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Degrees of value: comparing the contextual complexities of UK transnational education in Malaysia and Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper reveals the complex diversity that underpins ostensibly similar transnational education programmes (TNE), through a comparison of UK TNE in Malaysia and Hong Kong. It draws on data from two different yet cognate studies on the role of UK universities in delivering higher education in Asia. Some fine-grained and informative differences between the ways in which ‘value’ in TNE is constructed in different host contexts is revealed. The paper brings to light the ‘voices’ of TNE students and graduates, which are very seldom heard. The arguments adapt and extend the concepts of education as a positional good, and as cultural capital. For various instrumental, intrinsic and personal reasons the authors discuss in detail, UK TNE is more highly valued in Malaysia than in Hong Kong. The paper makes a wider contribution to knowledge on the changing landscape of international higher education and the impact on social and personal (dis)advantage.

KEYWORDS

Transnational education; positional good; cultural capital; Malaysia; Hong Kong

Introduction

The global growth of transnational education over the last two decades has been phenomenal. A defining characteristic of this growth is the extension of English-medium, Western universities into new modes and locations of educational delivery in the Middle East and East and Southeast Asia. The United Kingdom (UK), a major exporter of transnational education (TNE), has now more international students studying for UK qualifications outside of the UK than within. This amounted to 701,010 international students based overseas in 2015/16 (HESA 2017a), compared to 438,010 international students studying physically in the UK (HESA 2017a). Slightly more than half of the UK’s TNE students were studying in Asia in 2015/16 (HESA 2017b). Literature on transnational education has primarily focused on two areas of enquiry. One area involves macro-structural themes such as globalisation, trade, policy and quality assurance (O’Mahony 2014). This feeds into discourses on the internationalisation of higher education in East and Southeast Asia which centre on the economic role of cross-border education and the creation of knowledge hubs (Knight and

Morshidi 2011; Mok 2016; Shams 2016; Tham and Kam 2008). Another area examines the experiences of TNE educators, especially in terms of issues and challenges in learning, teaching and assessment, and personal and professional development (Cai and Hall 2016; Hoare 2013; Smith 2013; Trahar 2015). Relatively little is known about how transnational education is valued at the everyday level where students and graduates make meaning of their studies in interaction with their social and institutional environment. In the effort to address this gap, this article explores the value of UK TNE as perceived by students and graduates who have pursued UK qualifications in their home country context. It provides an innovative comparative perspective.

The article draws on our recent research on UK transnational education in Malaysia and Hong Kong. Our aim is to explore and compare how UK education is valued in the two contexts, casting light on the lived experiences of transnational students and graduates. In line with existing literature (Chee et al. 2016; Marginson 2004; Pyvis and Chapman 2007; Robertson, Hoare, and Harwood 2011; Sin 2013), we argue that TNE can be valued as a positional good; in other words, it can be used by individuals to secure better employment and status relative to comparable others. This originates from an idea expressed in Hirsch's (1976, 27) 'positional theory', which argues that the value of exclusive goods, services, work positions and social relationships primarily lies in their social scarcity. Individuals gain satisfaction from these resources predominantly in the relative sense, that is, from how much access to and control they have of these resources in relation to everyone else. When applied to higher education, it follows that more advanced and exclusive qualifications command higher value due to their relatively low supply, giving those who possess them a competitive advantage in the labour market over those who do not. The concept of education as a positional good resonates, to some degree, with the closure perspectives evident in Bourdieu's work (1984, 1997). Such perspectives view cultural and social capital (including high-status knowledge, skills, dispositions and networks acquired and enhanced through exclusive education) as sources of distinction for the economically privileged. These are exchangeable into economic and symbolic capital, such as highly paid jobs and recognition. Equipped with the right resources, those which are valued by dominant groups and institutions, privileged individuals are able to define and legitimate their advantaged position in occupational and status structures.

Our paper goes a step further than existing literature which adopts positional and closure perspectives to explicate that the value of TNE varies across different but ostensibly similar programmes within a complex and diverse transnational education landscape. We bring out some of the fine-grained and contextual differences in the way students and graduates value UK transnational education in Malaysia and Hong Kong. Our discussion on the value of UK TNE goes beyond employability. We highlight the under-researched intrinsic and personal dimensions of value which interlink with the instrumental, positional valuation of UK TNE in the two host contexts. We show that UK TNE in Malaysia is more highly valued by local students and graduates than it is in Hong Kong. This provides insights into the varying gaps between promises and realities in stratified sites and spaces of transnational education. We argue for a need to recognise the uneven provision and validation of cultural and social capital across TNE programmes, and the impact of this on the facilitation of various instrumental, intrinsic and personal needs.

TNE in Malaysia and Hong Kong

Malaysia and Hong Kong are two former British colonies which have among the largest numbers of students taking UK TNE programmes. Malaysia, the leading TNE market for the UK, is host to close to 79,000 individuals studying for UK qualifications in more than 800 courses (British Council 2014a; HESA 2017b). Hong Kong has some 30,000 students enrolled in over 800 UK TNE courses, making it the sixth largest TNE market for the UK in 2015/16 (British Council 2014b; HESA 2017b). Both economies have plans to position themselves as regional education hubs (Knight and Morshidi 2011). Their priorities are to expand access to higher education (which domestic public universities cannot adequately provide) and build their competitiveness as attractive study destinations in the region and beyond (Education Bureau, Hong Kong 2008; Knight and Morshidi 2011). Once mere exporters of students seeking tertiary education abroad, Malaysia and Hong Kong have now gained a relatively new status as hosts to providers of international education especially from the Global North/West (Education Bureau, Hong Kong 2017; McNamara, Knight, and Fernandez-Chung 2013). Reforms in higher education in Malaysia and Hong Kong have encouraged partnerships and collaborations between local institutions and foreign universities in the delivery of TNE (Lee and Young 2003; Tan 2002). This opens up opportunities, particularly to the less affluent middle class, to pursue a foreign tertiary education locally at a fraction of the cost (about 30–40%) of studying overseas (British Council 2014a; Education Bureau, Hong Kong 2016). It also benefits local students who fail to – or prefer not to – enter domestic public universities.

Malaysia is a more established host of transnational education than Hong Kong. It has a wide range of foreign TNE delivery modes (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2014) – dual or joint degree, twinning, franchise, international branch campus, validation, study exchange and credit transfer. It is the pioneer of twinning and credit transfer TNE programmes (Tan 2002). This has allowed students – since the mid-1980s – to study an initial period of their foreign education in private institutions in Malaysia before completing advanced stages of their studies overseas. Malaysia is presently host to 12 overseas branch campuses of foreign universities, of which five are from the UK. These campuses offer offshore programmes, enabling students to study entirely in Malaysia for a qualification awarded by the respective foreign institution. Apart from local students, foreign TNE programmes are open and actively marketed to international students in Malaysia. While locally accredited foreign programmes are available to most international students in Hong Kong (exceptions apply to mainland Chinese students for almost all programmes and a 10% quota is imposed on students from Macao and Taiwan) (Education Bureau personal correspondence), the TNE programmes are mainly intended for local students.

Models of foreign TNE in Hong Kong include fly-in teaching, franchising and distance learning, but exclude offshore delivery. To date, no UK university has an offshore branch campus in Hong Kong, although two American institutions have initiated foreign branch campus presence in the special administrative region (SCAD 2017; The University of Chicago 2016). Unlike UK TNE in Malaysia which offers primarily full-degree undergraduate courses (British Council 2014a), the majority of UK courses offered in Hong Kong are one- or two-year ‘top-up’ degree programmes (British Council 2014b). UK top-up degree programmes enable students in Hong Kong who have failed to enter local universities directly and have

completed an Associate Degree or Higher Diploma (usually at a local continuing education college) to upgrade their ‘sub-degree’ qualification into a full UK bachelor’s degree.

The lower study cost of studying locally as compared to studying physically in the UK has been a constant feature in the marketing of UK TNE in both Hong Kong and Malaysia, apart from the standard promises of employability and quality assurance (British Council 2014a, 2014b). TNE programmes are promoted to be similar to programmes offered at the parent or partner university in the UK, especially in terms of course content, academic standards and qualification awarded. The fact that UK universities operate in various contexts means that there is a need to consider contextual specificities which influence how UK TNE is delivered and experienced. The following sections of this paper take this into consideration while exploring the differential value that Malaysian and Hong Kong students and graduates attach to their respective UK TNE.

Research in Malaysia and Hong Kong

Given the limited availability of literature on the value of UK TNE across host nations (O’Mahony 2014), we felt a need to undertake comparative inquiry using data from our respective studies. Our underlying belief is that comparative research can contribute to wider understanding of the various commonalities and variations in TNE across host markets. This offers the potential for mutual learning and improvement of policies and practices in TNE (Phillips and Schweisfurth 2014). Conducting comparative research has its obvious challenges, especially in the identification of functionally and relationally equivalent constants (Nowak 1977) against which units of analysis can be meaningfully compared. The search for equivalences is complicated by cultural and contextual differences, especially when units of analysis involve diverse individuals and groups situated in different educational and societal settings (Crossley and Watson 2003).

Furthermore, there is the issue of finding comparable samples. As our research was undertaken separately using different research designs, the characteristics of our samples differed to a certain degree, especially in terms of modes of study. The Hong Kong sample consisted of local students and graduates who (had) pursued or were pursuing UK–Hong Kong partnership programmes. These programmes were delivered through partnerships between UK-based universities and Hong Kong public higher education institutions, that is, those funded via the University Grants Committee or quasi-government bodies (e.g. institutes of the Vocational Training Council). On the other hand, the Malaysian sample comprised domestic students and graduates who studied at local private institutions or at a UK branch campus. All participants in the Malaysian sample were enrolled in full-time programmes whereas some Hong Kong participants studied part-time. Despite this, we believe that our combined data are theoretically and empirically useful in shedding light on diverse student and graduate experiences across two prominent host settings for UK TNE. While we do not claim statistical representativeness, the exploratory nature of our qualitative research will reveal key themes and issues which have wide relevance for theory, policy and practice.

The research in Hong Kong was conducted between 2009 and 2011. A total of 70 semi-structured interviews were conducted with local students ($n = 38$) and graduates ($n = 32$) of UK–Hong Kong partnership degree programmes at different levels (undergraduate, master and doctoral). The participants had been enrolled in 73 programmes (three

interviewees had studied on more than one programme). The interviews aimed to investigate the participants' views on the purposes, success and failure of these TNE programmes. They explored the participants' motivations, expectations and experiences in their studies, as well as their career and mobility plans and/or experiences. Efforts were made to gather a good mix of students and graduates, considering their gender (43 female and 27 male), age (20s–40s), and academic and social backgrounds. Participants were recruited through a number of channels, including advertisements placed via higher education institutions, the British Council, personal contacts and subsequent snowball sampling.

The research on UK TNE in Malaysia is smaller in scale. It forms part of a larger project on social mobility among Malaysian students and graduates of various modes of UK international education. Between 2010 and 2011, a total of 36 Malaysians aged between 19 and 31 years participated in qualitative semi-structured interviews ($n = 30$). A focus group, a written interview and an audio interview through Skype were used to accommodate the availability of the remaining participants. The aim of data collection was to generate details and explore in an in-depth manner the aspirations and experiences of the participants in relation to obtaining superior employment and status through their education. For the purpose of this paper, data from 21 interviews will be used as they involve individuals who were either studying or have completed a UK TNE programme. Data collection was conducted in Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya and Penang. Participants were recruited through assistance from lecturers and administration staff, student associations, research advertisements and introduction from early interviewees. Academic programme (at undergraduate and post-graduate levels) and ethnicity were the two key criteria for participant selection. The number of TNE programmes represented in this sample amounted to 33, which consist of offshore and study exchange programmes offered at a UK overseas branch campus and, twinning, franchised and distance learning programmes offered at Malaysian private institutions. Having outlined our respective research, we now move on to discuss key commonalities and differences in our findings. Pseudonyms are used for individuals and the higher education institutions are anonymised.

Opportunities to obtain tertiary education

Malaysia

UK TNE offered our Malaysian and Hong Kong participants the opportunity to obtain tertiary education domestically, improving their chances of good employment in the home labour market where degrees are the 'safety net' (Grace, self-employed, distance learning undergraduate programme, Malaysia) to have to be competitive. This opportunity was not easily or possibly available to them in local public universities due to a mix of personal and institutional factors. For the Malaysian sample, the perception was that formal and informal practices of ethnicity-based admission in public universities did not favour ethnic minority applicants. Selection by ethnicity was formally implemented between 1971 and 2002, forming part of a larger state-endorsed affirmative action agenda to address inter-ethnic disparities especially between the Malay majority and the relatively affluent and sizeable Chinese minority (Joseph 2014). Continuing perceptions of an intake system which values ethnicity above merit and ability (Sin 2016) led the participants to question the quality and status of local public education. Adding to their concerns were commonly

known weaknesses of Malaysian public universities such as institutional emphasis on rote learning, rigid and insular curriculum, academic censorship limiting critical thinking, and low standards of English among the predominantly Malay academic community (Sin 2013, 2016). Fear of not being able to obtain a good quality education steered the Malaysian participants to TNE in the private sector where entry was determined more by academic performance and financial ability.

A UK TNE was believed to provide valuable cultural capital in the forms of knowledge, skills, dispositions and qualifications (Bourdieu 1984) that would ease entry into good 'professional' (Teik Lee, Executive, Twinning Programme) jobs. The Malaysian students and graduates were inclined to prefer local private sector and global employment especially in advanced developed countries. These are labour market arenas which most value embodied cultural capital linked to Western international education (Bourdieu 1984, 1997) such as high English proficiency, global orientation and outspoken confidence (Sin 2013, 2016). Key reasons for the participants' labour market preferences include higher salary, better meritocratic conditions for recruitment and advancement especially for ethnic minorities (relative to the local public sector which was perceived to favour the ethnic majority and graduates of local public universities), and better opportunities for professional and personal development. UK TNE served an instrumental purpose to the Malaysian participants who strategically planned to exchange their education-related cultural capital for positional advantage in appropriate employment spheres.

Although the valuation of their education was mainly instrumental, it was inextricably linked to intrinsic and self-transformative (Pyvis and Chapman 2007; Robertson, Hoare, and Harwood 2011) elements. The Malaysian participants believed that UK TNE helped them to develop 'open [and] independent' thinking (Imran, Business Information Technology undergraduate, franchised programme), confidence and appreciation of diversity. These forms of knowledge, skills and dispositions were valued for their inherent qualities, that is, on their own right, although the participants tended to see their value in relative terms. The following narrative illustrates the positional comparisons that the Malaysian participants made and the relative value they attached to their UK TNE:

In my opinion, students in private university more quality. More confident, able to think freely. If I study in public university, I'll have a lot of Malay friends. I study here, I have a lot of foreign friends ... public university, all the assignment, lecture they give in Malay. Here, we study all in English ... In public university, lecturer ask people to present in front of class and they all very shy, give to friend to present. Here is not. We want to present. (Imran, Business Information Technology undergraduate, franchised programme, Malaysia)

They perceived themselves to be not only more marketable in terms of private and global employability but also more engaged with their sense of self in terms of personal development and transformation. The value of a positional good can take an instrumental and intrinsic dimension (Halliday 2016). With regards to UK TNE, our participants valued it as the best viable route into tertiary education and the associated opportunities for instrumental and intrinsic pursuits.

Hong Kong

Data from the Hong Kong sample reveals divergent views on whether or not UK TNE offers the potential for significant occupational and status advancement. UK TNE was generally

considered a desirable advantage by participants who studied at postgraduate level while those who studied at undergraduate level saw it as a basic need which carried little currency or credibility. Rather than being a desirable positional good that would elevate their employment prospects and status, the vast majority of the ‘top-up’ degree students and graduates treated UK TNE as an absolute minimum in order to stand a chance of getting a decent job in Hong Kong. A top-up undergraduate programme was the last resort for them, having failed to acquire the necessary marks for acceptance into the more prestigious local programmes in public universities:

I applied [to] a few local universities but they all rejected me. Then I started to think about top-up degrees. (Adason Chan, graduated, UK ‘top-up’ degree, Hong Kong)

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. (Fiona Lee, graduated, UK ‘top-up’ degree, Hong Kong)

Nicholas Tse [graduated with a UK ‘top-up’ degree] explained that: ‘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.’ Upgrading the sub-degree qualification into a full UK undergraduate degree was a way for him and other participants to redeem their self-worth and feel a little more adequate relative to degree holders from local public universities.

Similar feelings of inferiority were unfortunately carried into their studies within UK TNE due to the lack of recognition given to their top-up degrees. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government does not recognise top-up degrees as on a par with ‘traditional’ full degrees in its own recruitment practices. Rather than building confidence in students and other stakeholders through effective quality assurance, it simply requires a statement that ‘[i]t is a matter of discretion for individual employers to recognise any qualification to which this course may lead’ to be printed on the advertisements of any TNE course (Leung and Waters 2013, 490; Waters and Leung 2013, 2014). In addition, the potential of the participants’ TNE to act as a positional good was undermined by the lack of recognition given to their qualifications from their families and wider Hong Kong society. Many of the interviewees were frustrated over the degraded value of their cultural capital as illustrated here:

My parents always think that only the local university programmes are good. They do not understand what top-up degrees are, no matter how many times I have explained to them. (Emily Yeung, student, full-time top-up degree programme, Hong Kong)

Some people in the society thought [they] were rubbish. It was just for those people cannot study well, and reduces the unemployment rate in Hong Kong. (David Kwok, graduate with a UK two-year bachelor degree, Hong Kong)

Contrasting these with the experiences of the Malaysian participants, it is clear that the positional rewards of UK TNE vary in degree across programmes and host contexts. This reflects a stratified distribution of cultural capital within transnational education and the unequal chances of acquiring and activating desired resources. Therefore, it does not suffice to argue, in the vein of positional good (Hirsch 1976) and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) concepts, that higher and more exclusive qualifications will instantly confer a position of dominance and competitive advantage in the labour market. The contextual reality is that transnational education is a diverse and hierarchically structured arena with diverse foreign education providers and programmes as well as varying opportunities for capital

accumulation and exchange. Accordingly, students and graduates in interaction with their social and institutional environment experience and attach finer gradations of positional value to their transnational education. This shapes their degrees of success in getting their degree-related cultural capital recognised, exchanged and rewarded.

UK TNE carried different meanings and value for interviewees who pursued postgraduate programmes in Hong Kong. They believed that their programmes helped to polish their CVs and hence raised their positional value in a competitive Hong Kong labour market (Waters and Leung 2016). Although their evaluation of their programmes was mixed, they were generally satisfied with the quality of the course content and opportunities to build professional and social networks during their studies. The following excerpt reflects this satisfaction which, on the one hand, surpassed the participant's expectations and, on the other, fell short of them:

Only in two to three subjects, the professors' teaching and our group discussions have deepened my knowledge. I expected higher level of knowledge to be taught ... I was a bit disappointed ... [But I am] pleasantly surprised [by the] diverse, interesting, dynamic [background of my classmates] we share strong bonding. (Michael Chan, student, part-time UK MBA course, Hong Kong)

Post-hoc rationalisation of their education choices might have occurred among some participants. For example, the unexpectedly tough academic standards in Jodie Yeung's (graduated, part-time MA course) programme convinced her of the credibility of her UK TNE which she believed was on par with education offered in the UK:

The course was exactly the same as the one offered in [UK HEI] ... the course was tougher than I had expected ... I was very happy about the programme ... I would recommend my friends to apply for it.

Satisfaction over the better than expected positional benefits that came with their programmes suggests that the postgraduate students and graduates might have been initially wary of the quality of UK TNE in Hong Kong. The lack of confidence and trust in UK TNE is, after all, prevalent in Hong Kong, as their undergraduate counterparts lamented.

The contrast in experiences between the Hong Kong participants with top-up education and those with postgraduate UK TNE, as well as with the Malaysian participants, is striking and instructive. While the narratives from the top-up degree students and graduates in Hong Kong were marked by academic underperformance, missed chances and limited choice, the TNE stories of the other groups who participated in full degree programmes reflected preference and more confident aspirations to learn, develop and be rewarded. This shows that the extent to which UK TNE is perceived to be – and can be – a positional good vary depending on the individual's programme of study. It illustrates the uneven recognition and acceptance of cultural capital within the differentiated landscape of transnational education, although qualifications may well be awarded by the same country provider and, in some cases, the same institution.

Uneven economic and symbolic exchange

A clear difference between the Hong Kong and Malaysian samples is the comparison research participants made of the symbolic power between UK TNE qualifications and local qualifications from domestic public universities. A UK education in Malaysia represented higher standards and status than education obtained at local public universities.

The opposite was the case for the Hong Kong participants who held higher regard for local public universities, although they also valued a good UK education. The reason behind the contrasting findings lies in the position(ing) of institutions and programmes within hierarchies of academic worth. The participants classified and ranked different types and sources of tertiary education on the basis of tangible and subjective characteristics such as institutional prestige, selectivity and recognition. Within the Hong Kong context, it is apparent why the participants believed that local programmes at public universities offered higher positional opportunities than UK TNE programmes, especially at undergraduate level. The reasons are strong institutional performance in prominent world university rankings (QS 2016; THE 2016), tougher entry standards and better recognition locally. In contrast, UK TNE offered the exact same benefits to the Malaysian participants while the local public universities could not.

While several Malaysian participants objectively evaluated the standard and prestige of their UK TNE using various global and national rankings, knowledge of these was generally vague and limited among the interviewees. Much of the participants' preference for UK TNE stemmed from habitus (Bourdieu 1984), an ingrained structure of perceptions which naturalises the superiority and distinctiveness of certain standards, in this case, British standards. The participants' evaluations of study destinations, modes of international education, academic institutions and subject areas were mostly impressionistic. What mattered most to them was that they would or had already obtained a UK tertiary qualification. Cultural capital in its institutionalised form (Bourdieu 1997) was believed to be enough to position them advantageously for highly paid jobs and status:

I think when the qualification is from UK, I think it is good enough. It'll automatically convince the organization. (Nadia, Applied Psychology and Management undergraduate, offshore programme, Malaysia)

People rarely question you when you have a degree from UK ... question you in terms of English language, whether you can do the work or not. I think the barrier of entry [to good jobs] would be lower ... I think people will look, again, perception wise, anytime you're a UK graduate, people will look a bit more highly of you. (Shamsul, business coach, undergraduate twinning programme, Malaysia)

This mirrors the understanding that Bailey and Ingimundardottir's (2015) Malaysian participants had of the symbolic power of a UK TNE qualification. The qualification was valued foremost by their participants as a signifier of quality and inter-cultural skills which did not require substantiation to yield immediate recognition in the local labour market. The symbolic power of British standards is a legacy of colonialism which continues to capture the aspirations and imagination of Malaysians some six decades since the country's independence (Koh 2017; Sin 2009, 2013).

The Hong Kong study did not specifically explore manifestations of a colonial legacy in TNE choices. The valuation of UK TNE among the Hong Kong participants involved less cultural-emotional attachment to the UK, although they still expected elements of UK- and internationalness in their studies. As will be discussed in the following section, contextual constraints in the home region made these expectations difficult to materialise.

Reduced benefits and opportunities

UK TNE was, to some degree, the lesser good for Malaysian and Hong Kong participants, as opportunities to accumulate embodied cultural and social capital traditionally associated with international education were constrained by institutional, programme and place-specific limitations. The majority of the Malaysian interviewees would have liked to study wholly in the UK if personal, financial and family circumstances permitted. They believed that UK education abroad offered the ‘dream’ (Salehah, Economics undergraduate twinning programme) ticket to intellectual and personal growth and discovery, a ‘whole package’ (Simrit, Trainer, Franchised undergraduate programme) combining education with travel pursuits. Malaysians’ perceptions of the superior value of UK education abroad relative to the transnational mode are explored in detail in Sin (2013). In that they were unable to study entirely overseas, a UK TNE was viewed by the Malaysian participants as less enriching and authentic although still valued for instrumental, intrinsic and personal reasons. The preference to study entirely in the UK did not feature strongly in the Hong Kong interviews, perhaps due to the participants’ acceptance of their inferior academic and economic capabilities, and their perception of non-local programmes as a ‘second chance’ (Waters and Leung 2012) at tertiary education instead of the first. Nevertheless, UK TNE was perceived to offer valuable cultural and social capital, albeit reduced, which positioned them at once privileged and disadvantaged.

A relatively short programme duration, minimal contact with UK staff, limited facilities and social activities and the non-availability of an overseas study component limited the Hong Kong participants’ accumulation of cultural and social capital. Disappointment and grievance, as expressed in the following quote, were heard often in the interviews:

A lecturer [from the UK] stayed for four days and left, and then the next lecturer came. And then we would not see them anymore. It would be meaningless to get closer to the professors. (Hanson Lee, full-time top-up degree programme, Hong Kong)

Interviewer: Did you want to be involved in a ‘university school life’, more involved in the student activities ... etc.?

Yes, sure, because I think it is a life time experience, and may not have second chance to study in university. I think my top-up joint degree program is lack of that. This is a disadvantage. And for experiencing school life, I wanted to have some ‘school life’ atmosphere and feelings, but we studied in [the central business district, rather than on university campus], which is a commercial area, so we were just like going to work when [we] go to school. Apart from that, I hoped to have opportunity to exchange overseas, but we didn’t have, we had very little international exposure. (George Law, graduated, full-time top-up degree programme, Hong Kong)

This suggests a wide gap between standard marketing promises and the realities of TNE delivery. The Hong Kong participants’ experiences hardly reflect participation in ‘quality’ education that offers the necessary ‘international experience’ (British Council 2014b, 8–9) and ‘support’ (British Council 2014b, 51) for personal and professional development. Institutionalised cultural capital (in the form of certification) was not enough for the participants: they wanted to embody cultural and social capital which could be used and/or exchanged for positional and self-transformative benefits. It was as important to them as it was to the Malaysian participants that TNE should fulfil the dual functions of screening and development (Halliday 2016). The screening function should signal to employers the superior positions and capacities of its students and graduates, and the development function should provide the resources for intellectual and personal growth for their own sake.

The Hong Kong participants were not alone in their experiences; Malaysian interviewees who studied in franchised programmes expressed relatively similar dissatisfaction with their education. These are students and graduates of smaller, local institutions which typically partner with lower ranked UK universities that maximise revenue through wide commercialisation of their TNE programmes. The participants' perceived weaknesses of their programmes include absence of or close to no contact with UK lecturers from the partner university, lack of highly experienced staff, lack of campus space, facilities and social activities, and limited international exposure. These excerpts illustrate some of the issues faced by the Malaysian participants:

We actually have videos from overseas and we were like, 'Wow, all these people are like write their own books' ... they actually do more research and they are actually more specialized in the field, rather than general whereas for local, I think it's because of limitations ... One teacher is like able to teach two different subjects but they're not really specialised in those particular fields. (Kor Ming, Accounting and Finance undergraduate, franchised programme, Malaysia)

I want to see a big lab. This one all is a small lab. And lots of classes. I don't like too many people in a class. (Rosli, Business Computing undergraduate, franchised programme, Malaysia)

The environment and the surroundings we have are still local, so the culture that we see is still very local. I think we're still very closed. We're still in our own comfort zone. We have not exposed to something outside. (Lian Hui, SAP consultant, franchised undergraduate programme, Malaysia)

Again, the discrepancies between rhetoric and reality within UK TNE are evident. The Malaysian participants who studied in franchised programmes particularly felt distanced and detached from a UK and international study experience. This reflects and shapes their perceptions of the lesser value of UK transnational education, positional or otherwise.

Across our samples, we found that satisfaction over the value of UK TNE was strongest among Malaysian students and graduates who engaged in offshore programmes at a UK branch campus. This is attributed to reasons such as direct learning and contact with a well-recognised UK university, a self-contained campus with good academic and recreational facilities, and an international mix of students and staff:

It's UK degree. It's not just the affiliate, it's the [name of UK branch campus] in Malaysia ... I think it's the people. Students, even the lecturers ... there are many many nationalities that I got to mix around with that I would not necessarily get if I were in another university in Malaysia. (Nadia, Applied Psychology and Management undergraduate, offshore programme, Malaysia)

I came, I saw the campus and I liked it compared to other campuses. It seemed very proper ... I really wanted the whole university life ... You know, when the campus is on its own. It's not like this building where I go and study. It's proper where the students live here and we have recreation. (Elaine, Business, Economics and Management undergraduate, offshore with exchange, Malaysia)

The Malaysian participants believed that a comprehensive international campus fostered a stronger sense of community and connectedness. This in turn facilitated spontaneous interaction and exchange of resources and information such as learning and career strategies, and cultural-linguistic norms. This aspect of learning and opportunity for cultural and social capital enhancement is notably absent for TNE programmes in Hong Kong, as noted in Waters and Leung (2013). The added appeal of UK offshore programmes in Malaysia laid in the availability of study exchange opportunities which enabled individuals with good academic results to study at the parent university in the UK for one to two academic

semesters. The opportunity to study in the UK was also available to participants in twinning programmes as well as in franchised programmes with a mobility component.

Overall, the Hong Kong and Malaysian participants were under no illusion that UK TNE has a value equivalent to international education traditionally and entirely obtained overseas. This is not to suggest that their education is instantaneously inferior, as studying in the home setting can enhance locally derived knowledge and experiences which are useful for inter-personal relations within local employment (Sin 2013) and identity formation in the home context (Robertson, Hoare, and Harwood 2011). The disadvantage remained, however, in that UK TNE did not, and in some cases, could not, deliver adequate forms and amounts of cultural and social capital which the participants associated with a ‘proper’ (Elaine) education. This impacted on their opportunities for wider employment, recognition and personal development.

Fulfilling local interests, obligations and commitments

Beyond relative positioning and distinction, one important advantage of TNE is that it enables individuals to manage various personal interests, obligations and commitments which are tied to local networks. Our participants’ instrumental and intrinsic motivations for studying on a UK TNE programme intersected with personal ones. The proximity of their institution allowed them to manage their studies around place-specific responsibilities which involved family and, in some cases, part-time work. This is consistent with findings from Chapman and Pyvis’ research (2006) which found that the juggling of roles, especially as a full-time student and active member of a family, was routine for Australian TNE students in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore. The Malaysian participants generally had immediate familial obligations which they could not physically separate from and had to fulfil on a daily basis. For example, UK TNE enabled Hee Seng to perform filial duties expected and perceived to be expected from him:

First, it was the cost issue. Second, my mum didn’t really like it for me to go overseas and study ... maybe I was too young, so she rather I study local and she take care of me. According to her, if I go overseas, I will suffer. At that time, I was quite dependable because first of all, I am a vegetarian. So, it’s hard for me to find food once in a while. So maybe I can’t cope, can’t do my own housework ... if I have a chance, I’ll still go to the UK. I’ll not do the three years there because my parents are here. I have to be with my parents. (Hee Seng, factory manager, offshore undergraduate programme, Malaysia)

In that studying domestically allowed our participants physically to attend to everyday familial and individual matters, UK TNE brought personal benefits which were not valued in relative terms. In the wider context of higher education, Brooks (2012) has highlighted the ways in which universities in the UK and Denmark supported the need of student-parents to balance their studies with caring for their child(ren). Classic positional and cultural capital approaches to education (Bourdieu 1984; Hirsch 1976) have little to say about these personal aspects of value which are neither positional nor exclusionary.

The Hong Kong participants expressed less often their feelings of familial obligations as a factor for opting for a UK TNE programme. Their preference to study locally in Hong Kong’s prestigious public universities if the choice were available to them, suggests that the immediacy of obtaining recognised cultural capital far outweighed considerations of familial obligations. Nonetheless, some of the informants referred to the lower cost of TNE

degrees compared to studying overseas – hence imposing a smaller burden on their own or their families' finances. For working students, pursuing a TNE degree also allowed them – crucially – to keep their jobs:

This is just a short cut for getting recognition from an overseas university in Hong Kong. For example, if you choose to study there in [UK city X] for this programme a year, it costs you more than 100,000. In Hong Kong, I just use around half that amount, 60,000 to 70,000 for two years. You can also study while keeping ... your own job ... Family would not support you any longer because you have already graduated for a long time. If you suddenly leave everything here in Hong Kong and go for study, not every family would choose to support their children like this. Studying the joint program is actually a short-cut. There are both gains and losses. (Florence Wong, two-year professional postgraduate degree, Hong Kong)

While UK TNE was perceived to bring reduced personal privileges (Waters and Leung 2012), such as relatively limited opportunities for globally oriented cultural and social capital accumulation, it too provided additional personal privileges in terms of facilitating local needs and commitments. UK TNE is essentially a site of advantage and disadvantage where our Hong Kong and Malaysian participants experienced the complexities, discrepancies and contradictions which surrounded the value and valuation of their education.

Conclusion

This article has explored the differential value of UK TNE by comparing and contrasting the lived experiences of students and graduates in Hong Kong and Malaysia, two key host markets for the UK. Using a comparative method which incorporates analyses from two separate but thematically related studies, we argued that the value of UK TNE is not fixed and uniform across programmes and host contexts. Although the key underlying motivation of pursuing UK TNE was consistent for all participants, which was to improve their relative economic and status positions, we highlighted how this instrumental pursuit often intersected with intrinsic and personal interests such as personal development, and familial and local commitments.

Transnational education has brought new practices, strategies and outcomes of differentiation and exclusion, which complicate the role of higher education in facilitating positional advantage and distinction. Hence, there is a need to be mindful of contemporary changes and developments brought by transnational education when drawing from traditional positional (Hirsch 1976) and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) approaches to higher education. Our key contribution involves taking this into account as we contextualised some of the newer education set-ups within higher education, capturing how the rise of transnational education has diversified and shifted individual understandings of value in higher education. We offered important insights into the experiences and outcomes of inequitable cultural and social capital opportunities within UK TNE on the everyday level, exposing the disjuncture between marketing rhetoric and lived TNE reality. Another contribution is that we highlighted some of the personal and non-pecuniary factors which impact on the perceived value of UK TNE and which are intertwined with, but go beyond, positional and exclusionary motivations. In doing so, we provided more visibility and voice to diverse UK TNE students and graduates, and their varying perceptions and experiences of value in a complex and differentiated TNE landscape.

It has to be pointed out that transnational education has the potential to be a public or social good (Marginson 2011), whether or not intended to be such by those who pursue it. The individual act of undertaking transnational education for private and positional benefits could bring collective benefits such as capacity development and social transformation which impact on the wellbeing of the wider public. The extent to which TNE students and graduates value and are able to employ their education-related capital for the purposes of societal contribution and service to the community is an interesting topic for future research.

As TNE continues to expand, it is important to understand in detail the finer and subtle differences in how TNE is experienced and valued across contexts amidst the commonality of TNE as a locally based and lower cost alternative to traditional international education. Our findings, which show that a UK TNE is more highly valued in Malaysia than in Hong Kong, call for greater quality assurance of different TNE programmes across host contexts. This especially applies to TNE programmes offered at local partner institutions (seen in some of our participants), which typically lack significant access and exposure to foreign-linked cultural and social capital that would constitute a wider, deeper, transformative international study experience. There has to be open and honest acknowledgement in the TNE industry that different TNE provisions have their relative limitations alongside their strengths. While it may not serve its immediate economic interests to make the limitations known to students and other stakeholders, the credibility of UK TNE is likely to be affected in the long run if the sector shies away from socially responsible marketing and provision. Appealing, generic promises concerning quality, employability and similarity have little substance whilst what are – in some cases – wide discrepancies between marketing promises and reality in TNE are not adequately addressed. Some promises relating to measurables, such as the cost of the degree relative to others, or the exact nature of the degree certificate graduates will receive, are more easily met by TNE providers and partners than are others (such as those relating to the quality of the experience students will be receiving). The more challenging assurances involve the provision of resources and opportunities which are comparable to experiences and outcomes in the UK (Healey 2016). Fulfilling these assurances requires policies and practices in the delivery of UK TNE to be sensitive and responsive towards contextual specificities (Karram 2014), not to mention their sense of responsibility towards – and care for – their TNE students. Importantly, universities and TNE partners have to develop deeper understanding of their role in advancing and limiting opportunities for private, public and positional benefits. Transnational education is essentially a diverse landscape with different institutions and programmes, which, interacting with the complexities of host contexts, bring varying gradients of worth and possibility to the individual and society. A comparative approach such as ours is useful to uncover why and how transnational education is valorised and experienced differently across place and space.

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