Transnational Higher Education Strategies into and out of Singapore: Commodification and Consecration

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Abstract

This article addresses transnational higher education strategies both to and from Singapore. It does so by focusing on outbound educational mobility from Singapore to the UK and inbound educational mobility from Vietnam to Singapore. Since the turn of the century, Singapore has pursued the agenda of developing itself as a regional hub for higher education, aspiring to be a Global Schoolhouse. Yet, while the number of international students grows in local universities, Singapore's academically brightest do not necessarily take advantage of higher educational opportunities within the shores of the city-state, with many traveling to universities overseas through a form of sponsored mobility. Using two case studies, I trace two logics of commodification and consecration as observed through the processes whereby individuals and institutions devise transnational higher education strategies into and out of Singapore. The first case study draws on interviews conducted with Singaporean undergraduates at Oxbridge while the second case focuses on Vietnamese students at two Singaporean universities. Together, the analysis from these cases uncovers the value for these Southeast Asian students in studying abroad and distinguishes between different types of routes that exist: one where students choose their own educational plans and another where students are chosen for a prestigious educational and occupational pathway. With increasing participation in mass higher education taking place across the region, the article outlines, through the site of Singapore, strategies of transnationalism employed by both individuals and institutions as a means of social differentiation.

KEYWORDS: Transnational higher education, Southeast Asia, Singapore, education markets, scholarships

INTRODUCTION

Singapore serves as an appropriate site to examine student mobility in Southeast Asia. In 2002, the country signalled its interest in developing as a regional hub of higher education when the Economic Review Committee recommended that Singapore capture more of the global higher education market by positioning itself as a "Global Schoolhouse" (Economic Review Committee 2003). Almost a decade later, foreign students constituted a fifth of the local universities' enrolment, compared to about a tenth in the late 1990s (Ng 2011). Yet, as Singapore

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markets itself as a hub for students in the region, its own, particularly the academically brightest do not necessarily partake of higher educational opportunities within the shores of the city-state. Rather, a proportion of Singaporean students make sojourns to universities overseas every year, with many doing so through a form of sponsored mobility[1] (Ye and Nylander 2015). As a Global Schoolhouse aspirant, Singapore is not just a receiver of international students; it is also a sender of Singaporean students to higher education institutions elsewhere.

The central research question that this article seeks to answer is: what drives the formulation of different transnational higher education strategies to and from Singapore? Adopting a sociological approach to this analysis, two particular logics of student mobility that feature prominently are uncovered and explored in the following case studies of student mobility. On the one hand, state agencies and educational institutions in Singapore have tended towards positioning the country as an educational hub, "an 'ideas-exchange', a confluence of people and idea streams, an incubator for inspiration" (Teo 2000). In proposing the Global Schoolhouse initiative, the intent was for the initiative to lead to Singapore capturing a bigger slice of the US $2.2 trillion world education market (Economic Review Committee 2003). From this side of the picture, higher education in Singapore, which has been impacted by transnationalisation policy reforms in recent decades (Mok 2011), could be regarded as commodified, made attractive by institutional and state agents to aspiring students of higher education, particularly those from within the region. Even though the number of students who travel to Singapore exceed the numbers that travel out for an overseas education, the composition of the latter group is interesting once scrutinised. For example, Singapore has been a large source of international undergraduates at the University Oxford, what is considered by the University itself as "a remarkable achievement for a city-state with the world's 115th largest population" (University of Oxford 2013)[2]. Sizeable Singaporean student communities are also found in other Russell Group universities in Britain as well as the Ivy League colleges in the US, many on public and private scholarships. From this side of the coin, it appears that the Singaporean education and scholarship system, with its competitive and rigorous streaming and sorting procedures, also prepares and consecrates students for entry into the highest echelons of global higher education.

This article will begin with an overview of student mobility flows out of and into Singapore, focusing specifically on two particular and interesting transnational pathways: 1) Singapore to the UK, and 2) Vietnam to Singapore. It then focuses on the methodological and theoretical approaches adopted in this analysis. Using the ideal typology of 'consecration' and 'commodification', the crux of

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[1]Ralph Turner (1960) characterises sponsored mobility as one which favours a controlled selection process where the elite (or their agents) are seen to be best qualified to judge merit and choose individuals for elite status.
[2]http://www.ox.ac.uk/international/oxford_around_the_globe/asia_south_east/singapore_people.html.

the article resides in the sections to follow which present and analyze the empirical data.[3] The article concludes with a discussion on two logics that guide Southeast Asian student mobility and the underlying social processes of valuation.

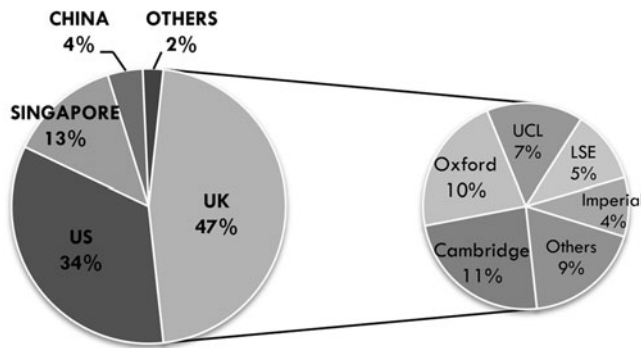## STUDENT MOBILITY OUT OF SINGAPORE: SINGAPORE TO UK

The early selection and grooming of the academically strongest into the ruling elite has been a hallmark of the Singapore government's 'talent management' strategy. A cog in this well-oiled machinery is the practice of awarding high-prestige scholarships that enables young Singaporeans to venture abroad to the best institutions in the world for higher education. In 1951, a governmental statutory board, the Public Service Commission (PSC), was established with the purpose of recruiting 'talent' for the civil service through the device of disbursing attractive government scholarships. The agency seeks top performers from every cohort's pool of 'A'-Levels or International Baccalaureate (IB) exam-takers. Tuition fees and living expenses for a high-quality university education are provided. In exchange, these students are obliged to work for the public service for five to six years upon graduation. Known locally as 'scholars', they are promised rewarding careers in the elite Administrative Service and may be fast-tracked into leadership positions within the administrative rungs of the state.

An examination of the destinations where PSC government scholars attend higher education over a decade (2002–2011) reveals that the most popular destination has been the United Kingdom. Forty-seven per cent of government scholars have studied in the UK over this period, while only 13 per cent remained in Singapore for their higher education. Additionally, a sizeable proportion of the 270 Singaporean government scholars who studied in the UK went to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Figure 1). The Singapore-to-UK educational pathway, and in particular these two universities, thus offer an interesting case to study transnational higher education strategies.

STUDENT MOBILITY INTO SINGAPORE: VIETNAM TO SINGAPORE

As a section of Singapore's youth moves overseas for higher education opportunities found in elite institutions, young people from around the world, including the Southeast Asian region, are moving to Singapore as they seek out tertiary education possibilities. According to 2010 data from the UNESCO Institute for

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[3]Here, I refer to Max Weber's notion of the "ideal type" as a conceptual tool. Ideal types, for Weber, are mental constructs "for the scrutiny and systematic characterization of individual concrete patterns which are significant in their uniqueness" (Weber 1949: 99). 'Ideal' does not refer to perfect things or evaluations of any sort, but stresses the construction of certain elements of reality into a logically precise conception, for analytical purposes (Gerth and Mills 2009: 59).

Figure 1. Singapore Public Service Commission scholars' university destinations in past decade (2002–2011). (Source: Author's own compilation from PSC data[4] (N = 580)).

Statistics, Singapore had the highest inbound student mobility rate out of all the Southeast Asian countries. Mobile students studying in the country made up almost 23 per cent of the total tertiary[5] enrolment (Figure 2). In Singaporean public universities alone, according to its Ministry of Education, the overall proportion of international students was 16 per cent in 2013. Certain disciplines host a higher number of students from overseas. For example, in Computing, Science, and Engineering courses that same year, 26 per cent of the student population was made up of international students.

Vietnamese students form one group in this international student population in Singapore[6]. Together with many of their counterparts who have left their home country in search of higher education opportunities elsewhere, they have spurred a sort of student exodus, which according to Welch (2010) has resulted in a worrying brain drain for the country. UNESCO Institute for Statistics data shows that close to 48,000 Vietnamese students went abroad for tertiary education in 2010, and a publication by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training reveals that in 2011 there were 7,000 Vietnamese students studying in Singapore (Dan Tri International 2012).

A big factor for this increase over this period could be attributed to demand for seats in higher education in Vietnam outstripping supply (Nguyen 2013). In 2011, 1.2 million candidates took the university entrance exams but Vietnamese universities had seats for less than half of these exam-takers (US Commercial Service 2012). For students who obtain a place within the Vietnamese universities, teaching and research quality issues seemed to be of concern. Nguyen and

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[4]The database was gathered out of information retrieved, in December 2012, from the website (www.psc.gov.sg) of the governmental agency responsible for disbursing government scholarships.
[5]Includes local public universities, private universities, and other types of tertiary educational institutions like the Academy of Fine Arts, etc.
[6]Note that there is no official data from Singapore which includes a breakdown of the number of international students in Singapore by country of origin.
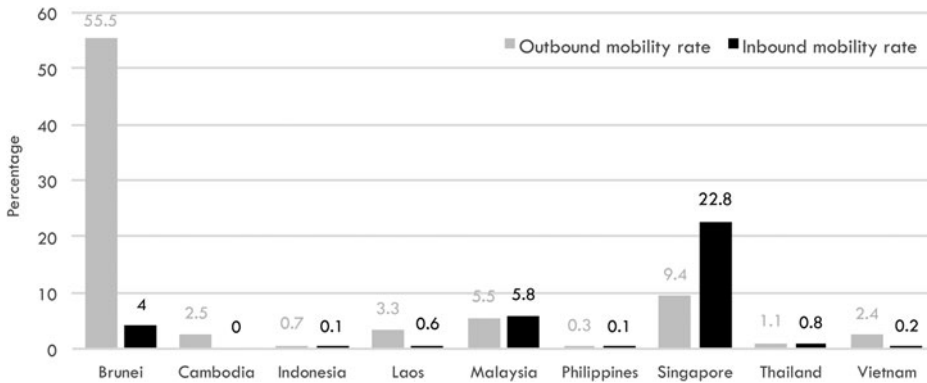
Figure 2. Inbound/outbound student mobility rate of Southeast Asian countries (2010) Note that there was no data provided for Myanmar and no inbound mobility rate data for Cambodia. (Source of data: UNESCO Institute for Statistics).

Nguyen (2004) describe the limited resources, lack of close linkages between universities and the labour market, and poor training quality and efficiency (see also Nguyen 2013). The weak institutional foundation of the Vietnamese education landscape has been attributed, in part, to the country's French colonial past, which saw little investment in tertiary education which resulted in Vietnam missing the "wave of institutional innovation in higher education that swept across much of Asia" during the middle of the twentieth century (Vallely and Wilkinson 2008: 3).

The increasing demand for higher education follows the rapid economic development of Vietnam over the last few decades that led to the country being one of the fastest growing economies in the world today. The 'economic renovation' (Đổi Mới) of 1986 – a milestone decision by the Communist Party of Vietnam to transition the Vietnamese economy into a regulated market economy — played a central role in leading these developments, as well as focusing attention on improving the education system in order to develop human capacity (Hayden and Thiep 2010; Nguyen 2013). Consequently, there have been important educational reforms made in Vietnam since 1993; a recent and significant one being the 2005 Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) (Hayden and Thiep 2010: 16, 18). This reform has resulted in crucial and positive changes in the Vietnamese educational landscape. Nevertheless, as the country battles the challenges of bringing its higher education system on par with the demands of its people and the needs of its fast-growing economy, many young Vietnamese have left and are leaving.[7] Their mobility brings them to educational markets that are eager to attract and host them as students – sites like Singapore. Additionally, what makes the Vietnam-to-Singapore case compelling to examine is

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[7]While recognising that Vietnam has had a long history of student mobility and that these movements are politically and economically driven (Nguyen 2013: 140), this article focuses on more recent and contemporary student migration.

how Singapore appears to not be the first choice, but the 'next best choice' for these students, as shall be explored in detail later in the article.

RESEARCH APPROACH: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL

This research has been inspired by scholarship in two fields: educational sociology and mobility research. Of particular relevance here is Pierre Bourdieu's *La noblesse d'État* (1989) in which analysis is made at two levels – individuals and institutions – in order to capture both mental and social structures in the field of education. The approach I adopt in this article is allied with other sociologists of education who draw on Bourdieu's work, particularly within Scandinavian educational sociology, and who have applied his approach to the study of transnational higher education (Broady *et al.* 1998; Börjesson 2005; Munk 2009). These studies extend from Bourdieu's seminal analysis, the sociological examination is not just about links between elite schools at the national level, but from elite schools in one country to elite schools overseas. Through these studies, it is often found that informational capital acquired abroad can be considered more prestigious than the same capital acquired in local education markets (Munk 2009: 6).

In the analysis to follow, I also glean heuristic usefulness from the concept 'consecration'. Defined broadly as the dedication to a special purpose or service, Bourdieu first borrowed the notion of consecration from religious spheres and applied it to the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1971). Often, these acts of consecrating cultural practices and objects are carried out by closed groups of experts or professionals who are seen as authoritative in their field (Bourdieu 1990: 138). A simple definition of this notion that draws from bourdieuian theory of symbolic fields is offered by Michèle Lamont (2012: 206) who wrote that consecration, "refers to recognition by oneself and others of the value of an entity (whether a person, an action, or a situation)." In his seminal text, *The State Nobility*, Bourdieu (1996: 102) asserted that elite schools fulfil a function of consecration. The use of the concept here to describe the flow from elite schools in Singapore to elite schools in the UK is expedient in that we are focusing on a form of sponsored mobility. In this case a select group of students are chosen by a prestigious scholarship awarding agency, the Public Service Commission, to acquire a prestigious type of education. Together with the PSC, elite schools can be regarded as "agencies of consecration" (Bourdieu 1971: 112).

An important aspect of this study is to understand the value for the individual (both the Vietnamese student in Singapore and the Singaporean student in Oxbridge) in studying abroad. Transnational education not only allows one to accumulate educational capital, it may also result in the build-up of other linguistic, social, and 'cosmopolitical' assets valued by future employers. For the

Singaporean students, travelling abroad for a prestigious overseas education is part of a 'rite of passage'[8] into the highest echelons of the civil service, and many of these students are able to embark on an expensive higher education due to this sponsorship by the Singapore government. For the Vietnamese students interviewed, many left their home country citing reasons of dissatisfaction with its higher education provisions. As the later section will discuss, their ambitions to study in the US or Australia are often not met, so, Singapore becomes a 'next best choice' city, a stepping-stone as they continue to harbour aspirations to eventually move to the US to live and work. I describe these movements, following Anju Paul's (2011) mobility research and her use of the concept "stepwise migration": a pattern of multi-stage international labour migration involving stints of substantive durations in intermediate countries as an intentional strategy adopted by those who are unable to gain immediate entry into their preferred destination countries. During these sojourns, Paul argues that stepwise international migrants attempt to gain the necessary work experience and educational certifications, build their network of overseas contacts, moving thus in an "iterative fashion up a hierarchy of destination countries" (Paul 2011: 1843), with the eventual aim of gaining entry into their preferred destination.

The context of this study takes place at a time when Singapore is pursuing a goal of becoming a regional education hub. Transnational higher education strategies are therefore being formulated within education markets where universities offer students a prized and priced commodity. One of the loudest critics of the commodification of education in the UK, Stephen Ball, argues that the crises and instabilities created by neoliberal capitalistic policies drive the quest for new markets, new products, and new sources of profit within the educational field (Ball 2004). He highlights that commodification has been used more commonly in two ways: one, to refer to the replacement of 'use values' with 'exchange values'. And, two, to refer to the subtle and quiet embedding of consumer culture at the quotidian level (Ball 2004: 4). The economic reality of supply and demand, as Munk (2009: 7, 19) also argues, suggests that changes in student mobility have resulted in part from the increase in the number of students in domestic higher education markets, and in part the clamouring over informational capital in order to maximise one's control over valued resources. To be clear, the phenomenon studied here is not just about education, but education for which one must relocate. The costs for moving thus no longer just entail the price of education per se, but also, the costs (as well as benefits) to the individual in migrating. Arguably, it is not just about the 'use value' for the student migrant, but also the 'exchange value' s/he obtains from moving to study.

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[8]In this article, I use the term 'rite of passage' as it is used in common parlance and that draws from Van Gennep's 1909 work *Les Rites de Passage* where he describes these rites as passages that an individual traverses from one situation and status in life to another.

Research Methodology and Data Collection

As discussed above, the first case study focuses on Singaporean students in overseas elite universities and is based on 22 interviews conducted between 2011 and 2012 with Singaporean undergraduates studying at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom. Recruitment of interviewees was done through contacting the agency that disburses these scholarships, attending student events, and leads from interviewees. A small number of undergraduates from these two schools on other funding arrangements (non-government scholarships and/or self-funded) were also interviewed, all of whom applied to PSC scholarships but failed to secure an award. In addition, I managed to contact former scholars who had studied in Oxford or Cambridge; their reflections and discussions about their current trajectories provided valuable insights. In this and the Vietnamese case, the main interview strategy adopted was that of sequential interviewing using case, rather than sampling, logic (cf. Small 2009). Other secondary sources include the analysis of documents containing information on scholarship selection processes and speeches made by Singapore's administrative and political elite on the topic of scholarships.

The second case study in this article focuses on Vietnamese students studying in Singapore, and is based on field observations at two local universities, Vietnamese student events in Singapore, as well as data gathered through online observations and in-depth interviews with ten Vietnamese students, a year after the Oxbridge field study (i.e. 2012–2013). I narrowed my research sites to one private university (that offers programmes that lead to an overseas degree) and one public university in Singapore.[9] This contrast revealed interesting differences in what it means for a Vietnamese student to attend a private or public university in Singapore.

From these two case studies (Figure 3), the logics of commodification and consecration demonstrate their value particularly by examining how individuals and institutions devise transnational higher education strategies in and out of Singapore. To be clear, it is not my intention to present these two logics as exhaustive, but as two particular types that stand out in the case of Singapore. Neither is it the aim of the article to generalise the encounters and motivations of all Vietnamese students in Singapore or Singaporean students in the UK. Rather, in documenting and using the interviewed students' verbalisations that characterise their motivations for moving to study, the similarities and differences in experiences allow us to better comprehend the range of strategies that exist in transnational higher education.

CONSECRATION

A majority of Singaporean government scholars travelled overseas to elite institutions for their higher education instead of remaining in Singapore over the

[9]Names of these Singaporean universities have been left out due to the request of anonymity made by a representative of the private university.
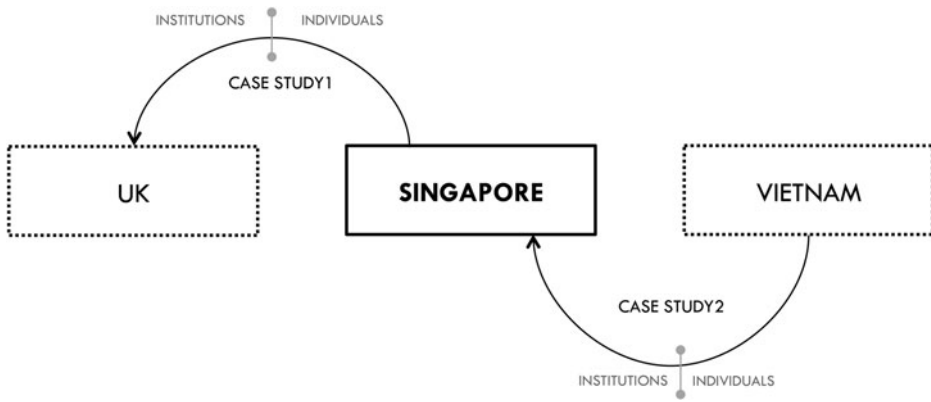
Figure 3.   Selection of case sites.

last decade (Figure 1), and this particular rite of passage out of Singapore and back is arguably valued and prized by the Singaporean government. An overseas elite education for the Singaporean student could thus be viewed as a form of consecration that confers on the student the legitimacy of being able to eventually return home to Singapore and embark on a career in the civil service. This act of consecration begins as early as when the student finishes junior college (approximately aged 18–19) and is carried out by a panel of gatekeepers who decide if the individual is deserving of an expensive government scholarship and a future career with the civil service. There is no fixed quota for the number of scholars selected every year, although to give a sense of proportion: out of approximately 15,000 students who graduate with the GCE A-levels and IB diploma annually, two to three thousand students apply for the scholarships but less than a hundred scholarships are eventually awarded (<0.7% of each cohort).

Duty

When speaking to these government scholars in their capacity as undergraduates at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, many were vocal of the sense of duty expected of them that comes with accepting funding from the government for their overseas studies. For example, one student at the University of Oxford, Karen[10], shared that she was often reminded of how she was studying on "taxpayer's money" and remarked, "PSC people always say, 'taxi drivers paying for your education. You better work hard'".[11] The prompting that the average layman – who might not have very much financially – is financing one's overseas education, appears to serve as an unabashed hint that one should feel a sense of obligation to study hard and not let the common folk down.

[10]Names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.
[11]Interview, 1 May 2012, Oxford.

Another student I spoke with, Ella, struggled a little more as she battled to articulate her role and duty as a government scholar:

Ella: I suppose the knowledge that you're over here on a scholarship sort of gives you a responsibility in that sense. You know that… <pauses>…you know that you have to perform. So you feel like that there is a duty to develop yourself, and there's a duty to perform well.

Interviewer: Duty to whom?

Ella: Yea so that's what I'm sorting out in my head. Because, because, for me I think, that duty will still remain, even if I wasn't on the scholarship, just because…<pauses>…the chance to come to Oxford to me really meant a lot. I think the difference comes in that, there's also knowledge that if you do not perform, the people who are paying for you would feel that you're not fulfilling your side of your bargain, or potential, I suppose?[12]

Like Karen, Ella is aware that her passage to the University of Oxford was financed by the state and this comes laden with the responsibility that her classmates from Britain or elsewhere might not necessarily have to bear. She shared that, beyond the duty to herself, she is also required to be dedicated to being groomed for the civil service. R. H. Wilkinson (1970), in his case studies of education in the Chinese dynasties and late Victorian public schools documented that the "gentlemen" in those institutions had experienced their privilege to an elite form of education as both a duty and a public service (cited in Bourdieu 1996: 104). A question that arises from attempting to understand how such an experience is formulated leads us back to studying the ways in which institutions cultivate this sense of duty. Reviewing documents and speeches addressed to Singapore's government scholars, one begins to uncover the promulgating of a particular type of discourse. In 2009, for example, the Chairman of the Public Service Commission, at the Singapore Seminar in London, was quoted as saying:

> "…we still get upset with scholars who break their bond without serving even one day after they finish their studies. They have wasted the PSC's time and effort and used taxpayers' money upfront for their selfish purpose. Even if there is no scholarship quota, there is an opportunity cost to every taxpayer dollar spent on scholars." (Teo 2009)

A student who returns to Singapore after his or her studies and does not follow through with the contractual obligation of working in the civil service is deemed

[12]Interview, 23 March 2012, Oxford.

self-seeking. The government agency that disburses these scholarships therefore aims to select, as its scholars, individuals who will be devoted to the calling of being a civil servant, and who would not eventually give up or 'quit'. Beyond the scholars' legal obligation, which is what the conditional scholarship and its contractual agreements are substantively, the awards they have accepted possess an addendum: the duty to be unselfish and to – in the words of Ella – "fulfil their side of the bargain". Since they have been selected and consecrated by the state apparatus, this is what is expected of them.

Performance

Fulfilling their side of the bargain includes not just returning to Singapore and serving their work obligation, it also encompasses showing good performance and excelling during their university education. Lynn, a government scholar studying at Oxford, told me that the pressure on her to do well was very high: "It's almost as if, I feel like I'm not entitled to fail once I've got this label (of a scholar)….And then I thought hard about, about why that struggle was happening, and I felt like, it was because people don't seem to want to take failure for an excuse."[13]

An upshot of these rules of accepting the scholarship is that these students are pushed to perform and emerge as a scholar par excellence. Ken, who studied at Cambridge, similarly discussed the climate of a low tolerance for failure and how, when he was back in Singapore working as an intern over the summer break, he was expected to do more and achieve more than his counterparts: "There is always this perception that, oh, if you're a scholar, you must be smart, you must do well, you cannot fail…And my tasks were naturally tougher. There's just so much expected from scholars. And scholars, we really have to prove ourselves."[14]

From Ken and his peers we learn that this privilege of a financed overseas elite education comes with the need to prove to others that they are indeed consecrated, and rightly chosen. Sometimes, this onus seems too much to bear. I was told on several occasions how it had been better for the students to not let others know of their 'identity' as scholars than for that label to be worn on their sleeves. Returning to my interview with Lynn, for example, she candidly told me that she tries not to disclose to others that she is a scholar "(b)ecause it seems to incite the impression, 'oh, you're a scholar', and then there's this awkward silence. People seem to be evaluating you left, right, centre."[15]

The fear of being evaluated with high and holy standards troubles these students. After receiving the award, they gradually learn that they will be tested and scrutinised with a particular mode of inspection. They will be grouped into a social category that occupies a high status in social space, and possibly attacked

[13]Interview, 28 April 2012, Oxford.
[14]Interview, 14 April 2012, Cambridge.
[15]Interview, 28 April 2012, Oxford.

for occupying that position, irrespective of who they are and what they have done. Dean, an undergraduate at Oxford, related an experience where he had to sit through a "bashing session" of government scholars just moments after receiving his own award:

> "I'm fully aware that there is a significant part of the population who does not like people associated with the government, and with its policy. For example, for its policy for people like us. Scholars are not very liked in Singapore. I came out from a PSC scholarship ceremony with a taxi driver and we were caught in this massive jam…and the whole way he was insulting scholars. And I just came back from a ceremony. I didn't know what to do. It was the most embarrassing, awkward ride I've ever had."[16]

In Singapore, taxi drivers – all of whom are Singapore citizens and above the age of 30 – take on the function of being one of society's barometers in their role as the 'average layman'. It is no coincidence that they feature frequently in my interviews, literally or figuratively, with these overseas Singaporean undergraduates as they discuss their relations with others in Singapore. At the same time, being constantly evaluated reinforces the perceptions of these scholars' position in social space. It encourages the "us and them" mentality, or as Dean phrases it: "people like us". The path of consecration these students have undergone cultivates *noblesse oblige*. As Bourdieu notes, the invisible action of separating the elites from the rest results precisely from "attaching students to a place and a status that are socially distinguished from the commonplace, which we might think of as a type of marking that creates a magical boundary between insiders and outsiders, often sanctioned by an actual enclosure" (Bourdieu 1996: 102). This attitude of being designated is also observed when discussing these students' career aspirations.

> "…half of it is good fun to go build villages in Kenya, or Thailand or something like that. But, ultimately I think, we weren't meant for that? …You've had an expensive education, you've had some training, and your specialist advantage should be writing policy and doing useful things. That's where you're most useful, anyway."[17]

Yao Ling, an undergraduate on a private scholarship, felt confident about the quality of education and training she received under the tutorial system at Oxford, which is characterised as intense and demanding. When comparing her educational experience with peers from other universities, she felt like she was more equipped to embark on "useful" work such as policymaking. She was not alone in making such an assessment of her abilities. Eunice, an

[16]Interview, 25 April 2012, Oxford.
[17]Interview, 1 March 2012, Oxford.

undergraduate government scholar, similarly felt that the rite of passage through Oxford has prepared her well for the work-life ahead of her.

> "After the tutorial system at undergraduate, doing so many essays every week, and like it's not just one week – every week, it's continuous and it doesn't stop, and you don't really have any breathing space. I think I've been used to that as the way of life. Everything else seems pretty easy. So even if work is going to be very intense, and very hard, and I have to stay at the office for long hours, I guess I'm going to be okay with that."[18]

The role of elite schools in fulfilling a function of consecration reverberates through these accounts. Bourdieu describes moments that are a rite of the institution, where selection can be seen as "election", exams as "trials", training as "ascesis" that evokes a process of transformation that allows these students to recognise, and be recognised by others, that they have been consecrated and have been worthy of being so (Bourdieu 1996: 102).

"One purpose"

Because the trajectory of being a Singaporean Oxbridge scholar is well-trodden, the recipe of what is expected and how one should walk this path provides the students with a form of certitude that they are prepared, or are being prepared for the 'way of life' ahead. There is often a concurrence about the presence of this planned trajectory and about what society expects of them as the consecrated.

> "Well in a way because, you see our lives are very planned out for us already…We know that we study for four years, we do whatever we want in four years, ideally a Masters, we go back for six years…it's all planned out for you. The plan just moves. There's no stopping, there's no obstacles or there's no motivation for you to move faster, because you can't."[19]

Colin, an undergraduate at Cambridge on a scholarship, describes the "plan" that others like him are members of. As a scholar, one has to go at the pace that has been set and one should not deviate from that planned trajectory. A former government scholarship recipient who was finishing up his government bond at the time of our interview, Jason, articulated this plan most vividly with the use of a treadmill metaphor: "So, you know, once you've been on this track – I mean, people who are kind say that it's a 'treadmill'…you've been prepared all this while. You hop on the treadmill, as long as you don't mess up."[20]

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[18]Interview, 24 April 2012, Oxford.
[19]Interview, 13 April 2012, Cambridge.
[20]Interview, 14 March 2012, Singapore.

A plan is available for the Singaporean Oxbridge scholar to hop on and run with. Yet, the students – former and present – are aware that one slip-up can derail them from a continued journey on this well-trodden path. The key, here, appears to be not 'messing up' so that the opportunities structured by institutional arrangements can shape the eventual course that the students take. At the same time, the students recognise the lack of control over these circumstances as they are subjected to several sets of tests with both explicit and implicit evaluative criteria, both at home and away. Together with the recognition of the difficulty to rise to the top of the system in an overseas elite institution, they view these opportunities of 'getting on the treadmill' and devoting themselves to the civil service as vital to their eventual educational and occupational attainment.

Commodification

Tuan, an undergraduate studying in a public university in Singapore, is one of the many Vietnamese students who travelled to the city-state for higher education. He earlier attended what he characterises as "elite schools" in Hanoi before departing the country in search of higher education opportunities. Early on in our interview, he shared with me how he responded to the marketing efforts of the Singaporean university he now attends, and from which he received a scholarship for his studies. Candidly, he tells me that his move to Singapore was not because he found the country fascinating, per se. Rather, a major reason for his decision to come to Singapore to study was because the university and their marketing team "sold the school to me".[21]

Yeoh and Huang (2013) propose that transnational migratory moves are strategies devised in response to economic rationalities as well as socio-cultural-political considerations operating at the levels of family-community-country. The term 'strategy' is used to not only delineate what is being observed, but also to denote the "conscious/unconscious as well as explicit/implicit undertakings by individuals, social groups or institutions aiming at defending or ameliorating their positions" (Broady and Börjesson 1997: 1). In Tuan's case, this transnational education strategy began with him wanting to leave Vietnam soon after commencing university education in a local Vietnamese university:

> "I know quite a bit about the Vietnamese education system….The problem is that it's not really meritocracy-based. That's the main problem. You can bribe your grade. You can actually bribe your grade. Certain things, it's under the table; you can go through those channels. And for me, I don't like cheating and those sort of stuff, I find that quite disturbing, and unfair. Not just me but for people who want a conducive environment for studying…all my friends were leaving [Vietnam]. It kinda made me anxious."[22]

[21]Interview, 7 March 2013, Singapore.
[22]Interview, 7 March 2013, Singapore.

Tuan shared how he and his peers were nervous about their higher education attainment and outcomes were they to remain in Vietnam. They started to leave the country one by one, with each person's move encouraging the rest in the group to do likewise. Other interviewees also shared with me their initial experiences of studying in Vietnamese higher educational institutions. Mai related how she dropped out after one semester because she felt that the student-to-teacher ratio was too large, it was difficult to concentrate and there was little interaction between professors and students.[23] Thao, who spent three years in a Vietnamese university before leaving, described the quality of teaching as "dismal" and that she was extremely unhappy with her circumstances.[24]

For many of the students interviewed, Singapore was however never a first-choice educational destination. International education reports and statistics reveal that Australia is the most popular educational destination for Vietnamese students,[25] followed by the United States (see Nguyen 2013 for trends in Vietnamese international student mobility). There is also a growing number of Vietnamese students enrolling in private boarding schools with the goal of eventually attending a university or college in the US (Ashwill 2010). According to the annual report on international academic mobility published by the Institute of International Education, *Open Doors 2011*, the number of Vietnamese students enrolled in US institutions of higher education in 2010/11 was close to 15,000. Amongst all Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam is the biggest sender of tertiary students to the US.[26]

From interviews with the students, it was apparent that the US had developed a sort of 'place reputation' that is socially constructed out of representations from media, information from friends/family, and educational material in schools. Often, these representations are inaccurate but they still wield considerable influence in the shaping of an individual's preference (Paul 2011: 1848). Munk similarly described popular educational destinations as "zones of prestige" and students move to these centres as they are recognised as offering "favourable transnational investments" (2009: 7). Nineteen-year old Phuong, a freshman undergraduate at a Singaporean public university, talked about his father's initial hopes for him to study in the US:

> "My father is very excited about U.S. studies, from what he heard, and from information from the newspaper….He feels that U.S. is the right place for me to go. Because firstly, it's a country of freedom, from

[23]Interview, 25 Feb 2013, Singapore.
[24]Interview, 7 March 2013, Singapore.
[25]As at 30 June 2012, 15,500 Vietnamese Student visa holders were in Australia (Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship). Available at: https://www.border.gov.au/Reports andPublications/Documents/statistics/student-visa-program-report-2013-06-30.pdf (accessed on 25 September 2015)
[26]Country data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009–2010.

what they say. They have a very good education, maybe the best in the world."[27]

These aspirations were dampened as the students realised the complexity of dealing with American university applications and the high costs involved in an education there. For example, Tuan related the difficulties in realising that initial ambition of studying in the States:

> "I abandoned my project. It turns out that I under-estimated the complexity of the application system. I managed to send the application for three schools. One University offered me a position there, but the fee was USD 21,000 for the whole thing, which is quite a lot of money."[28]

Tuan was not alone in relating his "abandoned" project of applying to the United States. A large majority of the other interviewees spoke of filling out forms, taking the Scholastic Assessment Tests (SATs), but eventually not proceeding with the application. The US Commercial Service in 2012 identified Australia and Singapore as main competitors to the US as an educational destination for Vietnamese students as they offer proximity and more affordable costs (US Commercial Service 2012). So even though Singapore was not the first choice for these students, it became the 'next-best choice'; and that, too, carried a particular type of place reputation. In particular, "the education system is very good"; "it is a very safe country"; and "the job prospects are good" were commonly cited.

Stepping-stone Strategies

Because Singapore was not the first-choice educational destination for these students, many of them harboured dreams to eventually moving to live in countries like the US or Australia. Like her peers who have already formulated thoughts about what they would do upon graduation, twenty-one year-old Tu[29], who was soon to graduate, related how she was anxious and reluctant about returning home to Vietnam. She wanted to stay out of Vietnam as long as she could, amassing work experience and other forms of capital before returning home – if she eventually has to. Lanh had similar thoughts:

> "I don't see myself going back to Vietnam very soon. I think in the end I will come back but not very soon because I want to explore things around. So I think after my three years here in Singapore is that…the best scenario is that I can be relocated to somewhere else. If not, I will just stay in Singapore looking for other jobs."[30]

[27]Interview, 6 March 2013, Singapore.
[28]Interview, 7 March 2013, Singapore.
[29]Interview, 13 March 2013, Singapore.
[30]Interview, 6 March 2013, Singapore.

These intentions of the students could be likened to plans of "stepwise migration" where their migratory patterns are multistage and involve living in transitional countries as a strategy of acquiring necessary experience before attempting to gain entry into their preferred destination (Paul 2011: 1843). In addition, completing their higher education in an English-speaking country like Singapore is viewed as a stepping-stone strategy to countries elsewhere where English is the lingua franca.

Vietnamese students awarded a tuition grant from the Singaporean government to attend a public university in Singapore are mandated to stay in the city-state for at least three years after graduation to work for a Singapore-based company. Whilst this could be regarded as a form of 'bond' in exchange for the tuition subsidies received from the Singapore government, all of them viewed this as a positive arrangement. Drawing an income from Singapore is also a way for them to earn money to pay back their student loans. Anh, an undergraduate in a private university in Singapore, who is determined to convert her academic credentials into economic capital, expressed: "I want to stay in Singapore for at most two years. Well, there's this saying in Economics, once you spend something with dollars, you should get back dollars."[31] Phuong also views his experiences in Singapore as necessary to secure himself a favourable position in Vietnamese society in the future. He expressed how he would not settle for anything less than "being his own boss", and the way for him to attain this goal is to amass as much capital in Singapore and elsewhere before returning to the country of his origin:

> "My father has very high hopes for me. He wants me to stay in Singapore because the salary is higher; the living standard is also higher. But given the chance, I think I will return to Vietnam only if I have enough experience and financial condition to establish my own company in Vietnam. If I go back to Vietnam just to do an employee's work, I will never go back to Vietnam."[32]

Earlier research has found that Vietnamese returnees are often placed on a professional fast-track as their linguistic and cultural skills are in high demand especially by those who are investing in emerging markets but lack local knowledge and connections. Furthermore, they are often celebrated in state media for returning to their cultural roots and contributing economically to their homeland (Small 2012: 236–237). It is evident from my interviews that Phuang's ambitions have been shaped in accordance to his father's, demonstrating a subtle but important effect of familial strategies, typically observed among the upper- and middle-classes (cf. van Zanten 2015). While staying close to the plans of parents was a

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[31]Interview, 18 February 2013, Singapore.
[32]Interview, 6 March 2013, Singapore.

Table 1. Tuition fees for an international student in Singapore studying accountancy. Breakdown by institution and funding arrangement, year 2013

University type and funding	Tuition fees
Private University	SGD 38,520
Public University (*with* government tuition grant)	SGD 65,400
Public University (without tuition grant)	SGD 112,290

common thread running through the conversations on educational and occupational planning, individual and family strategies alone do not sufficiently explain how transnational activities are influenced. In education markets, the strategies of both the 'consumer' and the 'producer' come to the fore.

Institutional Strategies

Financial decisions weighed heavily on the interviewees and their families as they sought to comprehend funding arrangements and the amount the family could afford to pay before applying to the Singaporean university. The stark reality of what is 'affordable' and tactics devised to pool sufficient funds together cast the spotlight on institutional strategies and how institutions price the product of education. Table 1 summarises the tuition cost for an international student for a three-year programme in Bachelor of Business (Accountancy), depending on the type of institution they are enrolled in and the kinds of funding arrangement that apply to them.[33] The availability of the government subsidised tuition grant in the public university makes a huge difference to the students as it effectively halves the costs. In addition to the government-subsidised tuition, loans that the universities administer through banks were highlighted as crucial for the students to obtain. Without this bank loan, it would not have been feasible for them to bear the initial costs of studying in Singapore. Furthermore, for students in the public university interviewed, the possibility of being able to work while studying also helps to alleviate part of their existing financial woes. Some of the students admitted that if not for the tuition grant, the bank loan, and the ability to work part-time while studying, they would not have been as inclined to come to Singapore for their studies.

As compared to other education markets, like the US and Australia, where international students have to pay full fees and are made to leave the country as soon as their programme is over, it could be argued that the subsidies provided by the Singapore government for international students follows an unprofitable, "outdated" model that has "poor business sense" (Sanderson 2002: 94). Viewed from this perspective, the notion of education as a pure commodity could appear contradictory. Yet, commodification can proceed in varying degrees. And commodification, as presented as a type of 'logic' here, is not just about

[33]The figures are based on the two universities used as case studies in this article.

how the Singaporean state can profit financially from inbound student mobility, but how the attractive positioning of higher education in Singapore to international students can be used instrumentally by the state for "supplementing Singapore's workforce as well as being part of a larger plan to help it achieve prominence as a knowledge economy" (Sanderson 2002: 93, 94). Whilst the tactics of the Singaporean state might come across, at first glance, as mild or tame vis-à-vis other education markets, the calculations that underpin these strategies are not in the least irrational, as these institutions use inbound student mobility as a means for investing in the country's future.

Besides establishing funding arrangements that enable students to embark on higher education in Singapore, universities actively reach out to students in Vietnam to entice them to consider their institution. The public university organises, for example, a 'bridging programme' that is typically attended by students from Southeast Asia and China. Essentially a 15-week intensive English course, students are able to participate in this programme before deciding to seek admission to the university. This is akin to a trial-period that consumers can opt for before deciding whether or not to buy the service or product. In addition, the universities' outreach teams hold information sessions in Vietnam, publish advertisements in Vietnamese media outlets, and appoint specific education agents to assist students in their migration to Singapore. In a study on agents in New Zealand, Collins (2012: 160) found that the use of agents is part of the "institutional thickening" procedure that states engage in to outsource risk to other actors. These licensed education agents, who are paid by students in exchange for their migration expertise and information, are particularly important in serving as intermediaries in the migratory process as they connect the education industry to the mobilities of international students (Collins 2012).[34] Taken together, these tactics devised by Singaporean institutions, in collaboration with other agents of education, demonstrate a very active participation in the transnational education market.

Two Types of Southeast Asian Student Mobility and the Underlying Process of Valuation

Contemporary student mobility research in Southeast Asia has been dominated by figures, rates, and commentary on the internationalisation of higher education institutions in these countries. We could learn more from understanding how transnational higher education strategies are actually formulated and how these students traverse new, commodified education markets. This article has

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[34]At a Vietnamese student event I attended, a key sponsor for the event was a firm for education agents that specialises in Vietnam-to-Singapore student migration.

aimed to go beyond the veneer of policy talk of Singapore as an educational hub in order to understand the sociological dynamics – shaped at the individual and institutional levels – that underlie decisions to move for higher education. Two types of logic that compel student mobility experiences are featured here: consecration and commodification. In the former case, we observe the ritual of the Singaporean student being consecrated through the award of a prestigious government scholarship which enables their overseas education and bestows on them a sense and duty of being a 'chosen one'. In the latter case, institutional arrangements that package and commodify higher education, renders the student a consumer of higher education. The Vietnamese students' move to Singapore is part of a stepwise migratory plan to acquire transnational capital that they believe can improve their social positions if and when they return to Vietnam.

As the reader may have observed, the push and pull factors that compel the student to leave his or her home country in Southeast Asia varies. For the Singapore-to-UK students interviewed, there is no immediately obvious push factor that surfaces to explain a strong need for them to leave Singapore for higher education. If Singapore is a Global Schoolhouse and takes pride in its higher education institutions, it is curious as to why its academically brightest have been sponsored to leave for undergraduate studies elsewhere. I would conjecture that if they are indeed pushed out, a plausible reason could be that in order to attain a place in the future administrative and ruling elite, they need to be 'consecrated' through a particular rite of passage that involves receiving a high-status government scholarship and an elite education abroad. The circumstances for the Vietnam-to-Singapore students interviewed in this study differ. The reasons they cite for pushing them out include the quality of the Vietnamese education system. They are then pulled into the Singaporean education market through its attractive, 'meritocratic' provision of higher education. Being able to stay on in Singapore after graduation to seek employment, the possibilities of acquiring various forms of capital, the aspiration of stepwise migration (to a preferred destination like the US), and the various funding arrangements set up by Singaporean universities, are verbalised by the students as selling points as they evaluate the benefits and costs of moving to Singapore.

It could be argued that a distinction between the consecrated and the commodified route is that of 'choice': one chooses his or her own plan while the other is chosen for a plan. As education consumers, the Vietnamese students deliberate and plot out their own educational journeys. The boundaries they have to traverse are both geographical and financial. They choose to settle in Singapore and harbour ambitions to continue journeying 'West' after their studies. In the case of government scholars, the Singaporean students are chosen by a state agency, and by an overseas elite school. This dialectic of who chooses whom is not so clear-cut, as one could argue along with Bourdieu that "the elite school chooses those who have chosen it because it has chosen them" (Bourdieu

1996: 104). Nevertheless, this analysis reveals that the designation of being chosen is something that the students battle with. Besides the geographical boundary that separates the UK from Singapore, the students are constantly reminded of the social boundary that separates the last person who has been chosen and the first who has been rejected (Bourdieu 1996: 103). Residing on the 'chosen' side comes with certain expectations of abiding to a specially configured life plan.

It is prudent to stress, in this concluding section, that this analysis does not view the logics of commodification and consecration as diametrically opposed, or that they are placed on the same continuum at polar opposites. For example, a consecrated pathway can also possess some degree of commodification. They are two forces that shape transnational higher education strategies that move in their own respective directions. They are not isolated, but consonant with the aim of the Singaporean state to remain competitive in this era of globalisation. What is analogous in both routes, for example, is how strategies for mobility are consciously and unconsciously derived. Following Paul's stepwise migration framework, we are able to flesh out how these student migrants move up "personally and socially constructed destination hierarchies" and observe how these tactics reveal their intentionality and forethought (Paul 2011: 1864–1865). Yet, it would be impossible to ignore the more unconscious strategies that are at play here. In both of the Vietnamese and Singaporean students sojourns, they have been put on a certain kind of journey where they do not have full control over the outcome, even if they comprehend what is expected of them as student migrants. As Bourdieu (1986: 253–254) proposed, the decisive moment is in the ease at which different forms of capital are converted and exchanged, but the incommensurability between these capitals is what bring uncertainty for these (aspiring) holders of capital.

In both routes, the importance for students to learn the tricks-of-the-trade to cope with these logics also comes to the fore. The Singaporean student is prepared through their junior colleges for getting a scholarship and getting into Oxbridge (see Ye and Nylander 2015 for a detailed study on the preparatory processes). The Vietnamese student acquires information from education agents and marketing representatives of Singaporean universities about how to get to Singapore, into a University, and into a particular study programme. Furthermore, student mobility – be it the commodified route or a consecrated one – is dependent on the social process of valuation. The Singaporean scholar is chosen over others based on a rubric devised by a state agency resulting in a form of sponsored mobility. As soon as the status of a 'scholar' is conferred on them, they are subjected to various explicit and implicit evaluation criteria over the course of their educational and occupational careers. The Vietnamese student aspires for a quality overseas education, and tailors this plan according to what can eventually be afforded and what may be feasible. They rank one country on top of another when deciding transnational educational moves and these decisions are formulated within family and within community. Moreover,

valuation demands serious organisational abilities. Taking centre stage then is the role of agents, institutions, and the state in facilitating the various student mobility arrangements and their offering of various devices (cf. van Zanten 2013) for the students to compare and contrast educational plans. These subjective and objective valuation processes collectively shape the formulation of desired transnational higher education strategies.

Singapore, as an aspiring 'Global Schoolhouse', has been an important site for a preliminary examination of the drivers of student mobility in the region. As higher education institutions in the region continue to internationalise and engage in market logic, it will become even more possible to conduct attentive research in the area of Southeast Asian student mobility. This research will deepen our understanding of the ways these processes either included or excluded students from this mobility option, as well as how students navigate through these 'transnationalisation' policies while pursuing their own educational and occupational ambitions.

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