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A future of endless possibilities? Institutional habitus and international students' post-study aspirations and transitions

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ABSTRACT

Research on international students' post-study plans centres on factors influencing migration and career decisions. However, few studies have considered the impacts of individual institutions on students' aspirations and their subsequent transitions after graduation. In this paper, I employ the notion of institutional habitus in order to explore the extent to which higher education institutions expand or limit the range of options that international students could envisage or realise. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 55 non-EU international postgraduate students from three different UK universities, this study aims to uncover the complex diversity that underpins ostensibly similar UK higher education degrees. Notwithstanding the overlapping influences of individual, family, friends and institution, I argue that individual institutions play a significant role in shaping the ways in which participants imagine and experience the field of possibilities after graduation. This perspective also enables a more detailed examination of differences between and within the institutions.

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Introduction

Considerable academic and political attention has been given in recent years to the post-study transitions of international students, as the flow of these students is deemed highly important in developing and maintaining national/regional competitiveness within a knowledge-based economy. A growing number of scholars have thus drawn attention to familial, social and political influences in students' aspirations and transitions after graduation. Family members, and especially parents, are often found to be influential in setting expectations for some students to engage in subsequent international migration (Findlay et al. 2017; Marcu 2015; Soon 2012). The post-graduation plans are also mediated by other social networks of individuals, expanded in a new educational context (Collins et al. 2014; Findlay et al. 2017). It has also been argued that various policy initiatives to attract and hinder international students as prospective skilled migrants also play a part (Geddie 2015). Whilst the extant literature underlines the significance of the social environment of study, there

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remains surprisingly little scholarship exploring the role that individual institutions are playing in shaping international students' aspirations and transitions upon graduation.

In addition, future mobility plans and/or career trajectories often cannot be separated from students' social characteristics. Previous studies have found that age and gender tend to complicate academic and occupational distinction through international education. In his study of South Korean postgraduate students from American universities who later gain employment in South Korea or the United States, Kim (2016) found that being female or old¹ often leads to positional disadvantage in the domestic labour market, as is also the case in other contexts (Sin 2013; 2009). Given its association with the right to work, nationality is also considered to be crucial in securing work opportunities in the country of education. The significance of ethnicity in deciding an appropriate sector or industry of employment is similarly underscored by Sin's (2016) research on Malaysian students and graduates of various – onshore and transnational – modes of UK tertiary education programmes. Whilst acknowledging the salience of individual factors in projecting post-study mobility, these discussions rarely engage with the extent to which the impact of institutions on students' perceptions and transitions after graduation is moderated by their social divisions.

The study reported here explores variations in the effects of attending three different UK universities by examining the institutional contexts which enable international students from outside of the European Union (non-EU) countries to imagine and experience a range of opportunities upon graduation. I deploy the notion of institutional habitus (McDonough 1997; 1998; Reay, David, and Ball 2001; elaborated in the following) to conceptualise differences between institutions. I illustrate how the institutional habitus of each case university interacts with the habitus of individual students and generates a divergent field of possibilities and choices for students after graduation. Through the analysis, I show the ways in which the individual habitus and the institutional habitus are sometimes at odds with one another and demonstrate how this tension affects courses of action for my participants to fulfil their imagined opportunities. The significance and contribution of this article challenges the homogenous construction of UK higher education credentials as 'the one-way ticket to global elite status' (Favell, Feldblum, and Smith 2007, 21) and aims to throw light on the often hidden intricacy and multiplicity of post-study aspirations and pathways through the UK higher education.

Conceptual framework: institutional habitus

Theoretically, this study expands a collective understanding of Bourdieu's notion of habitus to an institution, as it allows socio-analysis at the meso level and thereby the examination of specific institutional influences on international students' aspirations and transitions after graduation. As 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions', habitus is a product of an early period of an individual's life and especially socialisations within the family and education (Bourdieu 1977, 72; emphasis in original). Whilst reflective of social conditions in which it is acquired, habitus is also embodied in a range of activities including eating, speaking and gesturing (Bourdieu 2010). In spite of its implicit tendency to predispose individuals to behave in certain ways, Bourdieu sees habitus as generating a wide range of possible actions including transformative as well as constraining courses of action (Bourdieu 1993). Notably, it is suggested that a person's habitus is similar to those from the same positions in the social structure or class background (Bourdieu 2017; 2010; 2000). This

offers the possibility of theorising the interrelated practices of groups of individuals as collective habitus, although Bourdieu does not explicitly use the term as such (Burke, Emmerich, and Ingram 2013).

Institutional habitus, introduced by McDonough (1997) as organisational habitus in her work on the influence of classed high schools on students' college choice making in the USA, refers to the 'impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour, through an intermediate organisation' (107). Applying this notion to the UK context, Reay and her colleagues (2005, 2001) operationalise institutional habitus in terms of educational status (i.e. the quality of secondary schooling), organisational practices (e.g. practices that assist students' higher education decision making), and cultural and expressive characteristics (e.g. embodied in collectivity of students, staff, rituals and buildings), all of which influence students' choice of higher education in the UK. Building on the existing body of research, this study elaborates further the concept of institutional habitus by examining the university's position in global and national university rankings, the quality and quantity of careers support, and the class and race of people (e.g. students, staff) and the place/location of institutions. However, in order to advance its understanding and application, I also go beyond the focus of previous empirical studies on higher education choice-making (Horvat and Antonio 1999; Ingram 2009; Reay 1998; Reay, David, and Ball 2001) to analyse the ways in which students imagine and experience the field of possibilities after the completion of their studies in the UK.

One of the main critiques of extant literature that deploys institutional habitus is that the notion is used in isolation from other interrelated concepts such as field and capital (Byrd 2019). To understand more fully the role of individual institutions in fashioning international students' aspirations and transitions after graduation, the notions of field and capital will be deployed in this study in conjunction with both individual and institutional habitus. According to Bourdieu, society is composed of multiple and often competing social fields or space, that is, 'a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97). This research takes on Bourdieu's notion of field to a global system of higher education and individual institutions where the dynamics of position-takings of both institutions and individuals take place (Marginson 2008; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). Moreover, the positions of these agents in the field are configured by the overall volume, composition, and trajectory of the capital (Bourdieu 1986; 2010). Since the distinctiveness of capital lies in its convertibility within social space, I argue that the exchange value of UK cultural capital can be enhanced when it is obtained from traditionally elite and upper ranked institutions which are themselves endowed with high level of symbolic and economic capital (Boliver 2015; Cronin 2016; Marginson 2008). Ultimately, this paper illuminates how the values, beliefs and current practices of institutions structure students' dispositions and preferences, while drawing attention to the ways in which participants respond to the institutional habitus which may not be always in line with their individual habitus.

The research study

This study is primarily based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with non-EU international postgraduate students and career staff at the three different higher education institutions: Oxford University (Oxford), an 'elite' university; University

College London (UCL), a pre-1992 university; and Oxford Brookes University (Brookes), a post-1992 university. The Further and Higher Education Act in 1992 is of significance to UK higher education, whereby the binary divide between universities and polytechnics was abolished. Brookes is one of 35 polytechnics which were granted full university status and emerged as a post-1992 institution. New, post-1992, universities are distinguished from old, pre-1992, universities by the formation of the Russell Group in 1994. It consists of 24 prestigious, research-intensive universities in the UK. Amongst the old, pre-1992 universities, Oxford and Cambridge distinctively form an elite tier of universities as the UK's two oldest universities (Boliver 2015; Brooks and Waters 2009). The choice of these three institutions therefore allows me to compare student responses according to various institutional positions in the global and national field of higher education.

In total, 55 non-EU international students were recruited mainly through snowball methods and were, at the time of the interview, enrolled in or had recently (i.e. within 5 years) completed full-time masters or PhD degrees² in the fields of Social Sciences or Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Those from EU countries were not included in this study as they were different from other non-EU international students in access to employment, working conditions and all other social and tax advantages (e.g. tuition fees, loans, grants, visas), although whether to continue these rights since Brexit has been called into question (Martel 2017; Reidy 2017; Europäische Kommission and and Generaldirektion Justiz 2013). The study population was intentionally diverse in terms of age, gender, nationality,³ level/stage of study among others. Graduated students also differed in terms of years of work experiences, employment status and location, types of organisation. Across the whole sample, there was a more or less equivalent split between the sites (20 at Oxford, 18 at UCL, and 17 at Brookes) and the disciplines of study (33 in Social Sciences and 22 in STEM subjects). The main characteristics on the interview sample is summarised in Table 1 below.

The interviews took place in 2018 either face to face on the campus of each institution or via Skype. Skype interviewing facilitated the participation of those who were unable to attend face-to-face interviews, including graduates working full-time and/or abroad as well as students in their final years. All interviews, which lasted on average one hour, were conducted in English and digitally recorded. The interviews were designed to be conversational in nature and covered a range of topics such as their choices of studying in the UK, the study and/or work experiences, and the future career and life plans. This paper focused on students'

Table 1. Summary of student interview participants.

	Gender	Study/graduation status	Enrolled degree	Subject of study	Nationality
Oxford (n = 20)	Female (n = 11)	Graduated students (n = 12)	PhDs (n = 9)	Social Sciences (n = 13)	China (n = 7)
	Male (n = 9)	Current students (n = 8)	Masters (n = 11)	STEM (n = 7)	India (n = 7) Other (n = 6)
UCL (n = 18)	Female (n = 11)	Graduated students (n = 6)	PhDs (n = 10)	Social Sciences (n = 7)	China (n = 8)
	Male (n = 7)	Current students (n = 12)	Masters (n = 8)	STEM (n = 11)	India (n = 1) Other (n = 9)
Brookes (n = 17)	Female (n = 9)	Graduated students (n = 6)	PhDs (n = 4)	Social Sciences (n = 11)	China (n = 2)
	Male (n = 8)	Current students (n = 11)	Masters (n = 13)	STEM (n = 6)	India (n = 1) Other (n = 14)
Total (n = 55)	Female (n = 31)	Graduated students (n = 24)	PhDs (n = 23)	Social Sciences (n = 33)	China (n = 17)
	Male (n = 24)	Current students (n = 31)	Masters (n = 32)	STEM (n = 22)	India (n = 9) Other (n = 29)

experiences during and/or after their studies in the UK. The data that form the basis of this paper also included interviews with three career staff⁴ (one from Oxford and two from UCL) in order to identify a variety of careers advice and support available at three case universities. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and then organised by open and thematic coding to investigate the multiple ways in which individual institutions play a part in framing students' expectations and choices after graduation. In what follows, pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Institutional habitus: Oxford, UCL and Brookes

The three case universities differ in terms of their educational status, organisational practices and cultural and expressive characteristics, all of which form the basis of the institutional habitus of each university. With its long tradition of academic prestige, Oxford is placed at the top of university rankings both within and beyond the UK. There were prevalent perceptions amongst participants that Oxford provides 'intellectually enriching and challenging' learning environment and that 'academic excellence' is the institutional norm. Thanks to its global and national standing, the university has not only strong connections with leading transnational corporations and organisations.⁵ Higher investment incomes of the university⁶ also make it possible to offer a broad range of careers programmes not readily available in the other two institutions. It is situated at the city of Oxford where accommodations, colleges, departments, and other facilities (e.g. museums, theatres, parks) are scattered throughout the city centre. Oxford is perceived by many participants as a predominantly white⁷ and upper-middle class institution with its own distinct cultural practices and traditions, as illustrated by Edward:

So things like, um, so eating dinner in a formal hall – you'd be dressed up and you wear these weird gowns, you know, and it will be a candlelit dinner. [...] And during [the] matriculation, you start in your college, and then you walk with your college mates to the Sheldonian theatre, and you enter. And, um, the chancellor or vice chancellor speaks in Latin at you. [...] All you are aware is your becoming a student at the University of Oxford. [...] They've been doing this matriculation ceremony for, like, I don't know, 1,000 years. It's like those little things [that] have gone through the generations. (Edward, Canada, DPhil⁸ Population Health)

Whilst lacking the cultural practices of a certain class and the dominance of one race/ethnicity over others as such, other aspects seem to be more prominent in the institutional habituses of UCL and Brookes. Branded itself on the website as 'London's Global University', UCL not only maintains its strong position nationally as one of the top five British universities⁹ but also has a growing international reputation.¹⁰ Its main campus is in the central London area of Bloomsbury, surrounded by leading organizations and iconic institutes.¹¹ UCL particularly benefits from being part of the University of London, that is, a collection of 17 independent member institutions in London, when it comes to resourcing careers advice and support. This was made explicit by one career staff: 'Because we are in London, we collaborate some of these universities. So our location and ability to collaborate helps us do something different'. It is common to share careers resources and take turns to hold career events, allowing for the potential to attract and host a larger number of employers in the university's career fairs and offering students opportunities to build up social networks with people from other London universities.

As a post-1992 institution which tends to be held in less regard than older universities (Tight 1988; Scott 1995), Brookes tends to underscore in its marketing materials '[its] contemporary relevance, [its] flexibility and [its] ability to offer an experience akin to educational tourism... [with the emphasis on] their place of location [being in the city of Oxford]' (Sidhu 2006, 163–64). The university's programmes are more visibly featured in terms of professional accreditations and industry placements than the other two institutions. This was reflected in the perception of some of the participants like Emma (New Zealand, MSc Spatial Planning): 'The course was accredited. It [the accreditation] was one of the things that they [the university] advertised the most, I think'. Also, they have a more flexibility in the period of the student intake by allowing students to initiate their studies in either September or January¹². Moreover, its Headington campus – the largest of its three Oxford campuses¹³ – is only 1.2 mile (1.93 km) away from University of Oxford. The university provides the BROOKES bus service to facilitate connections between its Oxford campuses and to the city centre.

The influence of institutional habitus on post-study aspirations and transitions

The institutional habitus of the three universities has a considerable impact on how my participants develop their post-study aspirations and trajectories. Particularly at Oxford, where participants believed their degrees to be highly appreciated and well received in any parts of the world, many of current students expressed their intentions to stay abroad after completing their studies, and almost two-thirds of graduated students were already working in the UK or a third country. As a recent graduate working in a transnational corporation based in Belgium, Aaron (India, DPhil Engineering, Oxford) believed that despite the difficulties of getting a work visa sponsorship in the UK, having a degree from 'a reputed university' allowed him to imagine himself working in different countries. Notwithstanding the similar level of interests in working in the UK or a third country, participants from UCL and Brookes did not consider the option of working abroad as feasible solely based on their degrees. Making a fine-grained distinction within the UK institutional hierarchy, these participants not only found it necessary to complement their degrees with overseas work experiences as 'a protection' (Rachel, China, MSc Computer Science, UCL). They also tend to emphasise other institutional features such as the proximity to London or Oxford University. This concurs with previous studies on international students who provide alternative narratives of distinction based on 'place' rather than academic prestige to offset a sense of inferiority derived from the institutional hierarchy (Collins et al. 2014; Ho 2014; Prazeres et al. 2017; Singh, Schapper, and Jack 2014).

The university's standing is often channelled into formal connections with employers. Many Oxford participants mentioned that they were frequently exposed to a wide range of organisations across different sectors and countries, to which Aaron (India, DPhil Engineering) attributed: 'Because it's Oxford, a lot of companies prefer to come there and, uh, present there'. Such ties often led to the exclusive work opportunities for students, as demonstrated in the case of Felicity (China, MSc Law) who obtained an internship in the regional office of an intergovernmental organisation in China upon the completion of her master's study: 'It was through, uh, Oxford internship programme where I applied. I think

it's a different procedures from the general applicants. They have some, kind of, like, special programme between Oxford and [an intergovernmental organisation]'. This parallels the work of Brown and Tannock (2009) which illuminates a high degree of coupling between elite universities and transnational companies. In fact, long-standing relationships with a number of organisations with a similar status were also evident at UCL and, to a lesser extent, at Brookes. However, quite a few participants from UCL and Brookes indicated that the informal links of individual programmes were sometimes more helpful in navigating the field of work after graduation than careers support and guidance at the institutional level (e.g. careers fairs, one-to-one appointments). This partly relates to the lack of awareness, and sometimes insufficient provisions, of resources offered by careers offices at these universities. Critically, the varying levels of extensive and established networks feed differently into the way in which participants navigate the field of work after graduation.

Where there is a lack of formal connections with employers, informal institutional ties play a more prominent role in shaping parameters within which the participants assess the viability to take on certain academic or occupational pathways. Indeed, a handful of participants at Brookes were found to benefit from the connections between their programmes and some of the companies. For example, it was through e-mails from her course administrator that Emma (New Zealand, MSc Spatial Planning) had the chances to work as an intern in Oxford and London, respectively, throughout her study. However, she looked back on these experiences with some bitterness, since not only did these internships end up with the short-term experiences for her but neither of them resulted in full-time employment or further opportunities elsewhere. Likewise, whilst appreciating the links of his programme through which to secure several internships during his study, Travis (USA, MSc Human Resource Management) questioned whether the institutional connections – exclusively limited to the UK labour market – would continue to be of use in finding new job opportunities in his home country if he fails to gain employment in the UK. These examples show that Brookes participants, apart from a few exceptions, tend to have considerably less extensive and established institutional resources and networks that they can resort to after completing their study than those from the other two institutions.

As indicated earlier, 'place' was central to the ways in which UCL and Brookes were perceived by the participants. In the case of UCL, the university was frequently depicted by the participants as a place that is often inseparable from London. This can be partly explained by the way in which the campus buildings are scattered across the city. Beyond just appreciating the university's location, a number of participants were imbued with a sense of excitement and ambition over the positional possibilities that studying in London presented. For instance, the visible presence of buildings and statues related to historical figures, such as Charles Darwin and Virginia Woolf, near the UCL campus influenced the way in which Thomas (Canada, PhD Education) envisaged himself and his future:

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

Likewise, the physical accessibility to Oxford University, and the exposure to resources and people from Oxford University in particular, contributed to broadening positional possibilities for Brookes participants. As residents in Oxford, several participants described that they were given access to some of the resources at Oxford University. Having additional resources such as Bodleian Libraries was perceived as ‘a plus’ for Mark, a PhD student from Ghana. Not only would this complement academic resources at Brookes, but he believed it would also enhance his knowledge in the field through which to open up various possibilities. For Sabrina (Indonesia, MSc Finance), the advantage of being close to Oxford University was more concerned with the opportunity to mingle and associate with elite social networks. It is through these social exchanges with Oxford students that she hoped to accumulate and embody valued cultural capital and dispositions. However, this can be viewed as what Quinn (2010) called ‘imagined social capital’. Making connections with Oxford students can be turned into ‘real’ capital only if Sabrina maintains these relationships and operationalises the networks. She did not so far have a chance to interact with Oxford students since arrival in the UK and neither did she have opportunities to communicate with them regularly. This also echoes the centrality of time as Bourdieu contends:

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

Despite the fact that frequent if not regular encounters are highly unlikely as a non-member of the university, the presence of Oxford students near her institution at least offers the possibility of accessing social and cultural capital circulating in the area.

The price or the promise? A (mis)match between institutional and individual habitus

It is important to note that different members of the university have a different relationship to the institution, with some participants distancing themselves from the habitus of their university. The study findings identified the distinct conflict between the classed and racialised institutional habitus and students’ habitus across the institutions. This was especially noticeable in Oxford whose dominant habitus is clearly marked by a sense of privilege based on whiteness and significant class resources. Unsurprisingly, it was international students of colour rather than white counterparts who voiced their concerns strongly about the lack of diversity and displayed a sense of not belonging in the overall university environment (see also Lee and Rice 2007). For example, Daisy (China, MSc Education) observed that the university’s tone was being ‘too white’, and this at times made her feel uncomfortable with studying in the university as ‘a minority’. Jasmin (India, MA Public Policy) took a more critical stance towards the dominant cultural practices of Oxford, which could marginalise those who do not embody the legitimate class culture:

I think, uh, it’s quite elitist? It’s very elitist. I mean it’s very easy for people to feel intimidated by Oxford. That is not to say I felt intimidated. But I could see how it was [can be] intimidating... [the] atmosphere. Because there’s a lot of traditions. There’s a lot of, you know, things they [need to] follow... a lot of customs. There’s a lot of, sort of, dinners and halls, you know. It’s fun. It’s very quaint. It’s very interesting. But it can also be very excluding. So, somebody who is not [part of the upper-class], you know, [might feel excluded], yeah. And the sense that

it is for a certain class of society is quite problematic because it [gives] panics to people who would otherwise want to study or be eligible to study there. So, in that sense, I think [the university is lacking] in terms of inclusivity. But I think that is not so bad [at] the master level. I felt that, uh, in an undergraduate situation, it's quite bad, I think. Also [there are] not as many coloured people... things like that.

Jasmin's narrative resonates with the notion of 'symbolic violence' which is manifested in the imposition of the norms of the group possessing greater power on those of the subordinate group (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Although the marginalisation of other class cultures did not feature prominently in the participants' accounts, they commonly pointed out that such practices of ostensibly upper-class culture were viewed as legitimate and appropriate within the university. This therefore exerted, in Bourdieusian term, symbolic violence to those who did not embody this dominant class culture.

The ongoing encounters with symbolic violence, influenced by the extent to which the participants kept their distances from the dominant classed and/or racialised habitus of the university, sometimes cause pain and hurt, and affect their experiences both during and after study in the UK. Consider the example of Harry (Hong Kong, DPhil Social Sciences¹⁴) whose post-study plan was, in part, adjusted by his alienating experience at Oxford. The study experience, he explained, was characterised by the feeling of 'being distant by [from] the college environment or the community [in general]'. However, rather than trying to interact with the local domestic student community or people from other cultural backgrounds and/or ethnicities, Harry chose to remain within his social circles made up predominantly of fellow Chinese students on campus. Not only did this propel his decision to search and apply for jobs exclusively in China, but in doing so he unconsciously submitted to a symbolic power structure; that is, 'non-white' international students do not fit into the institutional habitus of Oxford.

The relatively less racialised and classed institutional habitus of UCL and Brookes did not cause a similar tension amongst the participants as observed in the case of Oxford, although this did not bring about the same assessment of academic and social worth associated with their degrees. For Ellen (Hong Kong, MSc Engineering), the fact that 90 per cent of students in her programme at UCL is from mainland China sit uncomfortably with the assumption that she could have a truly international experience by physically studying in the UK. Simon (Thailand, MSc Business Management) similarly expressed his disappointment about his faculty members at Brookes who are predominantly non-white and non-British. In both cases, the rather negative perceptions of the social mix within their institutions are arguably linked to the lack of exposure to valued linguistic cultural capital and social capital which could be converted into personal development and further positional opportunities. However, it has to be pointed out that given the proportion of international students is usually higher in specific disciplines such as business or engineering, the participants in those programmes were more likely to have exposure to international peers than those studying in less popular programmes. Also, a few participants considered the high proportion of international students in their programmes to be beneficial for their careers, pointing to the mixed evaluations of the overall diversity of these two institutions.

In fact, there is no perfect fit between individual and institutional habitus, and neither do the experiences of fitting in or standing out in their institutions have an unequivocally positive or negative impact on post-study aspirations and transitions. The crucial difference

between students in terms of envisaging future opportunities lies more in the interplay of institutional and personal resources. This is borne out by the example of Sana (India, Master of Business Administration, Oxford). Reay, David, and Ball (2001) argue that working class students' choices of higher education tend to be geographically constrained by the potential costs of commuting or moving out of the family home. Like the participants in their research who have limited economic capital, Sana relied on a student loan to support her study in the UK and had the pressure to pay back after graduation. Under such a circumstance, she could have operated within narrow circumscribed spaces of choice. Instead, she was able to envision a wide range of possibilities across the countries:

It [the university] has some of [the] best professors in the field and the best opportunities in the industry [...] And this degree really, uh, opens all doors for you. So this degree is, uh, accepted and valued all over the world? There is not a limitation. [...] I think as far as the degree concerns, I will have, uh, opportunities in the UK and Europe, US, China, uh, India... everywhere, I think.

Not only did substantial resources provided by the university help Sana to project her possibilities, but this perception was boosted further by her relatively young age (i.e. mid-20s) and few relationships concerns (i.e. single). Take another example of Alice (USA, MA Publishing, Brookes). Despite having had successfully obtained two internships through departmental connections during her study, it was both the lack of financial means to draw on beyond a student loan and the sense of being 'too old' (i.e. 30s) to venture into a career abroad that led her to give up the opportunities to stay and work in the UK. Compounding this was the double load of having to financially support her mum who recently retired from her work. This eventually led her to return to her home country shortly after finishing a master's degree. In Alice's case, the institutional habitus was not directly translated into the positional possibilities upon graduation that other younger and more affluent participants at the university envisioned and/or experienced. Instead, its influence is mitigated by her personal characteristics, including age and lack of economic capital. Overall, these examples suggest that just as the way in which the participants conceived the field of possibilities after graduation were influenced by the institutional habitus, its effects were too mediated by their individual habitus.

Conclusion

This paper underlines the importance of individual higher education institutions in understanding the post-study aspirations and transitions of international students. First of all, I demonstrate how different educational statuses of three institutions in the global field of higher education are turned into international students' possibilities and choices upon graduation. The extent to which the participants perceive or experience the global receptivity of their degrees affects the participants' abilities to envision those opportunities and options. Oxford participants tend to conceive their possibilities more broadly than those from the other two universities based on their beliefs that their degrees – regardless of their academic disciplines – will be recognised all over the globe. In the case of participants from the other two universities, their geography of possibilities seems contingent on the area of study. This chimes with Marginson's (2008) observation of how degrees from the world leading universities or the 'Global Super-league', such

as Oxford, enables individual students to pursue careers almost any parts of the world (305).

Also, I examine various organisational practices that are linked to the participants' aspirations and transitions after graduation. Alongside the levels and types of careers support and advice available, informal connections of universities are found to widen participants' post-study horizons. Importantly, this article has shown that a stock of social capital to which participants have access through their institutions is being played out differently in the field of possibilities after graduation. This strongly echoes Brinton's (2000) claim that 'institutional social capital' multiplies employment opportunities which young people would otherwise have had through information provided by their exiting ties (289–90). However, it is noteworthy that the way in which institutions provide career resources varies greatly. Whilst UCL harnesses its location to cultivate employer connections, central to Oxford's careers provisions is its global standing. This is exemplified in its exclusive network and investment of global employers who are keen to recruit 'the best and the brightest students' (Brown and Lauder 2009; Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011).

Lastly, I propose an extension of Horvat and Antonio (1999) insights into how race and class of students and staff at these case universities affect the way in which institutions characterise themselves and operate. As with African American girls' experiences in an elite secondary school in the USA in their study, the classed and racialised institutional habitus at Oxford is sometimes in conflict with the participants' habitus, which results in alienation and the sense of otherness during their study. On the other hand, a mismatch between institutional and individual habitus is relatively less apparent in the other two universities; however, this is potentially counterproductive, failing to provide valuable social and cultural capital that many participants expected to acquire through studying physically in the UK. Whilst Horvat and Antonio (1999) study was specifically about race and class, this study gives equal attention to the importance of place. Building on Allen and Hollingworth (2013) argument that participant's career aspirations and transitions are mediated through place, this paper identifies place(s) – both around and within a university – as central to the institutional habitus through which the participants broaden or demarcate their future horizons.

This article contributes to the conceptual development of institutional habitus by expanding on a collective understanding of habitus and employing it in conjunction with Bourdieu's other key theoretical concepts such as field and capital. I have shown how each university capitalises on institutional resources (i.e. forms of capital) to reproduce or transform its social position in the field of higher education. These processes influence the way in which participants envisage various opportunities after graduation, often – but not always – enhancing initial resources participants used to have before commencing their studies in the UK. Furthermore, given that the institution is materialised by a range of collective as well as individual practices, it is possible for each student to develop individualised forms of both similar and differing, yet *interrelated*, habitus (Burke, Emmerich, and Ingram 2013, 171–72; emphasis added). This implies a potential alignment as well as dissonance between institutional and individual habitus, indicating that the socio-cultural effect of educational institutions on the habitus and practices of individuals within them cannot be uniformly defined.

Relatedly, it is important to highlight that although individual institutions play a significant role in framing the participants' possibilities and choices upon graduation, their

impacts can be limited by combinations of contextual as well as personal factors. Whilst extant literature recognises the impact of social characteristics on domestic students' access to and experiences of higher education institutions, international students are rarely included in discussions of inclusivity and student differences in the UK higher education (cf. Taylor and Scurry 2011). In line with Tannock's (2013) calls for extending the demand for educational equality beyond national borders, I argue that it is equally vital to focus attention on the social diversities and hierarchies at work in the formation of aspirations and transitions of international students. Throwing light on the lived experiences of international students at three different UK universities therefore reflects, and points to the need to be attentive to, the socially and spatially differentiated flow of these students across the universities in the UK.

Notes

1. According to the author, age is usually associated with seniority in South Korean society based on a Confucian hierarchy. Younger candidates are therefore usually preferred over older counterparts. The author also suggests that it is common to ask candidates' age during the hiring process in South Korea.
2. Postgraduate students were considered to be more ideal for the research because the proportion of international students in the UK was higher at the master's and doctoral levels (see <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from>).
3. The student participants were mainly from the top non-EU sending countries or regions, identified from the 2016/17 Higher Education Statistics Agency international student statistics (HESA): China (12), Malaysia (2), USA (5), India (9), Hong Kong (5), Nigeria (2), Saudi Arabia (1), Singapore (4), Thailand (2) and Canada (3) (see <https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Research-Policy/Statistics/International-student-statistics-UK-higher-education>). While the priority was given to those from the top ten non-EU sending countries, ten interviewees from other non-EU countries were included in the sample.
4. Career staff from Brookes opted out of the interviews due to a concern about the university being compared with the other two research-intensive universities.
5. Oxford University Careers Service (see <https://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/careers-fairs#collapse1514416>).
6. This almost doubles or even triples the amount of income the other two universities generate in the same year (see Oxford University Financial Statement 2017/18 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation/finance-and-funding/financial-statements-oxford-colleges-2017-18?wssl=1>; UCL Financial Statement 2017/18 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/about/how/financial-information>; and Oxford Brookes University Financial Statement 2017/18 <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/about-brookes/structure-and-governance/policies-and-financial-statements/#financial>).
7. Black African or Black Caribbean heritage accounted for only 2.6 per cent of total UK students admitted in 2018 (see <https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/facts-and-figures/admissions-statistics/undergraduate-students/current/ethnicity?wssl=1>).
8. A DPhil is the Oxford equivalent of a PhD at other universities.
9. Best Universities in the UK 2020 (see <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/best-universities-uk/>).
10. UCL was ranked 16th, 14th and 15th in the world in the THE World University Rankings for 2018, 2019 and 2020, respectively (see <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/ucl>).
11. UCL Campus Maps (see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/maps/downloads/>).
12. January entry (see <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/studying-at-brookes/how-to-apply/apply-direct/january-entry/>).

13. Oxford Brookes has four main campuses. Three of its campus (i.e., Headington Campus, Harcourt Hill Campus, and Wheatley Campus) are located around the city, and one campus is in Swindon (see <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/studying-at-brookes/living/our-campuses/>).
14. This participant wished to remain completely anonymous, and his discipline has thus been broadly referred to as Social Sciences.

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