chose the] UK'. For him, the goal of working in the UK was achievable through a combination of cultural and economic capital. For example, he was aware of a youth mobility scheme (Tier 5) visa available for New Zealand citizens prior to graduation and decided to take this opportunity – such that he could be able to stay after completing his studies and work in the UK for two years. Despite the costs incurred by his visa applications which required him to travel to New Zealand temporarily, he was confident in his decision to apply for the Tier 5 visa which gave him more time to obtain sponsorship from employers. This eventually led him to secure a general work (Tier 2) visa and land a job of his dreams in London. In fact, the way in which he chose to wait in order to engage in work he would like to pursue evokes the strategies of Chinese international students in the work of Xu (2020). Drawing on Adam's (1994) concept of 'deferred gratification', she defines such strategies as:

... deeply class-based, often made possible through these Chinese international students' ready access to ample capitals through their families. Their underlining assurance and confidence and agile readiness to take

advantage of opportunities presented to them could therefore be attributed to this in-built characteristic of their *habitus* (Xu 2020, 8; emphasis in original).

Similar to her research participants, Oliver managed to grasp the opportunity presented to him (i.e., Tier 5 visa) quickly to lengthen his stay in the UK, knowing that the period of ‘waiting’ would eventually reward him in the future.

Daniel was also one of the interviewees who were considering a career abroad. Like other participants, he lacked a sense of urgency when it came to his plan after graduation: ‘So, it’s not quite finalised yet, but I’m thinking of applying for different postdoc positions. I can’t specifically say where yet? Because it does depend on which positions are available at the time. Um, but if that does not succeed, I’m also, kind of, open to work in industry, for instance’. However, when I asked about potential work opportunities, he listed the following possibilities without much difficulty:

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

As noted in the above narrative, Daniel was well-informed of the status and availability of research institutes or universities in other countries. Importantly, his construction of potential workplaces must be read in the context of his institution, and especially the connection of his lab, which provides a framework for what was ‘thinkable’ for him. In other words, his ability to imagine working in different parts of the world and therefore advance his aspirations for post-study international mobility was largely shaped by the informal connections of his lab in UCL or what Brinton (2000) calls ‘institutional social capital’ (see also Lee 2021). Overall, these examples represent interviewees who negotiate various future alternatives based on their financial resources, social networks, and knowledge and information of different pathways abroad. Not only did these students have an awareness of various forms of capital they possessed, but they also took those advantages for granted or were predisposed to utilising this fully to further their mobility across borders. Crucially, transnational mobility aspirations of these participants were driven by the pursuit of doing what they like in the place of their preferred choice, which indicated their privileged positions.

Improving life chance possibilities in the place where it is *only* possible

The picture becomes more complicated with the inclusion of participants who envisioned the UK or a third country as the *only* available or good option for living and working in. These participants had a more instrumental view of onward international mobility, which is derived – rather than withdraws – from concerns over ‘economic necessity’ (Bourdieu 2010, 46). Nathan (Japan, MA International Development, UCL) was one of those participants who matched such a portrait. At first sight, it seemed that his intention of working overseas was purely driven by his interests in the field of international development: ‘I really want to see their situation in the field, uh, especially for refugee children’. However, he later revealed that his experiences in ‘hard’ and ‘difficult’ countries were in fact a result of his previous and current employers’ decisions. Moreover, he believed that such international experiences would be necessary and beneficial for his career prospects in the long term. The following extract is illustrative of this:

Nathan: I was in Sudan which can be considered as [a] very hard, uh, situation [laughs]. And, now, I am in Egypt. [...] This is, again, not my decision. This is my company’s decision. So, well, because of administrative issues, some of the international staff had to move to Egypt. That’s why I am here. [...] And then I am getting,

a little bit, well, tired of being ... in a very difficult situation? Well, it's not very difficult. But, like, well, I have some issues. My living environment for the time being. I like living in various countries, but maybe, after a while, I need to go to some, well, easy countries [laughs].

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

Nathan: I don't know how long I am gonna work for this company. Maybe, I [will] move to another organisation, well, I think, [in] Middle East or Africa. And then, I don't know but ... after that, I want to go back to schools to study, which means either in the UK or [the] US.

Interviewer: Why do you still want to move again to Middle East or Africa?

Nathan: So, like, [in] five years, I want to go back to school to study psychology. And then, [eventually, I want to] counsel [as a professional in the field]. [...] I talked to some graduate schools [in the UK or the US], and then they told me having research experience in a professional position is a big advantage. That's one of the reasons why I decided to work for this company because I can obtain research experience as a professional position.

This echoes Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) notion of mobility capital, which is 'a sub-component of human capital, enabling individuals to enhance their skills because of the richness of the international experience gained by living abroad' (51). With Nathan, onward mobility across different countries was envisioned as a means to accumulate mobility capital to capitalise on later in his life. Notwithstanding, it seems that the possession of mobility capital would be rendered only effectual in contexts outside of his home country. His desire to move was largely influenced by 'not many opportunities in Japan' relating to his specific interest areas. Partly grounded in his seemingly free mobility decision, and aspiration for onward mobility, were the limited work opportunities that forced him to move. It is also worth noting that different 'values' were attached to certain destinations, with the UK and the US recognised as more desirable than Middle Eastern and African countries. Notably, his work in Sudan and Egypt – albeit in line with what he wants to do – was perceived as necessary *only* to further his studies in the UK or the US, that is, where he ultimately wants to be.

Career progression was similarly a strong motivation for Payton to engage in international mobility post-graduation. When I asked about his future plans after completing his studies in the UK, he made explicit his aspiration for staying in the UK or moving to a third country for work:

I wanna stay here [in the UK]. I am hoping Brexit doesn't happen so [that] I can have more opportunities to, like, work in Europe? Um, I would love to work abroad. [...] I don't wanna go back to [my hometown]. Um, politically one. [...] Um, Trump got elected. And I was, like, so offended especially what happens with health-care in America? Um, then I was like, 'I don't wanna be here'. [...] Two, cos it's just, like, I am sick of it. And three, it's not fun. It's not exciting. [...] After I graduated [from a university in my hometown], I worked, um, in commodities trading. So I did that for [a] couple of years. I advanced, but after two years I, kind of, made it as far as I could. And then, I was like, 'Okay. I'll try to go to other firms'. Wasn't having any luck. (Payton, USA, MSc Business Administration, Brookes)

As demonstrated in the above quote, Payton's preference to work abroad was due to frustration with his life in the US. For him, aspirations for transnational mobility were framed by his eagerness to make a difference in terms of his life chance pathways blocked at home and a second chance to achieve upward social mobility abroad. This resonates with what Favell (2010) calls 'social spiralists' whose decision to move internationally is driven by ambition, frustration, or boredom (95). Crucially, in contrast to the previous examples, Payton did not have the necessary capitals to obtain employment in the UK or a third country. For instance, his plan to stay and work in the UK was vague and general, falling short of details of how he could secure desirable employment and status outcomes in a new context: 'I don't have a, like, particular preference. [...] The only realistic way I could stay would be if I can find an American company that's based in London or in the UK'. In addition, the scope for venturing into different social fields (e.g., Europe) was largely circumscribed by the reliance of a student loan from the US government and hence the lack of economic capital he could dispose of. Nor did Payton have sufficient personal contacts or institutional social capital – like Daniel – to be able to locate and gain access to these companies. Despite the ostensibly

similar aspirations for transnational mobility after study, these examples show how some students believe they *have to* pursue their career abroad as a way of enhancing their life chance possibilities instead of an end in itself (Bourdieu 2010).

Negotiating emotional, moral and practical concerns

Given that students' work aspirations were interlaced with a range of different emotional, moral and practical considerations, not all participants envisaged themselves engaging in onward mobility after the completion of their studies. In fact, almost half of the interviewees (12 graduates and 15 students) indicated their return after graduation. As described in the above examples, such dispositions are often inseparable from habitus that is embodied in students. Unsurprisingly, a reluctance to be internationally mobile was more pronounced amongst female participants (17) than male counterparts (10), although this differed greatly depending on the extent to which the participants were family-oriented and/or whether they had caring responsibilities. This was also the case of Esther (USA, MSc International development, UCL) who had been working across different countries since she completed her degree in the UK. Having worked for non-governmental organisations in the Philippines and subsequently Cambodia, she began to question the footloose nature of her work and indicated her plan to return home. She explained that as she grew older, she felt a stronger sense of responsibility to take care of her mom and her younger brother. This concurs with work by Geddie (2013) on international students completing science and engineering postgraduate degrees in London, the UK and Toronto, Canada, which recognises the salience of gender in the careers and mobility decisions of female graduates (see also Sondhi and King 2017; Tu and Xie 2020).

Similarly, the matter of return was not a question for Andrew (Malaysia, DPhil Population Health, Oxford) whose ultimate goal would be to become a clinical doctor. Underpinning his decision to return was a perception that it would not be suitable to pursue transnational mobility at 'this stage of my [his] life' (i.e., early-30s) where he began to feel responsible for his partner and future family. In addition, the fact that he could not be able to work as a clinical doctor in the area of his interest meant there was no reason for him to stay in the UK after graduation: 'Um, in the UK, I have fewer choice[s] for my clinical interest. [...] I want to do [specialise in] neurosurgery. All the positions [for neurosurgery] will be taken in the first round, because it's a popular one. First round is only open to British or EU people. So foreigner [non-EU people] doesn't stand a chance'. This pinpoints how capital accumulation strategies in the UK are conditioned and limited by an individual's national origins (Brown and Tannock 2009; Sin 2016). Furthermore, onward mobility for work to a third country or across different countries would be of little use to Andrew: 'It's difficult to see what progression that I can make out of it because I could not fix to a place for a long time. I am saying if you stay in one place, you'll see yourself, uh, a progress that you can make. Like, you know, you'll be finishing your training at this point and what can you do after the training'. Instead, pursuing a stable high-status, high-pay career at 'home' – a place where he received a medical degree and planned to eventually settle down after the completion of his studies in the UK – was more practical, and the benefits of staying in that place were clearly seen to outweigh those associated with pursuing a career overseas.

Participants' own evaluation of locations which can be beneficial for their career sometimes more directly feeds into the manner in which they negotiate their aspirations for transnational mobility. For Abigail (Singapore, MSc Geography, Oxford), having an internationally mobile career trajectory was considered to be a less secure route than taking up local jobs to consolidate her positional advantage. As a Singaporean government scholarship holder, she was expected to return and work a local civil service job after the completion of her studies at Oxford. Her future career trajectory was clearly outlined, with jobs in the government lined up and waiting for her. This was contrasted with the uncertainty over 'working overseas', which she believed to be of high risk and confer little return on investment. Having a degree from a public university in Singapore, Abigail also saw good chances of finding opportunities in her home country: 'At least, I know, in

Singapore's case, a lot of companies including international firms [would recognise your degree] if you are from a public university. But if you are from a private university, um, it's a little bit tougher'. There are clear parallels with the findings of Forsberg's (2017) study of young people in Kalix, northern Sweden. She maintains that the decision to stay may not necessarily be made from a disadvantaged position but based on the possession of different forms of capital that are recognised locally. Contrary to the significant emphasis placed on mobility in conferring distinct and tangible advantage in existing scholarship (see, for example, Waters 2018), these examples illustrate some participants *chose* not to be internationally mobile after graduation as such mobility was considered to be more disadvantageous than beneficial to them.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper explores the way in which international students perceive and negotiate their aspirations for transnational mobility after completing their studies in the UK. The findings from this study contribute to the extant literature in three ways. First, this paper represents a significant shift from the emphasis of prior research that has situated the UK as a destination country, to one from which international students embark on onward mobility (see, for example, Beech 2019; Maringe and Carter 2007). By paying close attention to the post-study international mobility aspirations amongst those who chose to study in, and graduate from, UK higher education for the length of a whole academic programme, this article delineates that having a degree from the UK commonly instils a sense of being able to work in multiple countries amongst participants. Notwithstanding, such arguments should be interpreted with caution. The fact that the majority of participants are from non-EU countries with the colonial histories illuminates how this sense of endless opportunities through engagement with the UK higher education is embedded within academic imperialism. As scholars such as Raghuram (2013) and Stein (2016) have noted, the uncritical engagement of such aspirations has the potential to reproduce and perpetuate inequalities emanated from the colonial period. Furthermore, it is ultimately individuals' dispositions and resources that make such aspirations real and realisable.

In addition, this paper critically examines the meaning and power entangled with transnational mobility. I argue that the perceptions and experiences of cross-border mobility after graduation are more complex and multifaceted than they are described in extant literature. Whilst Gomes (2015), for example, recognises international students' aspirations for post-study international mobility, these aspirations have a clear romanticised reading, focussing on their 'sense of unlimited global mobility' (46). This article, by contrast, provides more nuanced accounts of mobility aspirations amongst international students. I argue that onward mobility is not always a reflection of privilege; for example, there are important differences between students in access to, and mobilisation of, various resources that are necessary for furthering their mobility across borders. Neither is the intention or decision to return necessarily made from a disadvantaged position. Those with practical, emotional and moral concerns contest the prevailing idea of international mobility as a taken-for-granted trajectory for internationally mobile students after graduation. Just as students aspire to be mobile at a global scale, so they have 'the right to immobility' (Forsberg 2017). In doing so, this research problematises the simplistic conflation of (im)mobility with (dis)advantage and highlights the need to attend to various dispositions towards post-study mobility across borders amongst internationally mobile students.

As a final point, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital enable a critical investigation of differentiated aspirations for transnational mobility amongst international students in the UK. The notion of habitus is employed to shed light on students' dispositions towards onward international mobility after graduation. I demonstrate how participants' future horizons are complicated by their embodied dispositions which are closely intertwined with social characteristics. Whether to fulfil different mobility aspirations is also contingent on the possession of a range of resources or what Bourdieu (1986; 2010) conceptualises as 'forms of capital'. However, this study goes further

to suggest that strategies of capital mobilisation diverge not just between students who move internationally and who do not, but within those who work in the UK or a third country or plan to do so. Making visible the international student perceptions and experiences of international mobility after study through a Bourdieusian perspective therefore not only serves as a tool for critiquing the dominant conception that valorises mobility (Cresswell 2006). It also elucidates the horizontal differences within the relatively privileged group of international students, which are increasingly linked to the socially diverse backgrounds of those studying within and beyond the UK.

Notes

1. Recent graduates were those who had graduated within five years at the time of the interviews.
2. Following a UK-wide referendum, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in June 2016.
3. Others include those from New Zealand ($n = 2$), Japan ($n = 2$), Kenya ($n = 1$), Ghana ($n = 1$), Indonesia ($n = 1$), Vietnam ($n = 1$), Chile ($n = 1$), and Taiwan ($n = 1$).
4. A DPhil is the Oxford equivalent of a PhD at other universities.

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