

International Education and Lifetime Benefits: a Case Study

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Abstract—Through an individual case this empirical longitudinal study explores how the international education impacts on the career development of a Chinese scholar after his returning to work in China. It draws the conclusion that the UK higher education and going-abroad experience generate lifetime benefits for the recipient, thus playing a positive role in his career enhancement.

Keywords—international education; benefit; career development; longitudinal; impact

I. INTRODUCTION

Accompanying the globalization of economy and internationalization of higher education (HE), the number of Chinese students / visiting scholars going abroad to study has increased tremendously. In the recent decade, there is a new tendency that more and more Chinese return home to work. How has such an overseas educational experience affected the recipients' life trajectory? Has it enhanced their career development after the completion of their international education? This paper will make a case study of a former Chinese scholar's career development after the completion of his UK PhD degree by drawing on two in-depth interview data, thus revealing the benefits he has reaped from his study-abroad experience.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Education is empowering. Previous research has shown that education brings great benefits to its recipients. With a good education they tend to enjoy a good return on their investment: more opportunities, higher incomes, quicker promotions, improved prospects and better quality of life. Arkes' research has revealed that education correlates closely with employability. He argues that employers pay higher wages to more educated workers because the possession of qualifications signifies such unobservable attributes as drive, perseverance and other traits that employers associate with higher levels of performance and productivity [1]. The critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving and communication skills that UK HE highlights conform to what employers expect throughout the western world [2]. Purcell et al. argued that UK PhD programs are designed to develop students' research and analytic skills, project management skills, communication skills and the capacity to interpret and conduct rigorous evaluation of

evidence, and such skills are highly valued by employers [3]. HE develops both skills and creativity and the 'benefits for individuals are far-reaching' [4] and "the more educated are healthier; wealthier; and in some ways, wiser" [5].

Because a foreign degree indicates better English language proficiency, wider social networks, richer cultural knowledge and experience and such like, international education is greatly favored and respected by people in the global age. Orahood et al. found that 96% of the students who participated in a study-abroad program thought their international experience made a difference in their career plan [6]. The research of Italian graduates through the Erasmus Program by Pietro shows that an international educational experience may provide the individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (but not very disadvantaged) with a great opportunity to develop marketable skills covering intercultural competence, global awareness and foreign language skills [7]. Likewise, past research has proved the benefits of international education for Chinese people. Those who returned home to work after a successful completion of their overseas education play a significant role in the socialist construction of China [8]. According to Yee, multinational corporations vie for the Chinese scholars who have received international education and accumulated work experience overseas to return to work in China [9]. With more and more Chinese scholars / students coming back to China to work after their study abroad, this case study of *Young* will focus on how the international experience impacts on the recipient's career development and life trajectory.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

This research principally adopts a qualitative method, eliciting data from two in-depth semi-structured interviews, a longitudinal study in this sense. The first face-to-face interview was conducted while the author was completing her doctoral research in the UK in October 2003 and it lasted one hour and 20 minutes. The second follow-up in-depth interview was completed in May 2019 while the researcher is conducting a key provincial project on international education^①. It was through a WeChat video call and lasted 50 minutes. To obtain complementary and supplementary data for a comprehensive understanding of *Young's* educational experience in the UK and his career development in China, this research combines quantitative and qualitative data. To be more exact, the subject completed 13 'Closed-Questions' on Likert interval measurement scales for quantitative data along with the first

^①It is a "13th Five-Year Plan" Project of Education Science in Jiangxi Province in 2019, entitled "The Impact of Study-abroad Experience on Career Development".

individual interview. Such data collected covered the subject's family and academic backgrounds, professional titles and work experience before going to Britain, the length of stay, the academic degree and qualifications, change in work after completing his UK PhD. The second interview focused on his career trajectory and development since 2003 onwards. Both interviews were recorded, transferred, typed verbatim, translated and analyzed shortly afterwards.

Young, the subject in this case, completed his doctoral research in Britain and returned to work in China. He was born in the countryside in 1957 and grew up during the 'Cultural Revolution', which affected his primary and secondary education at that time. He had little social and cultural capital at home; neither of his parents had much education. The rural schools *Young* attended had limited resources. In fact, the five siblings at home diluted the limited household educational and social resources significantly [10]. After his father died at *Young*'s tender age, the mother worked laboriously to bring up all the children on her own and *Young* had to help support the family since a little boy. Before receiving Chinese HE, the subject worked as an apprentice carpenter in the village for two years. However, *Young* had accumulated quite good cultural capital in the form of an MSc following his first degree and a scholarship won for a British PhD before going abroad after the restoration of the national entrance examination in 1977.

When being interviewed for the first time, *Young* was a professor, PhD supervisor and research institute director in a "211 Project" university. In the meantime, he was running his own company by applying his research outcomes to new products. At a second interview, at a retirement age for common Chinese citizens, *Young* was headhunted to act as a full-time Dean to a big faculty in a '*minban*' (non-governmental) university, managing, researching and teaching. Meanwhile, he held a role of PhD supervisor in the previous university, teaching and researching as a normal professor, thus running between the two universities and cities. In the next part the author will employ both interview data to show how the going-abroad experience underpins *Young*'s subsequent career development in China.

IV. STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE AND LIFETIME BENEFITS: A CASE STUDY

A. The First Interview

Past research has shown that students with rich economic and cultural capital at home attend schools with rich cultural and social resources, leading in turn to good academic achievements and a bright future [11-13]. In striking contrast, working-class students are deemed failures, suffer from 'spoilt identity' [14] and they experience high 'drop-out' rates, thus university being 'an impossible dream' and 'a potentially flawed experience' for these students [15]. However, in the case of *Young*, three points are worth discussion. Firstly, despite his poor family background, *Young* managed to enter a university for HE at a second trial after the historic restoration of national entrance examinations despite his two-year apprenticeship as a carpenter in the countryside. Secondly, *Young* successfully won a Sino-British Friendship Scholarship to complete his PhD in the UK. Finally, he had a quick promotion and good career development after being awarded a doctorate degree and returning home to

work. Just as past research has shown: 'education is a ladder for clever working class boys to escape their class of origin' [16], *Young*'s educational trajectory and successful career exemplify the importance of education, especially that of international education.

Cultural capital acquired at home is important in encouraging good academic performance. However, *Young* did not benefit from this initial advantage, being the only one among five siblings to take HE. In terms of social capital, which affects the creation of human capital in future generations, *Young* was not well situated either. It is completely through his personal efforts that he managed to change his life trajectory. When interviewed, he remarked the three substantial events in life as a trilogy, which completely transformed his fate:

Based on the importance, the biggest transition is entering university, the second biggest one is going abroad, and the third is the postgraduate program.

Young took his entry into university as the most important transition in life because he rose to the '*cadre*' rank from a rural youth. Without such an opportunity, he would in all likelihood have remained in the countryside throughout his lifetime. *Young* viewed taking UK HE as the second important transition, through which he acquired new knowledge, experience, a new way of thinking, deeper insights and a broader vision. He strongly believes in the special meaning of foreign education in China because of the '*different approach coming back from the west*'.

Young originally planned to remain abroad, but ultimately decided to return to work in China. The main reason he gave was that he wanted to apply his newly acquired knowledge in a practical setting. He linked the difference between working in China and Britain to being a boss and an apprentice, convinced that the Chinese environment was more favorable for his long-term career development, a belief shared by the other past students whom the author interviewed for her doctoral research at that time.

'I'm the boss here, and I recruit people to work for me ... If the foreign boss recruits you as a post-doctoral student, the fund is to complete the project, so you can do nothing but that.'

Young was somewhat regretful for the missed opportunity to be rated as an 'Associate Professor' while completing his PhD in Britain, but he was promoted in the same year when he returned to China after a five-year study abroad. Four years later, in 2001 he progressed to a professorship via the approach of '*po ge*', ahead of schedule. For his research, oil companies and environmental protection organizations frequently approached him, so *Young* was in a dilemma when interviewed: remaining to teach and research in the university or leaving to join the business world full time. From a humble rural background, *Young* has risen to become a professor rich in cultural capital and with numerous career opportunities.

B. The Second Interview

The second follow-up interview illustrates that *Young* has been reaping lifetime benefits from his international education and experience. As shown above, *Young* was promoted to Professor one year ahead of time and he progressed to PhD supervisor two years after his return to China. In 2005 *Young* was headhunted to be the Academic Leader and Chief Professor in C University, with funds provided for him to start up scientific research, fees for resettlement in another city and other welfares. *Young* was quickly promoted to be Dean of the School of Mechanical Engineering and he also acted as the Director in other Departments on some occasions. In fact, he remained as the Dean between 2005 and 2016, during which period he played a significant part in management, research and teaching in the new university. For some years, he not only held the role of Dean in two big faculties (Mechanical Engineering and Urban Rail Transit) but also was appointed as the Party Secretary, who took even greater responsibilities in management and leadership. When the faculty applied for the eligibility of running a PhD program in mechanical and electrical discipline, *Young's* knowledge, research, expertise and other credentials and qualifications played a pivotal role, thus revealing great contributions he made in the application process.

In 2017 when normal Chinese citizens would retire, *Young* was headhunted again to be Dean of the School of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering in a 'minban' university. He started this role as part-time but switched to full-time after retirement from the Dean in C University, where he currently is concentrated on teaching, researching and supervising doctoral students.

When asked to compare the current jobs with the previous one that he held at the first interview, *Young* remarked with pride 'getting better and better and all has to do with international education'. In his own words, he has got titles and important posts of various types and many honors as well, and he also published CSI papers and had inventions and patents. *Young* attributed all these achievements and benefits to the UK education he received and the going-abroad experience, which formed his global vision and cultivated his new way of thinking. He particularly accentuated the 'knowledge and technology' which he acquired from his UK doctoral research. As *Young* commented, such technology is very widely applied nationwide even today. *Young* added that he subsequently had quite many opportunities to visit other countries including the USA, Finland, Sweden, Ireland and so on to discuss about Sino-foreign collaborative programs in his role, cost covered by the universities. He also took advantage of the alumni networks in Britain. All these activities boosted his international experience, leading to the lifetime benefits *Young* is enjoying.

As Dean at his current role in the 'minban' university, *Young* is developing international collaborations for his school and university. At the time of interview, his school had got international collaborative programs with Germany and Ukraine. *Young* proudly talked about his achievements in the university, including the large increase of postgraduate pass rate from 1.5% to 6.7% resulting from his focusing on the teaching quality as well as staff development and student management. He bears in mind that 'one learns while he/she

teaches', taking advantage of what he has learned and accumulated abroad and applying all into the practical management and teaching. Different from the three transitions he detailed in the first interview, *Young* highlighted that going-abroad to receive UK HE is the transition in his career development, the transforming point in his course.

Young originally returned to China because his research was very useful to society, having immediate applications in industry, and he ran his own company for about four years. In his reflections, he was successful in technology but management, marketing and selling required improvements. Feeling exhausted, he sold his share to his partners and returned to the education sector again where he fitted better and played a distinguished academic and strong leadership role by strategic planning and implementation, leading, designing and delivering teaching programs, controlling academic quality, taking charge of staff development, collaboration and outreach. *Young* also suffered from the reverse 'culture shock' upon his initial return home. At the second interview, he explained by commenting that he treated interpersonal relationships in a simple way at that time, calling a spade a spade. However, once he took the role of Dean, everything fell into place. *Young* thinks it is easier for people in a leading role to handle human relationships as the subordinates have to obey whereas a teacher cannot have too strong individuality.

When interviewed, *Young* summarized and underlined the benefits he gained from the international experience in two aspects: 1. knowledge and technology, which he acquired during his doctoral research in the UK, and 2. new managerial concepts, new ways of thinking, global vision, front-edge research and teaching, which leads him to be a good leader, an advanced researcher, a qualified professor, or a prominent academic.

The quantitative data of 'Closed Questions' elicited from the first interview consists with *Young's* statements. While he rated the quality of his education in China '3.5', he rated his UK education quality '4.5' on a five-point scale, believing the overall education quality in Britain is '5' (China, '4'). He thinks the education he received from Great Britain is very important for his subsequent career, rating it '4.5'. *Young* holds that the going-abroad experience makes him more knowledgeable about the world and changes his values and beliefs, giving both '5' points.

V. CONCLUSION

Against the background of globalization of economy and internationalization of HE, a fast increasing number of Chinese students / scholars are going abroad for education. Over the recent decade, more and more Chinese tend to return home to work. How has the going-abroad experience affected the recipients' career development and life trajectory? This empirical longitudinal study explores how the international education impacts on the career development of *Young*, an individual Chinese scholar, after he returned to work in China. Two in-depth interviews were conducted and qualitative data were collected through 'Closed-Questions', which improved the reliability and validity of the research. It concludes that the UK HE and going-abroad experience produce lifetime benefits for

the recipient, thus playing a positive role in *Young's* career enhancement.

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