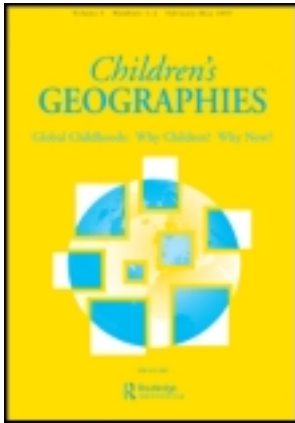


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### 'These are not the best students': continuing education, transnationalisation and Hong Kong's young adult 'educational non-elite'

Johanna Waters<sup>a</sup> & Maggi Leung<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department for Continuing Education, University of Oxford, Rewley House, 1 Wellington Square, Oxford, OX1 2JA, UK

<sup>b</sup> International Development Studies, Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University, PO Box 80115, 3508 TC, Utrecht, The Netherlands

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## 'These are not the best students': continuing education, transnationalisation and Hong Kong's young adult 'educational non-elite'

Johanna Waters<sup>a\*</sup> and Maggi Leung<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department for Continuing Education, University of Oxford, Rewley House, 1 Wellington Square, Oxford, OX1 2JA, UK; <sup>b</sup>International Development Studies, Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University, PO Box 80115, 3508 TC, Utrecht, The Netherlands

This paper examines the under-explored relationship between young people's transitions to higher education (HE) and the opportunities afforded by transnational education (TNE) programmes, with a focus on understanding the contemporary situation in Hong Kong. A fascinating association has developed, over the past decade, between the expansion of TNE in the territory and the government's commitment to providing 'continuing education'. We explore what this relationship might mean for the young people directly affected by these new opportunities, by drawing on 70 in-depth interviews with students/graduates. Our sample is, what Brinton [2011. *Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan*. New York: Cambridge University Press] has termed (in another context), Hong Kong's 'educational non-elite'. We ask: how does this 'non-elite' negotiate the shifting terrains of educational provision in an era where credentials (particularly at degree-level) are seen as 'everything'? Our paper contributes directly to discussions around young people and (international) education, and considers frankly the specific role that transnational HE plays in the education/employment transition of thousands of (hitherto neglected) individuals in contemporary Hong Kong.

**Keywords:** transnational higher education; young people; Hong Kong; continuing education

### Introduction

The words 'these are not the best students' are taken from a transcript of an interview with a high-level administrator at one of Hong Kong's prestigious domestic universities. This individual has a pivotal role to play in the organisation (day-to-day running, recruitment and marketing) of dozens of transnational education (TNE) programmes<sup>1</sup> offered, primarily, by British, Australian and American universities. These programmes are delivered through the continuing education (CE) arm of the university. In full, the quotation reads: 'To be frank, these are not the best students. However, they all have a strong motivation to learn and complete the programme, and they all aspire to have a degree qualification'. She is referring to the tens of thousands of individuals currently studying for 'non-local' (i.e. transnational) higher education (HE) credentials in Hong Kong (Education Bureau 2012). TNE is presently playing, we argue, a crucial role in education/employment transitions here, and therefore has a significant impact upon the formation of young adult identities. And yet, very little research has addressed this. Here, we highlight the specific role that TNE plays in the transitions of young people in contemporary Hong

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\*Corresponding author. Email: [johanna.waters@conted.ox.ac.uk](mailto:johanna.waters@conted.ox.ac.uk)

Kong and describe the relationship between TNE and CE. Our findings speak directly to the work of other scholars attempting to conceptualise the *diverse* transitions of young people in a comparative, global context (e.g. Ansell 2009; Jeffrey and Dyson 2008; Tse and Waters 2013). We are keen to stress the fact that many young people (particularly outside the 'West') do not follow conventional paths through education into employment, but lead complex lives.

Non-local degree programmes, or TNE, have proliferated in Hong Kong over the past 10 years, as part of the government's drive to get more and more young people into HE, whilst maintaining relatively low levels of direct entry into Hong Kong's eight domestic universities (the number has stabilised at around 18% of secondary school graduates). Many TNE programmes have developed alongside the growth and expansion of community colleges in Hong Kong (Cribbin 2002, 2008; Lee and Young 2003). Community colleges are often (physically and administratively) attached to, and yet maintain an important symbolic distance from, domestic universities. They have been given a variety of acronyms (such as SCOPE at City University of Hong Kong, SPACE at the University of Hong Kong and SPEED at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University or 'PolyU'<sup>2</sup>). Significantly, the 'transnational' degrees acquired through these CE colleges are usually awarded by the overseas (British, Australian or American) 'provider', and not by the domestic university. The implications of this arrangement are socially significant – above all else (and contrary to the assumptions of most British universities), local students consistently covet domestic (not foreign) credentials. In Hong Kong, the *value* attached to different HE qualifications varies (the University of Hong Kong is at the top of this hierarchy), with consequences for how students see themselves and for how they are seen by others in wider society (such as friends, family and employers). Their identities as young adults are in part formed through their experiences and understandings of HE (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008). Hence, it is so important to recognise the complex local/national geographies of international education, and not to assume (as many authors have done before – see Ong 1999) that some generic brand of 'Western' credentials are universally preferred by non-Western students. Our study of TNE in Hong Kong completely unsettles this assumption.

In this paper, we examine the role that TNE is playing in the provision of academic opportunities for young people in Hong Kong who are, by all accounts, 'not the best students'. They constitute what Brinton (2011, 29) has usefully termed (in a different context) Hong Kong's 'educational non-elite'. We want to argue that TNE has an increasingly pivotal role to play in young people's transitions from secondary to HE (and to employment) and from youth to adulthood (in Hong Kong and elsewhere). This is especially applicable to a particular sub-set of the population: those who have failed to access domestic HE directly, and have therefore been forced into pursuing 'CE'. To date, however, the links between TNE and CE have not been examined in any meaningful way and, similarly, the social impacts of TNE have rarely been explored. In a recent paper (Waters and Leung 2013), the authors considered the ability of TNE to confer 'institutional social capital' upon students/graduates. We examined the spatial dimensions of TNE (Leung and Waters 2013a, 2013b), with regards to how programmes are sold (in conjunction with local universities) and actually delivered (often away from the main campus). We were critical of the ability of TNE programmes in Hong Kong to facilitate the development of social relationships amongst students and graduates (through alumni networks), and suggested that this had implications for their subsequent employment experiences and social mobility. In contrast, this paper is less concerned with the acquisition of institutional capital – rather, it examines the way in which TNE intersects with young people's discourses around CE and HE – something rarely considered in the literature.

It remains the case, however, that very little is known about the dramatic transformations occurring in domestic HE landscapes, and in society more broadly, as a consequence of *transnationalisation* (Waters 2012). Where TNE has been examined in the academic literature, it is

usually from the perspective of ‘provider’ educational institutions and countries, focusing, for example, on its regulation/governance (Chan and Lo 2007; McBurnie and Zигuras 2007; Sidhu 2009), issues around quality assurance (Mok 2005) and the economic imperatives inextricably linked to TNE. Bottom-up accounts, which take seriously the *views* and *experiences* of students/graduates are sorely lacking. It is our contention, however, that such (student-centred) perspectives on the transformation of HE through transnationalisation are critical, for several reasons.

First, there is a growing recognition, prominent within recent geographical scholarship, that education is not just a credible sub-field of enquiry, but an increasingly important one. Hanson Thiem (2008) captured the main thrust of this sentiment with a timely intervention published in *Progress in Human Geography*, writing that:

formal education in the early twenty-first century is in flux – particularly in mature capitalist political economies. Dominant modes of provision and regulation are being restructured in compulsory schooling and higher education sectors, with state-centered and nationally organized systems giving way to pluri-institutional and pluri-scalar governance (Dale 2005a) [ ... ]. These substantive changes *within* education systems are being accompanied by a repositioning of the sector in broader social, political, and economic formations. In recent years, education has emerged as a policy priority for many states – tied to both the restructuring of welfare services and the pursuit of economic development. Education extends into new spaces and times of the lifecourse as individuals seek social and economic advantage and face the discipline of flexible labor markets. Finally, education has become an economic frontier, as states develop new export strategies, and providers seek to capitalize on deregulation and increased demand. (154–155)

The changes outlined in Hanson Thiem’s commentary speak, in various ways, to the specific developments in TNE with which this paper deals. The reorganisation of previously ‘national’ systems of education can be seen with the influx of foreign education providers and their impact on domestic HE around the world. The complex ways in which TNE is organised on the ground (involving state-level interventions but also institution-to-institution agreements and compacts drawn between individuals within institutions) demonstrates the ‘pluri-scalar’ governance involved. In the case of Hong Kong, education has (since the 1997 handover and independence from British rule) become a cornerstone of economic development (Cribbin 2008). And, as will be shown below, education in Hong Kong is demonstrably ‘extending’ into ‘new spaces and times of the lifecourse as individuals seek social and economic advantage and face the discipline of flexible labor markets’ (155). The government’s ‘CE’ agenda has fuelled and facilitated this. Finally, TNE is a clearly articulated ‘export strategy’ for many countries, especially the UK. As a recent report published by the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS 2011) indicates, the estimated annual value of education exports to the UK economy is in the region of £14.1 billion; transnational HE accounts for nearly £211 million (BIS 2011). TNE is an important source of revenue not just for the British government and universities within the UK, but also for universities in Hong Kong, who benefit from the fact that TNE is ‘self-financing’ and that institutions can and do charge for the use of their facilities and services (lecture theatres, seminar rooms, administration, marketing and so on). The delivery of TNE is primarily a commercial enterprise.

Second, an explicit concern with elevating young people’s voices resonates with recent calls within ‘children’s geographies’ to engage with work on geographies of education (Holloway et al. 2010; see also Cook and Hemming 2011). Holloway et al. (2010) sought to do just that in a direct response to, and critique of, Hanson Thiem’s (2008) paper. They acknowledge Hanson Thiem’s achievements, whilst also pressing the point that her largely ‘political-economy’ approach neglects ‘developments in social and cultural geography [ ... ], in particular, geographical research on children, youth and families’ (584). They proceed to outline ‘what geographies of

education that pay due attention to children, youth and families might look like' (Holloway et al. 2010, 584) – informed by feminist and poststructuralist theories. Their agenda has direct relevance for understanding TNE and for the arguments proffered in this paper, so we will spend a few moments considering them here. They propose, in the first instance, the following direction for a new approach to geographies of education:

In the context of universities, for example, putting students first will allow us to move beyond economic studies of universities' capacity to stimulate regional economic growth and innovation, and to produce different insights into the imprint of universities in their localities and regions, as well as their wider transnational networks . . . (Holloway et al. 2010, 594)

This is exactly our goal with this paper – to move beyond the economic discourses surrounding the internationalisation and transnationalisation of HE that currently dominate policy (and academic) discussions, to examine the local social–geographical implications of TNE for young people, their families and wider society. An additional outcome of our focus on TNE, of course, is that the wider 'transnational networks' implicated in this process become necessarily exposed. Holloway et al. (2010) also argue for the importance of focusing on 'the voices and subjectivities of young people' (Evans 2008), which in turn will highlight the significance of 'young people's experiences of education in the here and now, as well as having concern for education's future impacts, encouraging us to engage with young people as knowledgeable actors whose *current* and *future* lifeworlds are worthy of investigation' (594, emphasis in original). Our research (involving 70 in-depth interviews with young people in Hong Kong) sought to prioritise above all else the motivations, opinions and experiences of the young people themselves, rather than beginning, as so many studies of 'international education' do, with institutional and policy perspectives. An additional point raised by Holloway et al. (2010) concerns the 'Northern centrality' of much work on geographies of education and the need, therefore, to expand the spatial focus of such studies. In particular, they argue, we must consider how globally distanced places are *linked* through new geographies of education. Our project, which makes explicit the substantive connections between the UK and Hong Kong, represents one attempt to do this.

With these vibrant intellectual agendas in mind, the paper proceeds as follows. We begin with a brief discussion of some recent work on young people, education and employment with an emphasis on 'transitions' in globally comparative perspective. We then turn to examine, specifically, TNE – discussing what it is and what some of the implications of the recent growth of TNE might be for young people around the world (there remains a dearth of scholarship in this area). We then spend a few moments looking specifically at the case of TNE in contemporary Hong Kong, providing the background to our empirical study as well as a discussion of our research methods. We then draw upon our data (that include a substantial data-set of interviews with young people who have direct experience of TNE in Hong Kong) to draw some conclusions about the role that TNE is playing in young people's lives – how it relates to their aspiration to be a 'university graduate'. In conclusion, we try to consider how this relationship between TNE (and the growth of TNE) might be unfolding in different societies around the world, and what this might mean for our understanding of geographies of youth transitions, education and employment in the context of proliferating policy discourses around CE.

### **Young people, education and the promise of employment**

There has been, over the past several years, a growing recognition of the need to understand youth transitions in comparative, global context (e.g. Ansell 2009; Ansell and van Blerk 2005; Holt and Holloway 2006; Jeffrey and McDowell 2004; Katz 1991, 2004, 2008; Kraftl 2008; Jeffrey 2010;

Jeffrey and Dyson 2008; Tse and Waters 2013). This work has included, in some cases, an appreciation of the important role that education plays in effecting life-chances, particularly in relation to young adults who may be described as the ‘educational non-elite’. It is apposite to consider, in brief, the work of Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2008) and Brinton (2011) as their findings speak to a number of larger issues that help illuminate the fate of the educational non-elite in contemporary Hong Kong. In *Degrees without Freedom? Education, Masculinities and Unemployment in North India*, Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2008) argue that education is failing to deliver what it promises, and many young people’s expectations and aspirations are being cruelly thwarted. This is especially true of individuals from particular sections of society – some social groups are far better equipped to deal with un-/under-employment than are others. *Degrees without Freedom?* describes and explains the differential responses of young ‘educated’ men (aged 20–34) living in two villages in Bijnor district, western Uttar Pradesh, India to the devaluation of their academic credentials. The main argument of the book, according to Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery, is as follows: ‘power and inequality mediate people’s access to educational “freedoms” and therefore [ . . . ] scholars should focus more centrally on how young people negotiate post-educational terrains’ (31). The emphasis, then, is not on education *per se*, but on how accredited individuals *perceive* their educational qualifications (and, correspondingly, themselves). Significantly, the book also considers how *society* perceives and consequently treats these individuals.

In this book, they argue that by placing such a positive stress on the value of education in under-developed regions, the ideas of Drèze and Sen risk ‘downplaying’ differential experiences of schooling and the social struggles that occur over the ‘value and uses of education in situations of economic uncertainty’ (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008, 8). Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2008) claim:

at almost the precise moment that an increasing number of people formerly excluded from mainstream schooling have come to recognize the empowering possibilities of education, many of the opportunities for these groups to benefit from schooling are disappearing. (9)

They also argue, however, that we need to be cognisant of the ways in which young people facing the predicament of un-/under-employment ‘respond inventively’ to their circumstances (14) through the utilisation of different ‘stylistic strategies’ (18) and by ‘reaffirming’ the value of their educational credentials/experiences; emphasising their identity as ‘educated’ and therefore ‘modern’ young men. This identity is asserted, in part, through the active denigration of individuals *without* formal education (see Waters 2006, for a similar point in relation to ‘overseas educated/locally educated’ individuals in Hong Kong).

Sociologist Brinton has correspondingly examined the fate of young under- and un-employed men in a different national context – Japan during the late 1990s (*Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan*, 2011). She describes the ‘havoc wreaked on individual lives by the economic recession and dramatic employment restructuring of the late twentieth century’ (xi). She draws on a range of data, including: in-depth interviews with high school teachers, officials at public employment security offices, and with the young men she describes as the ‘lost generation’; a survey of 130 employers and urban Japanese in their late 20s; and school level data on graduates’ job placements. Her main claim is that, during the 1990s, the labour market position of young Japanese men (especially the ‘non-elite’ as she describes them) deteriorated significantly, with implications for wider society. The fate of this particular group of young men is tied to the drastic decline in school-work institutions that provided the structural support needed for placing young school leavers into particular companies. With the decline of these institutions, so the long-term job security that had previously been associated with Japanese society disappeared. Young men have been set adrift, with significant consequences for their identities as they transition from youth to adulthood.

What, then, are the implications of these observations for understanding Hong Kong's educational non-elite? Both examples highlight cases of where young people have shown 'inventiveness' – they have been forced to respond creatively to their unstable circumstances. So, Brinton (2011) observes 'how some young people have developed the capacity to use weak ties in their search for satisfying work, despite the fact that it has been reliance on institutions that the education system has traditionally encouraged' (33). Most importantly, perhaps, is the stress that both books place on the role of 'education', variously defined, in impacting the life-chances and forming the identities of young adults in disparate societal contexts – contemporary Japan and India. 'Being educated' means very different things to different social groups – and the meanings attached to education similarly vary.

The social circumstances of the young people represented in our study in Hong Kong could, on some level, been seen as similarly precarious. As we will show below, Hong Kong's young 'non-elite' face similar uncertainty and instability. The government's successful attempts to secure HE places for over 60% of secondary school graduates, through the growth and expansion of CE colleges and the introduction of the new Associate Degree (AD), has given many individuals (who previously would not have aspired to graduate-level jobs) the taste of the *possibility* of entering the formal university system (Lee and Young 2003). However, as has been observed, the 'articulation rate' (from AD to a domestic university place) remains extremely low, leading to media criticism of the 'false promises' these young people are given (Lee and Young 2003). Instead, 'AD providers' have been 'forced to channel their efforts in arranging articulation to overseas universities' (Lee and Young 2003, 157) – and herein lies the important role that TNE plays in providing opportunities for bachelor-level qualifications to individuals who have, by all accounts, been academically unsuccessful. The question remains, however (and this is something that we will address below): to what extent can and do overseas qualifications act as an acceptable alternative to local domestic degree-level credentials? How do young people themselves *perceive* these qualifications/alternative pathways? Lee and Young (2003) proffer a relatively positive interpretation of this situation:

Despite occasional criticisms from the media [...] there is no doubt that an increasing number of young school leavers are benefiting from this new endeavour [i.e. the expansion of community colleges and the introduction of the Associate Degree]. If not for this new development, most of them would have to spend their energy in repeating their F5 or F7 studies (and often not for once) or would be forced to seek employment in the job market. With an unemployment rate of over 7%, many of them would join the ranks of the unwaged, with all that it entails in Hong Kong (loss of confidence, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, etc.). With the new AD programme, they are learning something useful and are growing up to become more mature, responsible citizens. (156–157)

We will consider these 'benefits' below. The 'truth' of their argument has to contend with the growing realisation, expressed in the academic literature, that with the measurable expansion of access to HE (around the world), there has *not* been a coterminous growth in the number of graduate-level jobs (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011). As Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) have written: 'people are forced to depend on a job market *unable to cope* with the rising tide of individual, social, and political *expectations*' (11, emphasis added). Brinton (2011) observes, in relation to Japan, that career structures have generally shifted, from 'organisational' to 'boundaryless', marking an increase in uncertainty and employment instability (Arthur and Rousseau 1996). She writes:

The breakdown in school-work institutions and in employers' guarantee of secure employment to large numbers of new graduates produced a 'lost generation' in the 1990s, a cohort of young people unable to gain a stable economic toehold from which to embark on their adult lives. (Brinton 2011, 1–2)



Significantly, this ‘lost generation’ has internalised responsibility for their own circumstances – they blame not the wider system but *themselves*. This notion of personal responsibility is reflected more broadly in discourses around employability (Moreau and Leathwood 2006). In Hong Kong, the ‘self-financing’ nature of courses offered within ‘community colleges’, such as the AD and transnational programmes, align well with this discourse of personal responsibility for one’s future.

### CE and transnationalisation in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, reform of the education system from the 1970s onwards has seen the widening of access to education at all levels, and its transformation (in part) from an ‘elite’ to a ‘mass’ institution (Lee and Cheung 1992). In successive government publications, Hong Kong’s economic development has been discussed explicitly in terms of ‘human capital’ and ‘lifelong learning’ (Mok 2008). In 2002, HK\$5 billion was allocated by the government to establish a ‘Continuing Education Fund’. According to one study, the number of individuals in Hong Kong engaged in CE increased by around 400,000 between 2003 and 2005.

TNE provision in Hong Kong has developed alongside and in conjunction with this commitment to CE and lifelong learning – an agenda articulated by an increasing number of administrations around the world, faced with an urgent need to expand skilled workforces and develop knowledge-based economies. A key document in this process was published in 1999, entitled ‘Learning for Life – Framework of Education Reform’, wherein the notion of a diverse and ‘multi-layered’ HE system was proposed (Lee and Young 2003). The final report was published the following year and the government’s goal of admitting 60% of secondary school graduates into HE by 2010 was announced (Mok 2008). The first community college in Hong Kong was established in 2000, linked to the University of Hong Kong, and a new qualification – the AD – was launched (Lee and Young 2003). This new programme was ‘self-funded’ (that is, without public subsidy) and its profitable/commercial nature has meant that in recent years it has been used to provide extra funding for the ‘parent’ university, bolstering the financial viability of domestic institutions. This new policy was also a departure from previous conceptions of ‘lifelong learning’ as it was aimed to offer programmes to *full-time students* (i.e. young people and not older adults already in work) (Cribbin 2008). There were more than 6500 applicants for the first intake on this programme – reflecting a substantial demand for the new qualification (Cribbin 2008). However, it quickly became apparent that the intentions behind the AD (that it would exist, primarily, as a *stand-alone* qualification), and the way in which it was received by young people and the public more generally (as offering a route into a domestic university), failed to align, and expectations amongst this new generation of school leavers were inadvertently raised. Most of the young people we interviewed had seen it (at least initially) as a stepping stone to local universities. Obtaining a degree was fundamental to their transitioning from dependent child to responsible and successful adult.

The significance of the UK as a provider of TNE in Hong Kong needs to be stressed. At the latest count, 36 different British universities offer approximately 625 different degree courses (at Bachelors-, Masters- and PhD-level) in Hong Kong, and the number of programmes continues to grow (British Council Report 2011). Worldwide, the UK has 388,135 ‘offshore’ students, but its presence is particularly felt in Hong Kong, where over 70% of *all* TNE is provided by British higher education institutions (HEIs) (followed by Australia at around 20%) (Hong Kong Education Bureau 2012). The UK, therefore, has an extremely dominant role to play in the provision of HE in contemporary Hong Kong.

The link between CE and TNE is expressed in a number of ways. First, over half of all UK TNE is delivered through the CE arms of domestic universities (the new community colleges).

The relative role of the 'local' and 'overseas' providers varies (between institutions and courses): in some cases, the UK course is all but 'franchised' to the local CE college. The domestic institution thereby provides all the teaching on the programme. In other cases, a 'flying faculty' model is used, whereby British lecturing staff will fly out to Hong Kong to deliver the majority of course content in one or two intensive blocks. Supplementary support (through seminars or tutorials) may be provided by the local CE college. In the majority of cases, programmes fall somewhere between these two extremes – using some local lecturers and some overseas staff. Lectures/seminars/tutorials frequently take place within the CE college's 'town learning centres', located physically apart from the domestic 'parent' university. Undergraduate transnational programmes are also known as 'top-up' degrees – reflecting the fact that they are seen as 'topping up' CE qualifications (the AD or more traditional Higher Diploma) to 'degree level'. They are usually completed in 1–2 years full-time, and follow directly on from the AD/Higher Diploma qualification. Thus, whilst there are very few opportunities for students undertaking CE qualifications to transfer on to degree programmes within domestic universities, there are significant opportunities for them to do this through TNE.

The argument put forward in this paper is based upon the findings of a qualitative research project, undertaken between 2009 and 2011, on the role that British universities are playing in the transnationalisation of HE in Hong Kong. We were particularly interested in exploring the implications of TNE for local students/graduates (their educational experiences and employment prospects). We conducted 70 in-depth interviews with students (38) and graduates (32) in Hong Kong, but also sought the perspective of the foreign (in this case, UK) educational providers and employers in Hong Kong. Consequently, in addition, interviews were conducted with 18 British university representatives and 9 employers/recruiters.<sup>3</sup>

Students and graduates were recruited through a number of different channels. The majority were obtained by means of an advertisement sent out on our behalf by the British Council, a number of UK universities, and the Vocational Training Council in Hong Kong. However, we also employed a snowball sample and used, in a few cases, personal connections. Interviews with students and graduates were largely conducted in Cantonese and translated into English.<sup>4</sup> We sought to include the range of TNE qualifications offered by British universities, and our final sample comprised: 36 'top-up' (i.e. undergraduate) degrees; 22 Master degrees; 2 PhDs; 2 Bachelor of Law degrees (LLB); 10 certificates (i.e. conversion to LLB) and 1 diploma. Seventy-three different degree programmes were considered (three individuals had studied more than one programme). Out of 70 interviewees, 27 were male and 43 were female, and the median age of the sample was 27 (for graduates) and 24 (for students). Most of these had studied/were studying for a degree attached to a local university (community college).

### **TNE and the transitions of an 'educational non-elite'**

In what follows, we focus on exemplifying some of these ideas, drawing upon our interviews with individuals (students and graduates) who are undertaking/have recently completed *undergraduate* ('top-up') TNE programmes. There are several important points that we wish to raise in relation to these. First, all of these young people are individuals who would, prior to the development of community colleges and the expansion of the CE sector, have been forced (by virtue of their relatively poor exam performance at either the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) or Hong Kong Advanced Level (HKAL)<sup>5</sup>) to leave education and seek non-graduate-level jobs. Their aspirations have shifted in line with government discourses around the expansion of HE opportunities in the territory. Presently, a degree is seen to these individuals as *absolutely essential* to 'getting on' in life:

I think a degree qualification is essential and so I must study for it (*Chloe Lee, graduated in 2008 with a UK 'top-up' degree*)

If you do not have a degree, it seems that you cannot quite 'raise your head', feeling inferior. Having a degree is to show people that I am normal. (*Nicholas Tse, graduated with a UK 'top-up' degree in 2007*)

Others may want other things. But for me, I want to complete the race; I want to have a degree (*Shirley Kwan, almost completed a UK 'top-up' degree*)

At the same time, their options for obtaining a degree were extremely limited. For most of the young people we interviewed, an overseas 'top-up' programme provided them with the only opportunity for acquiring a degree-level qualification. Many had already repeated their Form 5 exams and still 'failed' to gain sufficient marks to enter sixth form and, subsequently, a local university directly. They openly acknowledged that their only chance of continuing in education was to study for a Higher Diploma or AD and then to apply for a place on an overseas top-up programme. As one individual told us: 'I applied [to] a few local universities but they all rejected me. Then I started to think about top-up degrees' (*Adason Chan, graduated in 2007 with a 'top-up' degree*). In the following quotation, reflecting upon her decision-making around HE, Fiona captures a sentiment expressed by many of our student/graduate interviewees:

To be honest, I did not have many choices at that moment . . . . If you have very good academic results, of course you could choose to get onto a local degree [course]. But the chance of this [for me] was not too high. My academic performance was not that outstanding. (*Fiona Lee, graduated with a UK top-up degree in 2006*)

It would seem, therefore, that as part of a larger agenda promoting 'CE' and the expansion of access to HE in Hong Kong, a new cohort of young people (the 'non-elite') are indeed gaining access to degrees. Most of the individuals we interviewed were extremely self-reflexive on this point – they openly acknowledged that they were not academically gifted, but opined that society *expected* them (and others of their generation) to obtain nothing less than a first degree. TNE has, then, without a doubt, allowed many individuals hitherto 'shut out' of HE the chance to achieve the 'minimum expected standard'. This has been integral to the establishment of their identities as 'normal' young people in contemporary Hong Kong and has enabled them to make the transition from childhood to adulthood (see Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008 for similar discourses amongst young people in India).

A second point concerns the 'international' nature of TNE degrees. Many of the UK provider institutions that we interviewed for our project talked openly about the wide 'appeal' of a British qualification for Hong Kong students. However, during interviews with young people it became quickly apparent to us that the 'overseas' nature of the qualification was incidental (even, in some cases, problematic), and certainly not an attraction. A small number of interviewees discussed their 'preference' for UK top-up programmes (over Australian) as they felt these were (or at least, *would be seen to be*) of better quality. But *all* would have preferred, given the option, a degree conferred by a local university. This points, again, to the need for geographers (or those with a geographical sensibility) to tackle the research challenges posed by the internationalisation of HE. Local and national hierarchies of educational credentials are far more complex than a post-colonial reading of the internationalisation of education would suggest (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2009).

Third, it is important to mention some of the *benefits*, articulated by interviewees, of transnational top-up programmes over more traditional local degree structures. These included cost (they

are generally seen as a 'cheaper' option), speed (the top-up can be completed in 1–2 years), level of difficulty (many saw these degrees as 'easier') and, above all, flexibility for young people already in employment. Several individuals appreciated the concentrated nature of much of the course delivery (in one or two-week intensive blocks), the unconventional hours (some classes were taught in the evening and at weekends), and staff were generally perceived as more 'flexible' and understanding of those with family and work commitments. Many individuals needed to work to fund their HE, as they did not receive financial assistance from family or government (some received limited assistance from the government Continuing Education Fund). Our findings remind us of the fact that young people lead complex lives, which often do not fit the linear narratives imposed on them by government ideas around education. This is nowhere more the case than with students following a CE route.

And finally, it is important to stress that the vast majority of students/graduates interviewed expressed the view that a degree obtained through TNE was inferior (in various ways) to one obtained directly from a local university. Adason, for example, said:

I think if you cannot get an offer from a local university, there is no harm to try this [a top-up degree]. But if you have a local degree offer, don't study this. I think top-up degrees' resources are not as good as those at local universities.

The issue of inferior resources came up several times (individuals on 'top-up' programmes attached to the CE arms of local universities had restricted access to university facilities, such as libraries, computing, halls of residence and organised social activities). More significant, however, was the perceived lack of recognition given to TNE programmes *vis-a-vis* their local counterparts. Several participants talked about family members (particularly parents) not valuing their top-up degree (questioning its validity as a university qualification). Others discussed the fact that, for many government (civil service) jobs, TNE programmes are not given recognition (in some cases they have been formally assessed by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications and deemed equivalent only to an AD or Higher Diploma). Others talked in vaguer terms about how 'society' generally fails to value TNE (in the same way as domestic degree qualifications). Fiona said: 'Society perceives us as a lower tier kind of degree graduate, and I need to explain to employers what it [a top-up degree] is during an interview'. All of this has clear implications for how young people with TNE qualifications perceive themselves as 'educated individuals' (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008). Many would seem to have accepted and internalised their 'inferior' status – they all blamed their circumstances on their poor examination results which, in turn, they attributed to their own personal failings. As we have shown elsewhere (Waters and Leung 2013), the structural arrangements of many TNE programmes do not enable students and graduates to mobilise (through social networks) in order to transform these rather negative discourses.

## Conclusions

This paper has explored the relationship between young people's transitions from secondary/tertiary to HE in Hong Kong, and the opportunities afforded by transnational (specifically British) education programmes (TNE). An intriguing association has developed over the past decade between the expansion of TNE in the territory, and the government's commitment to providing 'CE'. A clear target had been set by the Hong Kong government – from 30% of 18–19 year olds in HE in 2000 to 60% in 2010 (a target which was exceeded well before this date). The expansion in HE did not occur, as might be assumed, through an increase in the number of places offered to secondary school graduates by domestic universities, however (Lee and

Young 2003). Rather, the growth observed was in the so-called ‘self-financing’ sector, which has included new HE qualifications offered by community colleges (such as the AD) and, significantly, hundreds of transnational degree programmes provided by 36 different British universities. In our recently completed project, we examined the role that British universities are playing in the HE landscape of Hong Kong through the provision of transnational degrees.

Here, we have considered the implications of TNE provision for the young people directly affected by it. These are the academically ‘unsuccessful’ individuals who, hitherto, would have been unable to access HE and, consequently, would have been forced into (un)employment. Since 2000, however, they have been able to undertake degree-level programmes offered by non-local providers. We asked: how have this ‘non-elite’ negotiated the shifting terrains of educational provision in an era where credentials (particularly at degree-level) are seen as ‘everything’? We drew upon in-depth interviews with 70 individuals (students and graduates, most of whom were in their 20s and early 30s), to explore young people’s perspectives, particularly with respect to their motivations for undertaking a TNE programme, their experiences of and reflections on TNE, and (where applicable) their subsequent encounters with the local (Hong Kong) labour market.

Our data have allowed us to make a number of observations about the role of British TNE in the experiences of ‘educational non-elites’ in contemporary Hong Kong. First, as is supported by statistics related to the uptake of CE in Hong Kong, it is clear that a potent demand for HE exists amongst the sizable number of individuals unable (as a consequence of their relatively poor exam results) to access a local university directly. Only 18% of secondary school graduates are presently able to find a place on a first-degree course at a local HEI. And yet, there is a widespread perception (amongst our sample) that a degree-level qualification is imperative for a successful and fulfilling life. It is considered a bare minimum – without it, as one interviewee put it, you do not feel ‘normal’. This was the view reflected across our sample – a degree qualification was a necessity and, furthermore, a non-local top-up programme was their *only* means of accessing this. Second, then, we made the point that young people chose a UK TNE programme not for its ‘international’ or ‘British’ qualities (as some of the providers of TNE have claimed) but because it was the only option open to them if they want ‘a degree’. The international dimension is considered incidental (or even a hindrance) to this. Third, the flexibility afforded by non-local degree programme structures was largely welcomed by the individuals in our sample. Many of them worked part time to fund their education (they did not receive any financial assistance from family members or government grants). Their lives did not fit a conventional ‘transition’ narrative. Thus, the association with CE (degree courses taught intensively and during work/family-friendly hours) was generally perceived as a plus. The final point we made, however, was that TNE degrees were seen (by the students/graduates and, from what we can gather, by employers too) as *in no way comparable* to degrees obtained at a local university in the ‘conventional’ way. They are perceived as inferior (in some cases, they were described as ‘not real degrees’ and the students themselves as ‘not university students’). Clearly, it would be disingenuous to suggest that all university degrees *can* and *ever will* be equal (patent differences exist, everywhere, between as well as within universities/programmes). However, the distinction between local and non-local degrees uncovered through our research seemed particularly harsh and unyielding. As described by Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2008) and by Brinton (2011) in relation to young people in India and Japan, respectively, contemporary identities are fundamentally shaped by experiences of education and especially by how one’s particular credentials are received by wider society. Thus, it is significant that students undertaking TNE programmes *see themselves* as inferior – somehow branded and permanently marked by their educational experiences.

There are a number of wider implications of our findings that we wish to draw out briefly in conclusion. First, there are the general changes occurring to education systems around the world,

observed by Hanson Thiem (2008), which necessitate a new *geographical* focus (Brooks and Waters 2011). As we have noted in the paper, it makes little sense to think of international education in crude terms of 'East' and 'West' (a degree from the latter assumed to be superior and preferred). In East and Southeast Asia, local and domestic HE landscapes are far more complex than this, and this complexity has only been heightened by the introduction of TNE programmes. Rather, nuanced geographical accounts of local/regional educational markets are needed in order to understand how societies are being transformed through changes to (international) education. Second, TNE is seen, by influential commentators, as *the* growth area in HE (Bone 2010); there is an urgent need, therefore, for scholarship examining the impacts of TNE *locally*; upon students, graduates, their families and wider society. We have shown some of these in relation to the experiences of students/graduates who could be considered the 'educational non-elite' – particularly, how their qualifications are being assessed by wider society, and how this has impacted quite profoundly upon their sense of identity. This relates to a third implication, supporting the call by Holloway et al. (2010, 594) to move 'beyond economic studies of universities' capacity to stimulate regional economic growth and innovation', focusing instead upon the emergent social and cultural geographies of HE. Different perspectives on the impacts of changes to HE emerge when the voices of young people are explicitly sought. Our findings complement existing work on youth transitions at different global sites (Jeffrey and McDowell 2004; see also Jeffrey's series of reports in *Progress in Human Geography*), particularly in relation to how students' and graduates' identities are intimately related to their experiences of education and employment. In this paper, we have discussed, and given voice to, the experiences of a forgotten cohort of young people, for whom the ability to obtain a HE has (for their sense of self) proved vital.

## Notes

1. TNE is defined here as programmes 'in which learners are located in a country other than the one in which the awarding institution is based' (McBurnie and Ziguras 2007, 21).
2. SCOPE stands for 'School of Continuing and Professional Education'; SPACE is 'School of Professional and Continuing Education' and SPEED is 'School of Professional Education and Executive Development'.
3. We gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support of the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK and the Research Grants Council in Hong Kong (RES-000-22-3000). We also acknowledge the work of Yutin Ki, who conducted many of the interviews for this project.
4. The translation was carried out by our research assistant and double-checked by one of the researchers.
5. Before 2012 and the introduction of the new secondary education certificate, the HKCEE (taken at age 15–16 – Form 5) and the HKAL (taken at age 17–18 – Form 7) determined university entrance in Hong Kong.

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