

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Mobility in 'Immobility': Re-Imagination of Prospective Chinese Students' International Education Mobility During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract:

Covid-19 triggered the decision on an unforeseen 'gap year' for students globally, including prospective Chinese international students. Although taking a 'gap year' as part of the education track might be popular amongst and familiar with students in some countries (e.g. the UK), it is likely to be an unconventional and disorienting situation in, for example, Chinese students' traditional education trajectories. This mix-method study focuses on UK's prospective Chinese master students who have, reluctantly, suspended their studying abroad during the Covid-19 pandemic, and explores how these students strategically reimagine their international education mobility. Although almost all students in the study had suffered intensified uncertainty and stress, yet, findings highlight that such transition was also positively noted as a critical 'cooling-off period' and a meaningful 'trial and error opportunity'. UK universities are further suggested to better understand and support prospective international students who may face more unpredictable challenges during and post the COVID-19.

Paper:

International student mobility has been increasingly affected by politics, culture, economics, natural disasters, and public health. The limited possibility of traditional in-person learning and increased worries about personal health and safety made many vulnerable groups confront greater challenges, among which international students are not exceptional. The Covid-19 pandemic caused unpredicted disruption to the international students' movement, which has challenged the primary host and sending countries, including the UK and China. In particular, it has triggered the decision on an unforeseen 'gap year' for students globally, including prospective Chinese international students. Although taking a 'gap year' as part of the education track might be popular amongst and familiar with students in some countries (e.g. the UK), it is likely to be an unconventional and disorienting situation in, for example, Chinese students' traditional education trajectories. This unanticipated 'gap year' is likely to crucially impact not only prospective Chinese international students' international education mobility but also their life circle. This study focuses on UK's prospective Chinese master students who have, reluctantly, suspended their studying abroad during the Covid-19 pandemic. It attempts to investigate the forced shift between international students' mobility and 'immobility' (Chan, 2017), and explores how these students strategically reimagine their overseas education in the future.

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of these prospective Chinese international students' international education 'immobility' in this extraordinary situation, two research questions were formulated for the present study: 1) What are the factors that impact international students' choice of suspension during the pandemic? and 2) How does the 'immobility' influence students' mobility and life circle? In responding to these research questions, a mixed-method longitudinal approach was adopted. In stage one, this study utilised semi-structured in-depth interviews, and metaphors as a creative research technique to facilitate participants' holistic reflections on their experiences in this distinct period. Then in stage two, survey and semi-structured individual interviews were used together for a broader exploration of this particular cohort. Drawing upon Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1994; Gill, 2007), this study provides an in-depth investigation of how UK's prospective Chinese Master's students cope with the challenges in this unanticipated 'gap year' and experience necessary changes through navigating possibilities and impossibilities in the education transition. It also offers insights from these prospective Chinese Master's students' experiences and reflections in their deferral of overseas degree education.

Findings suggest that almost all these prospective Chinese international students in the study had suffered intensified uncertainty and stress, extreme concern on 'wasting of time' is likely to be one of the top triggers for them. Conflict with parents and strong worries about career plans and personal development has also been raised in this study. However, although this has been an unsurprisingly difficult situation for this cohort, such transition was also positively noted as a critical 'cooling-off period' away from intensive and sequential formal education pathways, as well as a meaningful 'trial and error opportunity' where students have the space for navigating their professional potentiality and life alternatives. This study offers meaningful insights on this particular cohort, highlighting the transformative learning from life experiences and human agency (resilience and responsibility) to meet their needs in terms of personal, social and psychological adjustment in the transformative situation. Besides the influence of the health crisis, findings highlight the geopolitical situations, such as the somewhat tense relations between mainland China and the US, Australia, or Hong Kong has confined students' overseas education destination to the UK as the "choice of no choice". Regardless of parents' pressure or suggestions in pursuing master's degrees in Chinese universities as a safe alternative, students in this study demonstrate their strong agency and careful considerations on their education destination choices (e.g. academic climate, education quality, intercultural experience, etc.). From the aspect of prospective UK universities, findings highlight the strong need from these prospective students for more efficient and effective contact and updates on their suspended education. Apart from those enrolled international students, UK universities are further suggested to better understand and support prospective international students who may face more unpredictable and even overwhelming challenges during and post the COVID-19. This untraditional invulnerable international education 'immobility' requires more effective responses and proper infrastructure from prospective UK universities, which could better facilitate this cohort of students to better prepare their international education mobility in the future.

References: Chan, T. W. (2017). Social mobility and the well-being of individuals. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 69(1), 183-206.

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