Mobility as ‘becoming’ : a Bourdieuian analysis of the factors shaping international student mobility

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Abstract

This paper unpacks the meanings and implications of the mobility of international students in vocational education - an under-researched group in the field of international education. This four-year study found transnational mobility is regarded as a resourceful vehicle to help international students ‘become’ the kind of person they want to. The paper justifies the value of re-conceptualising student mobility as a process of ‘becoming’. Mobility as ‘becoming’ encompasses students’ aspirations for educational, social, personal and professional development. Theorising mobility as ‘becoming’ captures international students’ lived realities and has the potential to facilitate the re-imagining of international student mobility with new outlooks. Mobility as ‘becoming’ is construed through the manners in which overseas education facilitates not only the redistribution of social class capital but importantly the pursuit of the integrated forms of profession-advanced capital and migration-oriented capital. This research suggests the importance to draw on the integrated and transformative nature of Bourdieu’s forms of capital in understanding the logics and practice of the social field - international student mobility.

Introduction

International student mobility has become an important phenomenon in tertiary education over the past few decades. There are over 4.3 million international students currently pursuing tertiary education outside their national border (OECD, 2013). Despite the growing focus of institutions around the world on internationalisation of education and increasing research interests in international education, the ‘mobility’ of international students remains a largely under-theorised concept. This paper is an attempt to theorise this concept and provides insights into the mobility of an often-neglected group within the field of international education – international students in vocational education and training. It draws on a four-year study that involves semi-structured interviews with international students, teachers and international program directors from 25 vocational education institutions in Australia.

Using Bourdieu’s notions of field, capital and habitus to interpret empirical data, this research found that international student mobility has extended beyond its traditional focus on educational purposes to reflect students’ divergent aspirations to transform their life possibilities. Mobility should therefore be viewed in relation to international students’ investment in the self as subjects in international education and in what they regard as the acquired values of international education. The paper contributes the new vocabulary to conceptualise students’ aspirations to engage in cross-border mobility. These aspirations emerging from the empirical data are termed as the transformative profession-based perspective, instrumental-pragmatic perspective and the migration-oriented perspective. The profession-based perspective underscores the aspiration of cross-border mobility as being related to facilitating career transformation or career advancement. Within the instrumental-pragmatic perspective, the objective to study abroad is centred around instrumentalism and the quest for
better material life or becoming the successful successor of family business. In terms of the migration-oriented perspective, overseas study is driven by the aspiration to secure migration in the host country. The interview material of this research shows that these perspectives can be complementary to each other rather than mutually exclusive and an individual student can embrace multiple aspirations of transnational mobility. Moreover, these perspectives illustrate a new mobility trend in the globalised world which interrogates different educational, cultural, social, and personal meanings of mobility. Yet at the same time, they share a common pattern as they are tied to a way of becoming and future aspirations that international students attach to their desire to engage in transnational mobility.

This paper suggests international students imagine their spatial movement as producing new conditions and possibilities for the transformation of themselves and identity re-construction in divergent manners. Transnational mobility is regarded as a resourceful vehicle to help them ‘become’ the kind of person, professional or citizen that they aspire to. Marginson (2014) coins the notion of international education as self-formation and accordingly positions international students as self-forming agents who have the capability to pursue the course of life that they regard as being worth living. Seeing international student mobility as a self-formation process, this paper draws on interview material to illustrate how students’ ‘becoming’ is mediated through mobility. The notion of mobility as becoming has been explored in the literature on space and mobility as a practice in daily life (Creswell, 2006; De Certeau, 1993). Mobility encompasses fluidity, flow and dynamism, thereby being confined to the process of becoming ‘at the expense of the already achieved, the stable and static’ (Creswell, 2006:47). However, whilst the concept of mobility as ‘becoming’ offers advanced theoretical grounding, it is rarely explicitly considered and understood in the field of international education. Drawing on both theoretical discussions and empirical base, this paper suggests that mobility as ‘becoming’ reflects the reshaping of international students through their aspirations for engaging in geographical, educational, cultural and ‘life’ border-crossing. This re-conceptualisation appears to imagine more for mobility than simply the movement across national borders for educational purposes.

International student mobility

There are two sectors of tertiary education in Australia – higher education (HE) and vocational education and training (VET). The latest figure from Australian Education International (AEI, 2014) shows that HE is the leading sector in the number of international students with 241,617 enrolments in September, 2014. The VET sector ranks second in volume of international students with 132,011 enrolments. Nevertheless, most of research on student mobility in Australia and around the world has concentrated largely on international students in higher education. This research attempts to address this paucity by examining the nature of mobility of international students in vocational education.

Brooks and Waters (2011) have made significant contributions to this research field by drawing on the bodies of knowledge from related and broader fields, including social theories (e.g. geographical and migration studies) and educational studies, to theorise the ‘mobility’ of international students. These authors call for the need to draw on theories ‘within and beyound’ the field of geography to conceptualise
mobility geographically (2011:128). They regard international students as those who ‘move for educational purposes and in doing so create new networks and circuit of identity’ (2011:9). Other researchers argue for the importance to re-think international student mobility from the lens of international study since this conceptual relocation enables us to see student mobility as the process of international knowledge construction and circulation (Madge et al., 2014). While the consideration of international student mobility in terms of academic development has been a traditional focus, growing research in Australia’s international education has indicated that non-academic considerations such as migration, enhancement of international work experience and social transformation have emerged to be important factors shaping international student mobility (Birrell & Perry, 2009, Bass, 2006; Tran & Nyland, 2011). This suggests a critical need to understand the actual meanings international students and other actors involved in international education ascribe to mobility in different contexts and re-conceptualise ‘mobility’ in line with these new developments.

Mobility in international education is described to be linked to a vehicle of (re)producing social class advantage and thus social inequality (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Holloway et al., 2012; Matthews & Sihdu, 2005; Waters, 2005). A proportion of international students come from more privileged groups in their home country who draw on their family’s economic assets to secure more advantage in the domestic as well as international labour markets through their engagement in mobility and accordingly their credentials earned abroad. Thus, middle-class social re-reproduction occurs when families use Western-based educational qualifications – an institutionalised form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to create a positional advantage for their children with regards to employment opportunities (Holloway et al., 2012; Waters, 2005), which in turn help to reinforce the class advantage of this group. Echoing Holloway et al. (2012), Kim’s (2011) research shows that Korean students are driven to overseas study by the desire to position themselves successfully within the local Korean competition as well as in the global job marketplace. Interestingly, this study reveals that at the same time ‘Korean students see US higher education as a means of liberation that resolves some of the inner contradictions of Korean higher education, including gender discrimination, a degree caste system, and an authoritarian learning culture’ (p.109).

The growing wealth and size of the middle class in a number of primary source countries including China, India and Vietnam is one of the important drivers of international student mobility. Pursuing international education can be a solution for children of middle-class families who fail to secure tertiary places in their home countries due to the gap between demand and supply in tertiary education (Cao & Tran, 2014). In Vietnam, for example, the number of students who registered for kỳ thi đại học [the national higher education entrance examination] reached 1.8 million in 2012 (VnExpress, 2012). Yet, chỉ tiêu tuyển sinh [the admission quota] was around 560,000 (Đào Tạ Net, 2012). Given the gap between supply and demand in higher education in Asian countries, getting a place in high profile universities as many middle-class families dream for their children has become increasingly difficult. In China and Vietnam, many middle-class families draw on their financial capital to protect their children from the risk of failure in the highly competitive educational system in their home country. The family’s financial capital is used to make up for children’s inability to acquire the ‘desired’ institutionalised capital in their home
country through providing their children the opportunity to gain foreign qualifications, which will in turn help them reproduce their social status.

Research by Pyvis and Chapman (2007) identifies ‘positional’ and ‘transformative’ investments as two main factors influencing students’ decision to undertake international education. Positional motivation appears to be pragmatic and instrumental. It refers to the way international education is seen as a means to enable student to achieve higher social status or employment opportunity as previously discussed which help them create a competitive advantage for their life. Students with transformative investment, nevertheless, see international education as providing them with the opportunity to enrich their cultural, professional and personal outlook (Pyvis & Chapman, 2007). Robertson and colleagues (2011) advance Pyvis and Chapman’s research by examining the intertwined positional and transformative impetus and outcomes of acquiring international education including migration opportunities, career advancement, personal enrichment and new outlooks on life and work (p.695). These authors thus argue that while the concepts of ‘positional’ and ‘transformative’ investments are useful in examining international student mobility, they should not be seen as ‘a binary to categorise the intentions or motivations of students’ (p.687).

Australian migration policy that facilitates the transition from international student to skilled migrant attaches another meaning to mobility. Authors such as Bass (2006) and Birrell and Perry (2009), for example, claim that the increase in international student enrolments in Australia, especially in the vocational education sector, has resulted from the advantage Australia’s skilled migration program assign to international students who complete their studies in certain areas on the occupation in demand list of the migration ministry. Within this context, many international students have been viewed as ‘migration hunters’ or ‘PR hunters’ and colleges viewed as ‘migration factories’ or ‘PR factories’. Tran and Nyland’s (2011) study highlights four variations of the relationship between migration and student mobility. The first category includes students who are motivated to undertake international education by dual objectives to secure migration and acquire the skills associated with their chosen occupation, the second one regards migration as a ‘second chance opportunity’, the third sees migration as the sole ultimate objective of overseas study and the fourth has lost the intention to migrate that they initially had (ibid, p.17). These different studies indicate the importance to gain further sociological understandings of how student mobility is perceived.

Bourdieu’s work and international student mobility

To analyse the nature of international student mobility, this article draws upon Bourdieu’s (1990, 1998) theory of social practice, particularly his ‘thinking tools’ – field, capital and habitus. Central to Bourdieu’s theory is the concept of social field or space. According to Bourdieu (1990), society is constructed by different and sometimes contesting social fields characterised by their particular ‘logics of practices’. Taking on Bourdieu’s notion of field, this research conceptualises international education and student mobility in vocational education as being anchored in the intersections of multiple fields including institutional practices, policy

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1 PR is the abbreviation of permanent residency commonly used in Australia
field related to the commercialisation of vocational education and the federal government’s policies on skilled migration and international education.

With regards to the policy field, international education in Australia has shifted from internationalisation as a social aid process to a commercialisation process shaped by the neoliberal ideology. This move was marked by the introduction of ‘Overseas Student Policy’ in 1985 (Meiras, 2004). The changing nature of internationalisation in Australia was driven by the growing dependence of Australian institutions on international students’ tuition fees, which occurs in parallel with the government funding cuts. Historically the vocational education sector was not a significant player in the international education field. Yet, vocational education was the fastest growing sector in the number of international student enrolments in Australia between 2005 and 2009. It currently ranks second behind the university sector by volume of international students (AEI, 2014).

In Bourdieu’s term, Australian international education is shaped by the artefacts of different fields, amongst which the federal government’s migration policy is an important social field that constitutes the distinct logics of international education. As noted above, the significant expansion of international students in Australian vocational education between 2005 and 2009 is assumed to be driven by the advantage Australia’s general skilled migration scheme accords international student graduates in a range of occupations including areas of ‘Food, Hospitality and Personal Services’ (Birrell & Perry, 2009). During this period, the migration-education nexus was regarded as a win-win policy by the government in both addressing the nation’s labour shortages and promoting Australia as a destination for international students. Some authors maintain that the only key driver for many VET students was to obtain the desired migration points while the quality of education is of marginal importance (Baas, 2006; Birrell & Perry, 2009). In 2010, the Australian government amended the General Skilled Migration Scheme through the introduction of independent testing of graduates to assess whether they have the required skills. This restricts the likelihood of VET graduates to secure permanent residency.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s ideas, this research construes student mobility as a product of the interplay between different social, cultural and economic structures governing the field of international education and is interrogated with different forms of capital students possess as well as aspire to acquire. A social field is characterised by the species of capitals accumulated of resources, traits, behaviours, titles, skills and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986). An individual’s accumulated capital derives from ‘the value systems associated with particular fields’ (Clark & Zukas, 2013, p.213). Bourdieu proposed three fundamental forms of capital: the economic, the social and the cultural. In the Bourdieuan scheme, economic capital refers to the access to material and financial resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Social capital is linked to the social assets arising from social memberships, networks and relationships. Cultural capital is understood as the skills, knowledge, titles and sensibilities people possess. The concept of cultural capital encompasses the embodied (including language competence and style), the institutionalised (e.g. educational qualifications) and the objectified (including books and artwork) (Bourdieu, 1986). In this research, economic capital is understood as the financial resource that international students and their family possess and invest in overseas education. Forms of cultural capital refer to international students’ language
competence, foreign credentials, work experience and sensibilities. Social capital relates to the family’s social status and positional advantage international students access.

Existing research in social science has been criticised to mainly concentrate on singular forms of capital rather than the combined and integrated social, economic and cultural capitals (Wood, 2013). Wood thus highlights the need to draw on the integrated nature of Bourdieu’s species of capital in understanding the logic and practice of a social field. This research responds to Wood’s call by considering the combined and integrated capitals international students mobilise and attempt to accumulate through the mobility of themselves as subjects in international education as well as the movements of capitals, objects and knowledge between fields. A new stream of research indicates teachers, students, individuals and groups not only passively receive and reproduce capital but also engage in building, enhancing and transforming kinds of capital in different ways (Mills, 2008; Wood, 2013). Forms of capital may operate differently and transform within and between fields. For example, economic capital can operate differently between the two fields closely associated with international education – labour market and migration. Economic capital associated with overseas education is often conversed to positional and professional investment in the field of labour market while in the education-migration field, economic capital is often translated to migration chance through the means of overseas education. The study reported in this paper considers the conditions and the ways in which forms of capital are mobilised and reshaped across fields.

Habitus, as conceptualised by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), is a set of schemes, generated by particular conditions that shape the ways individuals think and act (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Both family and schooling have impact on individual habitus. In Bourdieu’s term, if there is a harmony between international students’ habitus and the Australian institutional environment, they can be described as ‘fish in water’. Otherwise, if there is a mismatch between international students’ habitus and their new Australian institutions, the students often struggle to develop a feel for the rules of the game. According to Dumenden and English (2012), habitus ‘functions, at the level of the individual agent, as the organising principle of the agent’s action’ (p.1080). Thus, as social actors, international students’ agency and their way of becoming are mediated through their habitus. Furthermore, international students’ habitus, conditioned by their previous schooling experiences, and possible habitus restructuring, enabled by their transnational mobility, are interconnected with the dynamic nature of their ‘becoming’ process. The discussion of data in this paper will indicate how international students’ positional and transformative investments as well as their becoming are mediated through their habitus.

**Research Methodology**

This paper is based on a four-year study funded by the Australian Research Council through the Discovery scheme. This research investigates the motives underpinning international students’ investment in Australian vocational education, their learning experiences and teachers’ adaptation of pedagogic work in teaching this cohort. The data that form the basis of this paper were from semi-structured interviews with 105 international students between 2009 and 2011.
International student participants were identified with the help of vocational education institutions from three main states of Australia: New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD) and Victoria (VIC). The researcher requested international student support coordinators and international program directors from 25 colleges to circulate an invitation to take part in the study to international students at their colleges. The face to face interviews which lasted between 30 to 60 minutes were digitally recorded and transcribed. With consent from the participants, the researcher took part in various student activities and visited them at workplaces, she also participated in their workshops and practice and theory classes. Participation in and observation of these activities enabled the researcher to have deeper insights into the multiple dimensions of international students’ experiences in Australia, some of which may otherwise be invisible through formal interviews. This paper focuses primarily on the semi-structured interview data. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, their names and colleges are kept anonymous.

Most of the student participants lack the typical forms of cultural capital associated with international students in English speaking countries including English language proficiency and knowledge and familiarity with the academic and social context in the host country. However, many of them have already had experience of the labour market. Their engagement in international education accompanied by the acquisition of foreign credentials is a strategic response to domestic barriers to career progression. Overseas education is to enable them to become more advanced in their profession and enhance their future social and economic positioning. This sometimes happens alongside any desire to make a ‘better’ life for themselves and in some cases family members either through career and social advancement upon return to home countries or migration.

The students’ national origins and courses are summarised in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nation of origin</th>
<th>Number of interviewees</th>
<th>VET course</th>
<th>Number of interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>South Asia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Food and hospitality</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Management &amp; commerce</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Building &amp; carpentry</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Northeast Asia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Information technology</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Hairdressing</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Community welfare work</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Automotive</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Southeast Asia and the Pacific</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Malaysia, Philippine, Thailand)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritius</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Europe and the UK</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Profession-based perspective: Mobility as ‘becoming’ more advanced in their profession

The previous section discusses how international student mobility should be viewed as a socially embedded practice shaped by associated concepts of social field, habitus and capital held by individual students and different actors. International students are social beings who are capable to mobilise their economic and cultural capitals to enhance their imagined professional positioning and accordingly their future social positioning. In this sense, they are regarded as agents with a complex and mobile social history, multiple values and the capacity to ‘organise’ and ‘reorganise’ a sense of place and value in the social world (Arkoudis & Love, 2008). Many students in this study are able to draw on their social and economic capitals to transform and create other forms of capital through the acquisition of the Australian qualification. The following participants illustrate occupation-related future aspirations as the key driver for their overseas education:

After being in the industry for years I learned that I lack of management skills. That's why I am coming here for Diploma of Hospitality. So I really can define the term or if I have employees, how can I deal with my colleagues and employer and supplier? How can I manage them to be in one group? That's why I want to sharpen my skill. (Thai, Hospitality Management, NSW)

Trúc: Actually I just want to develop my skill and knowledge and then I will come back my country because it has more chance for me to develop my career.

Mỹ: Why do you think so?

Trúc: Simple because I was born in Vietnam. I’m Vietnamese. I know how the way the Vietnamese, how the ways the economy develops and which way we can operate our business… If I return to Vietnam after I get the international qualification and I can apply straight away to the high point because I got experience, I got qualified and I can train people. I can be a trainer, not a trainee. If I get the PR here [in Australia], I apply for a job, I’ll still be a trainee in a sandwich bar or coffee shop. (Vietnamese, Hospitality Management, VIC)

I have some working experience in China... and when I was working I found out that accounting knowledge is very useful to whichever department you work... so I chose the accounting course in Australia. In China, English is very important nowadays because a lot of multicultural companies will come to Beijing or Shanghai and their headquarters there so if you are very good at English, it is kind of a chance… So the best way to study language is to come to the country where they speak English (Chinese, Accounting, NSW)

The above excerpts reveal that the student participants see mobility and international education as providing them the opportunity to enrich their professional outlook and gain positional advantage in the local or international labour market. A foreign qualification is a marker of distinction (Bourdieu, 1986) in the labour market. In other
words, the possession of a foreign qualification can make international students
distinct in a competitive labour market (Holloway et al., 2012; Waters, 2005). These
students articulate on their desire to enhance the skills and knowledge needed for the
advancement and transformation of their chosen profession. Therefore both
‘positional’ and ‘transformative’ factors (Pyvis & Chapman, 2007) seem imperative
in shaping the students’ decision to undertake overseas education. This research
supports Robertson et al.’s (2011) argument that positional and transformative
motivations can be seen as being combined and interrelated factors underpinning
individuals’ decision to pursue international education rather than being seen as a
‘binary’ to classify their impetus.

The students convert the social, cultural and economic capitals to which they have
access into foreign qualifications. This supports their pursuit of other forms of capital
including knowledge and skills as the embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and
professional and social (re)positioning as combined social and cultural capitals. Thus
mobility has become the cradle for international students’ process of capital
mobilisation and conversion into positional, economic and social advantages.
Mobility is closely linked to the positional possibilities for international students
seeking distinction in the workforce as well as in the society. Mobility should
therefore been seen as a process of ‘becoming’ as it represents a means for
international students to realise their aspiration to become more advanced in their
profession and enhance their future social and economic positioning. The overseas
credential and the attributes they acquire through their engagement in geographical,
cultural, intellectual and linguistic move associated with overseas study are the
products of both their investment in the self and their exercising of their own agency.
Like all persons, some international student subjects exercise stronger agency than
others (Marginson, 2014) and their self-formation also depends on the external
conditions that nurture or contradict their habitus.

Another student explicitly conveys how both profession-based perspective and
instrumental-pragmatic perspective shape his decision to undertake overseas
education:

The main purpose is because I did a diploma in construction in India so I want to
continue my profession in my life so that I can earn a lot of money in my future and get
more knowledge about this profession. So I want to establish myself in this particular
profession. (Indian, Building, VIC)

This student explicitly mentions how mobility and overseas education can help him
secure both career advancement and economic advantage in the society. In this regard,
his privileged access to valued capitals has been materialised into combined and
integrated forms of cultural and economic capitals (Wood, 2013). Engaging in
educational and spatial mobility has enabled him to do so. His objective to study
abroad is centred around instrumentalism and he is making a connection between
overseas education, the quest for employment advancement and material life. The
student thus aims to transform his life chance professionally and materially through
mobility. Middle-class in Asian countries have more privileged access to the
opportunity to engage in mobility and overseas education thanks to their economic
capital. Mobility and overseas education can in turn be converted into the social,
cultural and economic forms of capital they wish to acquire. This shows how social
class reproduction occurs through mobility.
Dreaming large: Mobility as ‘becoming’ the designer of their own professional life

The process of being and becoming has been regarded as fundamental to professional identity development. In the field of education, professional identity is viewed to be shaped and reshaped through individuals’ experiences and the kinds of professionals they want to become (Walkington, 2005; Wenger, 1998). The process of ‘becoming’ is paralleled with individuals’ evolving perspectives (Walkington, 2005), their imagining of the future life chances, their awareness of the ‘possibles’ and particularly their dynamic interaction with the broader world shaping professional practices. In the following excerpts, the respondents articulate how mobility and international education can be seen as a resourceful vehicle to help them ‘become’ the kind of ‘person’ and ‘professional’ in the field that they want to:

I need to get a Masters [as his parents expect] but the thing that I want to do is cooking. That’s why I decided to do this course instead of a Masters… In Thailand many students finish the Masters of Marketing course and it’s hard to find a job… If I did the Master, when I get back to Thailand, I can just be an employee somewhere. But if I study cookery I think I can run my own business. (Thai, Cookery, NSW)

Firstly I love to cook. And I want to be a chef in Australia. Then I want to make my experience from the restaurant and want to go back to Korea and I want to open my own restaurant. (Korean, Cookery, NSW)

Because I finish in Economy Bachelor in Vietnam so now I want to have more experience in customer service. That's why I want to do diploma….Yeah, because if I want to run business by myself I want to get the higher position and I must to have a lot of knowledge about customer service skills (Vietnamese, Hospitality Management, VIC)

Based on analysing the qualitative data on international student trend, some researchers have made a sweeping generalisation that international students are motivated to invest in a vocational course in Australia solely as a stepping stone for migration and they are not genuinely interested in their chosen course of study (Birrell & Perry, 2009; Birrell et al; 2009). These authors maintain that returnees who work as a cook in developing countries potentially get low pay, which led them to the conclusion that Asian international students’ impetus to study vocational education in Australia is to gain migration. Yet, the empirical data from interviews with a number of students in this study shows that this assumption can be challenged. The above excerpts reveal students’ ‘large’ dream to become the owner of their business. They draw on mobility and international education as a resourceful means to accumulate the relevant professional skills and knowledge and importantly to advance their positional advantage. Thus the notion of international education as self-formation (Marginson, 2014) is confined to not only investment in economic attributes but importantly human capital and positionality. However, there might be a tension between education as positionality and education as economic investment. Education as positionality does not always guarantee a return in the economic realm and vice versa. These two capitals could be seen as heterogeneous in this regard.
The Thai student in the above quote points out an important issue in the current labour market in many Asian countries. He argues that investment in a VET course can bring better return than a HE course due to the high unemployment rate of university graduates in his country and the growing chance to run business in the trade area. This participant’s observation is supported by the World Bank report (2012) which establishes that one of the critical problems facing East Asian countries is the disconnection between the education system and the labour market, with the paradox of high unemployment rate among university graduates and unfilled positions in trades. Yet, despite this paradox, the main obstacle to vocational education choice seems to be associated with parents’ attitudes towards a vocational credentials or the social stigma associated with the image of vocational education and trades in many countries (Cao & Tran, 2014; Kingston, 2008). Based on a study with employers and parents in both developed and developing countries, Kingston (2008) found that many parents do not appear to support their children’s pursuit of vocational education, instead an academic route is more favoured.

The interview excerpts reveal that as subjects in international education international students invest in transforming the self professionally and socially. The students draw upon the cultural and financial capitals to which they are given access to act as potential agents of transformation of their own professional trajectory and their future life. Through their engagement in mobility, they demonstrate the potential to not just passively re-produce the cultural and economic capitals they hold but transform these capitals through their imagining of securing positional advantages in their professional and social world. This reinforces what Mills (2008) refer to as the importance to consider the ‘transformative traits’ and the possibilities for the restructuring of students’ habitus through creatively resourcing and translating between a variety of capitals (p.79). This process of transformation is embedded in how students try to realise their plan to ‘become’ the kinds of ‘professional’ and ‘person’ they want to through resourcefully drawing upon mobility and the acquisition of foreign credentials. Mobility therefore entails the imagining and practice of ‘becoming’.

**Mobility as ‘becoming’ the successor of family business**

As discussed previously, a growing body of research has pointed out the positional possibilities that foreign qualifications can represent to international students who seek competitive advantage within the labour market (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Holloway et al., 2012). Yet, some students in this research articulate on a responsibility they feel towards their family and the group to which they belong that underscores their act of engaging in mobility and international education. Thus, the purposes of their investment in mobility are to some extent associated with their own family and class habitus.

I want to study this business course. After graduating my course I will go back to my country. My father is managing five companies so I have to do that. I have to manage them…Yes, my father is the CEO... so I have to be inheriting this CEO position.  
(Korean, Business, QLD)
Because I am going to become a chef. That's why I want to study patisserie… When I was in Vietnam I used to be an IT man. I came here to study patisserie because my uncle will open a bakery shop, that's why he ask me to study this one. (Vietnamese, Bakery, VIC)

These two students are from South Korea and Vietnam which are regarded as Confucian-based cultures. One went to Australia to study business after finishing high school in South Korea and the other completed their Bachelor's Degree in Vietnam and used to work in the IT field in his home country before moving to Australia to study a Diploma in patisserie. The students placed great value on their role as the successor of their family business. Fulfilling one’s filial piety is seen as one of the fundamental responsibilities of children in line with Confucian philosophy (Lee, 2011). One’s success in education is central to their filial piety and for many middle-class families in Confucian-heritaged countries, children’s accrual of overseas credentials is regarded as the marker of the family fame. In Bourdieu’s terms, individuals’ habitus is characterised by a system of schemes and rules of the class/group to which they belong. These students have privileged possession of the economic capital and social capital through their family financial and positional advantage in the society to help them not only acquire foreign qualifications but also to reinforce their habitus and reproduce their family’s social status. Mobility in this case facilitates the intergenerational transmission of social advantage and students’ investment in social status is mediated through habitus.

The students’ views echo Holloway et al.’s (2012) argument that students’ ability to ‘realise the value of their cultural capital is not only shaped within the labour market but also, crucially, within the family’ (p.2287). These students demonstrate both the profession-based perspective - their desire to develop skills and knowledge in their future field of employment and the instrumental-pragmatic perspective - to be the successor of their family business. These combined and integrated perspectives underscore their aspiration to engage in mobility and attain foreign qualifications.

**Gaining integrated capitals: migration and career advancement**

Mobility as ‘becoming’ has emerged markedly when international students reveal they turn to mobility as a means for not only acquiring skills and knowledge but also transforming their life through migration opportunity. The conceptualisation of mobility as ‘becoming’ facilitates consideration of student mobility in terms of both educational purposes and life transformation. In this regard, international students’ awareness of the capitals they accumulate, converse and enhance through their mobility is in direct relationship with their imagining of education as life rather than simply as study experience. This is in line with Robertson et al.’s (2011) statement that students acquired value not just from their study but more holistically from life engagement through international education (p.695). A proportion of students in this study explain:

My purpose is to become a pastry chef. And being a pastry chef allows you to stay in Australia if you get the points and everything. So to stay in Australia I do it. So that’s my purpose. (Mauritius, Hospitality Management, VIC)
My purpose is because Australia just asked for a skilled person to stay in the country and I would like to stay. So I used to work as a carpenter. It’s a little bit different but we also work with timber so it’s connected. And I was a little bit tired of the same thing, like working as a carpenter, so I went to another future to open my mind. (Brazilian, Carpentry, QLD)

For me it’s to facilitate a career change. I was working in property before this. So I came back to TAFE to learn IT skills and partly to get a foot in the door to get permanent residency in Australia. That were my two main reasons I suppose. (English, IT, NSW)

These students expressed the dual objectives underpinning their mobility and pursuit of study in Australia. The consideration to engage in mobility is shaped by not only the profession-based perspective but also migration-oriented perspective. They wish to use mobility as a means to facilitate career change, which can result in the accrual of and translations between cultural, financial and social capitals, but also to gain new citizenship, a form of ‘participatory’ capital (Wood, 2013). Thus, for these students, the key driver of their mobility moves beyond a desire to re-generate the profession-related resource which makes them stand out in their profession field (Holloway et al., 2012) to the accrual of new ‘participatory’ capital in the host country - migration. Therefore mobility is regarded by these international students as a form of enrichment and identity reconstruction for themselves. Mobility is the condition for students to realise their aspirations in both the professional and social fields and ‘add other cultural capital to their repertoires’ (Mills, 2008:85). The integrated capitals international students wish to accumulate characterise the logics and practice of student mobility within a social field - international education. The above excepts reflect how students as subjects in the field of international education have attempted to mediate and transform their life by mobilising and materialising their integrated capitals. Thus, mobility provides the condition for self-formation but it is students’ capacity to mediate and translate between forms of capital that enables actual self-formation to happen.

Discussing the factors shaping the cultural accumulation and the acquisition of Western qualifications of Chinese families, Ong (1999) mentioned many Chinese people ‘are not merely engaged in profit making; they are also acquiring a range of symbolic capitals that will facilitate their positioning, economic negotiation, and cultural acceptance in different geographical sites’ (pp. 18-19). Interestingly, this statement appears to most obviously apply to many UK students in this study. These international UK students intend to use mobility and overseas educational experience as a vehicle to accumulate several forms of symbolic capitals that enable them to acquire professional, cultural and spatial repositioning. When asked what motivated them to pursue their vocational education in Australia, these UK students explained:

Andrew: Basically to get a trade that I can use here and use it to immigrate as well and get a job.
Mỹ: Have you had any experience working in this field before?
Andrew: No, not really. Not back in England no.
Mỹ: Why are you interested in migrating to Australia?
Andrew: Yeah. I love it here, aye. I just came over and I loved it. So I wanted to stay. (English, Carpentry, QLD)
David: Basically, I’m married with three kids and the reason why we came over just for a better life for my kids and myself. So it’s cost me a lot of money to do so I am very serious about it and when I finish the course I’m going to stay… Basically, a better life for my kids, climate and work experience…

Mỹ: But your country is quite developed too?

David: It’s quite developed but it’s going through a big recession at the moment and it’s very, very doom and gloom at the moment compared to out here. (Irish, Cabinet making, QLD)

Henry: My partner’s family are here in Australia and she wanted to join them. But we had trouble like with other routes of gaining sort of access to the country. So, somebody told me that a family member had done the trade course in Australia and they managed to stay as a result of that trade course. So I looked through all the courses and saw one I liked which was this one and came over and decided to do it… I would love to migrate to Australia. (English, Carpentry, QLD).

The interview extracts depict a new phenomenon in the field of international education regarding the desire of international students from developed countries to migrate to Australia as the key driver of their overseas study. This phenomenon appears to challenge the stereotypical claim made by some scholars that international Asian students are ‘migration chasers’ because they are often from developing countries, thereby wishing to pursue a better life in Australia and as migration is the sole objective of their overseas education, the education received is of marginal significance to them (Baas, 2006; Birrell & Perry, 2009; Birrell et al., 2009). This study instead finds that using educational mobility to secure migration is individual’s life project shaped by one’s personal desire and circumstances regardless of one’s nationality.

This research echoes Waters’ statement that a range of complex social and economic factors “have made the ‘overseas education’ a particularly valued and desirable commodity” (2005:312). In the case of the UK students above, overseas education represents a valuable bridge for them to an end - securing migration to Australia. Waters’ (2005) study also found that Hong Kong families in Canada regard migration as the key to realise their educational objectives and thus the core strategy in the family ‘project of capital accumulation’ (p. 359). This research complements Waters’ study from a different angle by showing that migration - for the sake of improving the quality of life for the students themselves and in some cases, family members, plays a key part in driving overseas education for a group of international students from the UK.

Students mentioned the complexities around their investment in mobility and migration:

Before that I’d finished a post graduate course her in Australia. But that’s my main interest and what I would like to work in as a counsellor therapist. But I found that I won’t be able to work [as a therapist in Australia] if I was not a resident. And to become a resident you have to do a course that's on the Occupations In Demand list. Strangely enough a psychotherapist is not in demand but a welfare worker is according to the Victorian government. I would say that is the main reason why I am doing this course. (Indian, Community welfare, VIC)
The interview extract shows the complex logics of practice in the fields of international education, migration and Australian labour market in which international students operate. International student mobility as a social field can be a site of contestation (Bourdieu, 1986). The student revealed in the above excerpt her struggle to work through the conflicting logics of migration policy and the Australian employment market rules. She stated she would like to work as a therapist in Australia but in order to do so, she needs to gain permanent residency. Permanent residency is thus seen as a license to work in Australia. This view is also reinforced by many participants in this study and is supported by research done by Murray et al. (2012) which reveals that many programs offered by Australian companies give priority to domestic students and students with PR but exclude international students.

To get bonus points which are vital to her PR application, the student needs to study social welfare, an area in which she does not intend to work but is listed in the Occupation on Demand List. Therefore the course she is currently undertaking is regarded as a means for her to achieve the goal – permanent residency that in turn gives her the license to apply for employment in psychotherapy, the career she wishes to pursue in Australia. The student’s account indicates that the complex and disconcerted social structures around her mobility preclude her desire to access the participatory capital in her chosen profession. However, the student’s strategy to enrol in another course to give her advantage in acquiring migration also shows that she is not passively received the social and economic capital (Woods, 2013; Mills, 2008) given to her but actively and creatively seeks to translate and acquire participatory capital in her dreamt profession and society through her strategic investment in foreign qualifications. In other words, international education as a symbolic capital plays a key part in facilitating the acquisition of the desired career and citizenship as the manifestation of cultural, social and participatory capitals. International education as self-formation (Marginson, 2014) in this regard embraces citizenship acquisition and professional transformation.

In criticising the current practice of international students, Marginson (2014) points out the myth that all international students are wealthy and contends that a proportion of students who are currently pursuing overseas study are poor. This is in line with the findings of this study which reveal some students from less affluent family who cannot really afford overseas education by merely drawing on their family’s economic capital manage to sell their house or have loans from their local bank and relatives to secure overseas study. Many of these students imagine overseas qualifications and experiences as a means to help them secure migration in the host country and transform their social class. For the less financially privileged group, acquiring the cultural capital through transnational mobility is not the way they seek to re-produce their social class but to upscale their class status and gain economic capital in the country of migration. In other words, those students dream of acquiring the participatory capital in the host country as a way to help them overcome their financial and social disadvantages in their home country.
This paper highlights the differences in the nature, meanings and implications of transnational mobility perceived by international students. The study found that international student mobility in Australian vocational education appears to be driven by the transformative profession-based perspective, the instrumental-pragmatic perspective and the migration perspective. This research supports the importance to draw on the integrated and transformative nature of Bourdieu’s forms of capital in understanding the logics and practice of the social field - international student mobility.

Several distinctive contemporary trends in the global flow of international students are suggested by this research. It found that the aspiration for creating a positional advantage in the labour market through the possession of a foreign credential in vocational education rather than in higher education plays an increasingly important role in driving international student mobility in Australia. This trend responds to the growing demand for vocational skills and trades in the labour market in many Asian countries which parallels with the excess of HE graduates resulting in high unemployment rate amongst university graduates (World Bank, 2012). This phenomenon is referred to as ‘thừa thày thiếu thợ’ [surplus of masters, lack of skilled workers]. The study underlines a trend of students from the developed region including the UK and other European countries wishing to use overseas education as a stepping stone to migrate to Australia and at the same time a number of Asian students desiring to return and run business in their home country after their overseas study. The research thus suggests the meanings attached to transnational mobility and overseas education are shaped and reshaped by individuals’ personal desires and class habitus regardless of their nationality. It is students’ imaginaries of the varied symbolic processes attached with overseas education that underscore their engagement in transnational mobility. The findings indicate the salient role of family and class habitus in shaping their investment in overseas education and their becoming professionally and socially.

This paper explores the idea of mobility as ‘becoming’ as a theoretical concept to explain the dynamic and complex dimensions of international student mobility. Marginson (2014) proposed the concept of international education as self-formation which is confined to ‘investment in the self as human capital, the economic attributes, and credentials acquired in education, which change what a person can do’ (p.7). Marginson constructs the notion of international education not only as economic investment but importantly as personal, cultural, professional and positional transformation. This research advances Marginson’s thesis by providing the empirical base to conceptualise international students as self-forming agents who have the capability to pursue the course of life that they regard as being worth living and meaningful to them. Mobility as ‘becoming’ is construed through the manners in which overseas education facilitates not only the redistribution of social class capital but importantly the pursuit of the integrated forms of profession-advanced capital and migration-oriented capital. Theorising mobility as ‘becoming’ therefore reflects international students’ lived realities and has the potential to facilitate the re-imagining of the field of international student mobility with new and innovative outlooks.

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