

Transition to Employment: A Critical Analysis of the Role of Post-Study Work Visa Policies on International Graduates

Yinuo Wang

London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

This research paper focuses on the international graduates' study-to-work transitional experience. It employs the education-migration nexus as a framework, semi-structured interviews as methodology and thematic analysis to investigate the influence of the post-study work scheme (PSW) on their decision-making, professional expectations, and challenges and opportunities they experience in the British labour market. The findings demonstrate that even if the graduate schemes grant legal rights and serve as 'entry tickets' for overseas students, their short-term and temporary natures and potential uncertainties frequently limit their occupational strategies and development. The interview findings also show that bias, inequality, and discrimination are led by policy mechanisms. These highlight the complexities of international graduates' transition periods and are expected to contribute to policy recommendations for relevant stakeholders to engage in collaborative governance and future improvement.

Full paper

Background

Between 2003 and 2018, countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and other major international study destinations progressively introduced graduate schemes, which permit foreign learners to remain in the host country for a specified period following the completion of their studies, primarily to seek employment or gain work experience (Joshi & Ziguas, 2023). Such social policy constructs an education-migration nexus; Robertson (2013) argues that it is more like a 'political pendulum' that governments change schemes in response to market share and high-skilled workforce demands and the local citizens' attitudes towards immigrants. For example, due to the public sentiment of discontent and state security concerns regarding foreigners abusing the migration system, the United Kingdom discontinued the graduate pathway in 2012, but reintroduced it recently, aiming

to enhance higher education's global attraction, reputation and social influence (Ahmed & Davies, 2024; GOV.UK, 2019).

Methodology

This study uses an interpretivist paradigm to investigate how the UK British Graduate Route shapes international students' transition from university to employment. It focuses on personal experiences rather than general trends, aiming to understand how individuals make decisions, what they expect, and what challenges and opportunities they face due to the visa policy. The method of data collection was semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The target group was overseas graduates from UK universities, divided into three categories: (1) those planning to apply for the visa, (2) those who successfully obtained a visa, and (3) those who chose not to apply and return to their home countries. All participants were expected to have a basic understanding of the visa information and to be considering its use. Based on the purposive sampling, eight participants were recruited through social media platforms, e.g., Reddit and Xiaohongshu.

The following table involves the demographic information of 8 participants:

Interviewee	Degree level	Hold PSW visa or not	Others
A (Male)	Bachelor in Public Policy	No	Eligible and ready to apply
B (Female)	Master in Sociology	No	Eligible and ready to apply
C (Male)	Master in Engineering	No	Eligible but dropped application
D (Female)	Bachelor in Math	No	Eligible but dropped application
E (Female)	Bachelor in Marketing	Yes	N/A
F (Female)	Master in Business	Yes	N/A
G (Female)	Master in Translation	Yes	N/A
H (Female)	Master's in management	Yes	N/A

Findings

First, several participants view the graduate visa as an opportunity to gain overseas working experience and enhance their employability. Participants like A and H expressed a desire to stay in the UK temporarily to improve their skills and professional background, which is consistent with Trevena's (2019) view that the graduate route offers access to job networks and accumulates social and cultural capital.

The visa is also seen as a stepping stone towards skilled migration and permanent residency. Participants like F and B hope to use the PSW visa as a platform to transfer to Tier 2 skilled worker status with more stability. However, the temporary nature of the visa presents challenges. Participants G and H reported difficulties in securing jobs or struggling

with low-skilled and part-time roles, and reflected a broader trend of underemployment and exploitation among these graduates.

Meanwhile, discrimination and inequality in the British labour market further hinder job prospects. Participants E and G described subtle and overt biases in hiring practices. Risk-averse employers were concerned that investment in training for overseas graduates was wasted and often prioritised local candidates, perceiving the latter as having higher productivity.

Furthermore, these barriers and the mismatch between policy objectives and realities have been shown to lead to anxiety, stress, and a lack of social belonging, affecting participants' career strategies and aspirations and overall well-being in the host country. Coupled with the high costs and inadequate social welfare associated with the post-study work visa, more graduates have been pushed to return to their home countries, as illustrated by the experiences of Participants C and D.

"The application and healthcare fees for the PSW visa are expensive, and immigration policies continue to change. Almost all employers have indicated they will not offer support or sponsorship once my student or PSW visa expires. These factors have left me feeling discouraged and played a direct role in my decision to return to China after graduation."
(Participant D)

Despite these challenges, Participant H provided a new perspective that criticises the former viewpoints and argues that most international students are relatively young and have limited or no full-time work experience upon completing their studies, which makes it less advantageous for them to make effective use of the graduate visa. This may be a key factor negatively influencing their career development in the UK. Participant B also shared similar thoughts and believed that the graduate route actually brings flexibility and allows them to explore diverse opportunities in their chosen fields or discover new career paths, thereby strengthening career prospects globally. As a result, they gradually develop into purposive agents, exercise self-direction by envisioning future trajectories and make informed decisions and actions (Tran et al., 2022).