

Qualitative Inquiry into the Meanings of Higher Education: Implications for Developments in Education and Social Integration in Hong Kong in the Post-Covid-19 Period

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ABSTRACT: The pursuit of equitable education is key to a government's regulation and allocation of life-chances, which enables social integration. Yet, evidence of the diminishing returns of degrees and of the "skills mismatch" between higher education training and labour market requirements casts doubts on the role of higher educational institutions in facilitating social mobility. This paper draws upon the findings of 40 qualitative interviews with young people conducted in 2018 in Hong Kong to shed light on the micro-level processes in which higher education training is translated into graduate employment outcomes. Findings comparing two sets of higher education graduates' interview narratives are presented. Assumptions of the logic of human capital theory are questioned from the "positional" and the "processual" perspectives on graduate employability. The discussion unpacks the meanings of "skills mismatch" and "graduate employability," and foregrounds the assumptions of the differential values assigned to skills and knowledges of different kinds in the local higher education system. With the insights drawn, this paper concludes with a reflection on the relevance of higher education to our understanding of social mobility and social integration in post-Covid-19 Hong Kong.

KEYWORDS: employability, study-to-work transition, skills mismatch, workplace, higher education, social mobility, social integration, Hong Kong.

Introduction

This paper draws upon the findings of 40 qualitative interviews with young people conducted in 2018 in Hong Kong to shed light on the micro-level processes in which higher education training is translated into employment outcomes. The paper will first introduce the background against which the discussion in the paper is set before outlining the theoretical framework and methodology of the study. Findings comparing two set of higher education graduates' interview narratives are presented to unpack the meanings of "skills mismatch" and "graduate employability" and to foreground the assumptions of the differential values of various skills and

knowledge in the local higher education system. With the insights drawn, this paper will conclude with a reflection on the relevance of higher education to our understanding of social mobility and social integration in post-Covid-19 Hong Kong.

Background

Education in Hong Kong used to serve the purpose of social selection of elites who would help facilitate colonial governance. Education provision gradually expanded during the 1950s to 1970s: free, compulsory, and universal six-year (primary) education and nine-year (primary and junior secondary, i.e., Forms 1-3) education began to be provided, and became accessible to all, in 1971 and

1978 respectively. This facilitated the rapid development of Hong Kong from an industrial economy into a service economy, creating opportunities for individuals to move upward from their families' socioeconomic background and achieve social mobility. This was conducive to the establishment of a moral and social order in which people shared their faith in seeking social advancement through "open" and "fair" competition (Wong and Ng 1997). This is essential to the maintenance of social stability in a context characterised by persistent socioeconomic inequality (Post 1996).

Expansion of postsecondary education came after the 1980s. The number of public universities funded by the University Grants Committee expanded from two in the 1980s to seven in the 1990s (Post 2010). Broadened access to postsecondary education from 2000 onward has been supported by self-financing institutions providing two-year sub-degree and later "top-up" degree programmes allowing sub-degree holders' articulation with degree programmes (Lee 2016). The rate of participation in full-time undergraduate programmes rose from 17.3% in 2001-2002 to 56.6% in 2022-2023.¹ This cemented the perceived role of higher education in fostering social mobility. As of June 2024, there are 22 degree-awarding institutions in Hong Kong.

Nevertheless, as postindustrial Hong Kong develops into a global city, the expansion of professional, managerial, and administrative jobs is observed to have lagged behind that of clerical, service, and shop sales positions during the period of 1994-2005.² More recent cohorts of university graduates are found to be disadvantaged in occupational attainment, earnings, and earnings mobility when compared to earlier cohorts (Wu 2010; Ip 2019). Similarly unfavourable comparisons between cohorts are observed in China (Mok and Wu 2016). In view of the above, the massification of higher education is said to have created a skills mismatch (Mok and Qian 2018). Changing labour market needs are not adequately satisfied by university graduates across East Asia (ibid.; Mok, Ke, and Tian 2022). Higher education graduates end up seeking employment in jobs that were hitherto taken up by those with lower-level educational qualifications (Mok and Wu 2016; Mok and Qian 2018). Graduates in East Asian contexts and beyond are either overqualified and "overeducated" for their jobs (Mok and Wu 2016; Figueiredo et al. 2017), or become underemployed or unemployed (Mok, Ke, and Tian 2022: 2-10).

The observations presented above engender concerns about the blocked opportunities of social mobility for young people (Mok and Neubauer 2016). Such claims have limited empirical grounds, at least in the case of Hong Kong (Wong and Koo 2016; Chiu and Siu 2022). Still, local young people are reported to be struggling with student debt, dead-end jobs, low income, and insecurity (Leung, Law, and Kwan 2016). In international contexts, there have been ensuing calls for boosting graduate employability and employment outcomes as higher education is repositioned as a key driver for economic growth. As Brown and Tannock (2009) observe among OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, education at all levels is increasingly expected to strengthen the training of skills, which is understood to enhance employment, productivity, and national economic competitiveness. In higher education, such endeavours are geared towards better equipping graduates with soft skills meeting employers' needs (Dinh, Luong, and Pham 2023) as well as technical skills relevant to labour market requirements (Mok and Qian 2018). The employability agenda of higher education is not often addressed from

the perspectives of higher education graduates who are finding it hard to land jobs that match their knowledge and skills, however.

With so much spotlight cast on the employment of higher education graduates in debates concerning social mobility, it is curious why the meanings of "employability" and the translation of higher education training into skills that can be matched with jobs have not often been subject to critical scrutiny. Being employable is not just about having the "appropriate" set of skills; it is also about how opportunities in the labour market are seen (Grosemans et al. 2023). It is especially germane to the Hong Kong context to approach graduate employability in this way. Opportunities for upward social mobility are found to be no less available for younger generations when compared to those for their older counterparts (Wong and Koo 2016; Chiu and Siu 2022), public perceptions notwithstanding. An understanding of what employability means and how higher education training is translated into employability from the perspective of higher education graduates provides an important reference for policymakers and practitioners in pushing forward the employability agenda. It also throws light on what higher education graduates consider to be "acceptable" jobs in relation to their training and qualifications, what is deemed "acceptable" higher education that merits their investment, and therefore the question of the legitimization of the role of higher education institutions in distributing and allocating life-chances.

Theoretical perspectives on graduate employability

As mentioned earlier, the employability agenda is geared towards boosting graduate employability through addressing the problem of skills mismatch. Emphasis is placed on equipping prospective graduates with what is known as "graduate attributes"³ as often identified in the visions and objectives of higher education institutions. These attributes cover both discipline-specific and generic knowledge and skills (Clarke 2018). Examples include communication skills, creative thinking, critical thinking, and global perspective, etc., which closely align with what are stipulated in the employer surveys designed by the Education Bureau.⁴ Studying employability in these terms can be said to be guided by a logic informed by human capital theory, in the sense that graduates are assumed to be equipped with human capital, often measured as a set of competencies, skills, and qualities that brings about productivity, employment earnings, career advancement, and ultimately economic

1. See "3. Participation Rate of Post-secondary Education," Information Portal for Accredited Post-secondary Programmes (iPASS), 2023, <https://www.cspe.edu.hk/en/Statistics.html#!> (accessed on 29 June 2024).
2. Research Office of the Legislative Council Secretariat, "Challenges of Manpower Adjustment in Hong Kong," *Research Brief* 4, 7 June 2016, <https://www.legco.gov.hk/research-publications/english/1516rb04-challenges-of-manpower-adjustment-in-hong-kong-20160607-e.pdf> (accessed on 26 June 2024).
3. See for example, "Generic Intended Learning Outcomes," The Education University of Hong Kong, 2022, <https://lt.eduhk.hk/graduate-attributes/generic-intended-learning-outcomes/> (accessed on 26 June 2024).
4. The Education Bureau has been conducting surveys of employers' ratings and opinions of performance of full-time locally-accredited publicly-funded and self-financing first-degree graduates. See the different surveys prepared for the Education Bureau in 2022: <https://www.cspe.edu.hk/en/Resources-Surveys.html> (accessed on 26 June 2024).

growth at the national level (Marginson 2019: 3-6). Employability is understood as “possessive” (Holmes 2015: 542-3): what is “possessed” by graduates is seen to allow seamless translation into employment outcomes.

Marginson (2019) pointed to the paucity of evidence of how formal academic credentials differentiate employment outcomes; any differences observed cannot be explained without knowledge of differences in institutional contexts in terms of factors such as how the labour market coordinates with educational institutions. It is also pointed out in the critiques of the “possessive” understanding of graduate employability that the latter has been reduced to a relatively fixed but arbitrarily defined basket of quantifiable skills or attributes (Li Z. 2013; Holmes 2015; Clarke 2018) that are disaggregated into discrete, socially isolated variables that abstract out the context (Clarke 2018: 1930).

Contrarily, Pham (2021) contends that graduate employability is better understood as a *process of sustaining* one’s ability and competitiveness as well as *meaningfulness* (our emphasis) of employment. Academic credentials and dispositions that establish employability are differentially valued and rewarded in specific places, situations, and contexts rather than “fixed” at the time when graduates begin working (Pham 2022: 746-7). On the one hand, the positioning perspective focuses on the relative standing of graduates in the labour market (Holmes 2013). In this vein, Tholen (2015) and Li Z. (2013) examined how university students and graduates made sense of “employability,” and acted accordingly, with reference to the interpretive frameworks provided in specific contexts. On the other hand, the processual perspective adopted by Holmes (2013, 2015) focuses on the presentation and negotiation of one’s identity as an employable graduate in interactions with employers (among others) during study-to-work transition. A more dynamic, contextualised conceptualisation of employability that incorporates the temporal and normative dimensions of (developing) employability can be found in a literature (Akkermans et al. 2024) that encompasses various methodologies.

Integrating the insights of the positional and the processual perspectives of employability, the first author conducted qualitative interviews with 40 young people in 2018. The study aimed to clarify the black box of how higher education training equips graduates with skills that can be translated into employability. Findings were first published in 2021 with a focus on addressing the gaps in the conceptualisation and research on graduate employability (Lam and Tang 2021). This paper builds upon published findings to more explicitly compare two sets of interview data from the same study to unpack what “skills mismatch” means and how it happens.

Methodology

To clarify how higher education training is translated into employability, specifically how skills can be applied in “matched” jobs, the study in 2018 probed young people’s experience of their transition to work from higher education, of their employment and workplace experience, and of their management of subsequent job transitions (if applicable). Attention is drawn to the meanings attached to such experiences, to the ways “employability” is understood and evaluated, and to the relevance of higher education training to employability, i.e., the potential to get hired, to be able to move

between jobs, and to stay competitive (Clarke 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were designed to invite and to encourage interviewees to recount and reflect on their experiences. Ample room was allowed for interviewees to elaborate on their perspectives and the meanings they attach to the aforesaid experiences.

Interviewees were first asked to provide information about the time taken to land their first job (and any subsequent jobs) and the attributes of this (these) job(s) (e.g., salary, job titles) and what job-seeking and work were like. Probing questions were raised in relation to whether and how “skills matching” or “mismatch” were addressed. Interviewees were then asked to comment on the skills demanded by employers according to their experiences and on how well their higher education training equipped them in this regard. To elicit interviewees’ elaboration of their viewpoints, the first author also asked the interviewees to comment on the relevancy of the common “graduate attributes” (as identified in the visions and objectives of local higher education institutions) to the aforesaid experiences. At the same time, whenever notions of “professional,” “specialised,” or “technical” training were invoked, interviewees were always asked to elaborate on what they meant. Information about interviewees’ socioeconomic background was not solicited, but a question was asked about whether interviewees paid tuition fees with the aid of financial assistance provided by the government and/or their respective institution.

Interviewees were initially recruited through the personal and professional networks of the research team through convenient sampling. Sampling became later more purposively oriented; informal referrals were made by interviewees where the research team considered it appropriate. The research team aimed to arrive at a sample more amenable to strategic comparisons between young people graduating from programmes of different disciplines when the salience of disciplinary differences became obvious in the data collection process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from July to October 2018 by the first author with 40 young people who were mostly graduates (N = 33) of full-time undergraduate programmes at the time of the interview (see Table 1 for their general profile; see also Lam and Tang 2021: 17-8). Most interviewees were interviewed once. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Cantonese in venues of interviewees’ choice, with the interviews recorded with informed consent. Interviews lasted from 50 minutes to almost three hours long. Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Table 1. General profile of the 40 interviewees participating in the study conducted by the first author in 2018

Profile of interviewees	Number of interviewees
Graduates of full-time undergraduate programmes (offered by both publicly funded universities and self-financing institutions)	33
Graduates of other programmes (including part-time undergraduate programmes and full-time sub-degree programmes)	4
Student workers whose graduation was pending at the time of the interview	3
TOTAL	40

Source: authors.

Interview data was thematically coded in terms of interviewees' study-to-work transition and subsequent job transitions (where applicable), their workplace experiences, and the perceived relevance of their higher education training to what made them "employable." Upon reading and rereading the transcribed interviews, connections were made between the aforesaid coding categories to inductively tease out higher level interpretive themes for further analysis. These themes cover what constitutes a career path (if applicable); the dynamic construction and presentation of "relevant" skills in job-seeking as well as in workplace interactions (Holmes 2013, 2015); and the assumptions underlying skills in relation to the meanings of professional, specialised, or technical training. Eventually, interpretive themes were brought together to conjure up a picture of what the aforesaid interpretive processes mean for interviewees' management of study-to-work transition and subsequent job transitions (Li Z. 2013; Tholen 2015); of how skills become matched or mismatched; and of how employability became established in a contextualised manner (Pham 2022). Focus is placed on the different meanings and values attached to knowledge and skills that circulate and ground interviewees' understanding of their study-to-work transition and the negotiation of their employability (Li Z. 2013; Tholen 2015; Waters 2018: 679-81). The research team seeks to foreground the sets of meanings, values, or common sense that interviewees drew upon (Wong 2020: 773) in making sense of the hierarchies (of skills, knowledge, and institutions) of the higher education system and to bring to light the sources of tensions discerned in interviewees' narratives (Bryman 2012: 584-5). Coding by the first author began as soon as interviews began. Coding categories continued to be developed and applied as new themes and insights emerged. Multiple rereadings of interview transcripts were carried out to ensure the consistent application of codes throughout the data analysis process. The second author's readings of the coded transcripts ensured the credible and fair representation of interviewees in the publication of the findings.

To facilitate an in-depth, contextualised discussion for the purpose of this paper, the accounts of 15 interviewees (Table 2) are presented below. These interviewees were grouped in the discussion according to data reflecting the objective content and subjective framing of the programmes from which they graduated. Ten of these interviewees were drawn from programmes that feature substantial elements of humanities and social sciences. Their accounts were presented in juxtaposition with those of the other five interviewees. The training provided by the programmes from which the latter five graduated were presented by these interviewees as professional, specialised, or technical.⁵ Pseudonyms are used to address the interviewees presented below.

The presented findings do not claim statistical representativeness of objective "true" experience meanings. Presented findings cannot be empirically generalised. Instead, they seek to elucidate how higher education training is translated into employability in ways informed by interpretive processes in study-to-work and job transitions, workplace interactions, and the application of skills.

Table 2. Profile of the interviewees whose accounts are presented in this paper

Name	Full-time position at the time of the interview	First full-time position (after graduation)	Number of years after graduation at the time of the interview	Programme
Programmes providing training in humanities and social sciences (self-financing institutions)				
Dorothy	Teaching assistant in a higher education institution	Teaching assistant in a primary school	1	Creative arts
Ethan	Photographer	Junior photographer	2	
Jackie	Project reporter	Project reporter	2	
Mandy	Welfare worker	Multimedia technician	2	
Bonnie	Marketing executive	Logistics coordinator	4	Media and cultural studies
Mario	Class coordinator	Sales assistant	2	
Ivan	Associate marketing officer	Project coordinator	2	Journalism
Selina	Communication ambassador	Communication ambassador	2	
Alice	Programme worker	Programme worker	4	Social sciences
Mark	Personal secretary	Personal secretary	3	
Programmes providing professional, specialised, or technical training (self-financing institutions)				
Cyrus	Logistics officer	Logistics officer	2	Testing science
Frances	System administrator	System administrator	2	Information science
Kevin	Relationship manager	Junior auditor	4	Business
Programmes providing professional, specialised, or technical training (publicly funded institutions)				
Derek	Engineer	Assistant engineer	4	Engineering
Teresa	Engagement and experiment manager	Project assistant	6	Design

Source: authors.

5. Interviewees whose programmes feature substantial humanities and social sciences training include those graduating from a degree that can be grouped under programmes in creative arts, media and cultural studies, journalism, and social sciences. Those whose programmes were considered to offer professional, specialised, or technical training include those graduating from programmes that can be grouped as engineering, business, information science, testing science, and design.

Data analysis and the presentation of arguments are restricted by the limitations of the sample: the majority of graduates of degree-awarding institutions who graduated within four years of the interview ($N = 28$) graduated from programmes in humanities and social sciences ($N = 21$). It will be remarked in the discussion where the number of years that had passed after graduation at the time of the interview could have made a difference in the experiences recounted and in the interpretations of employability. Employers' perspectives were inferred based on interviewees' accounts, but triangulation of graduates' and employers' accounts is not possible. These limitations should be borne in mind in the reading and interpretation of the findings.

Findings and discussion

Experience of study-to-work transition

Higher education graduates are often said to be employed in jobs and fields "mismatched" with their skills nowadays. In this sense, it appears that skills mismatch in first full-time jobs⁶ did happen to five of the ten humanities and social sciences graduates. This happened because they chose to work in positions where they had worked part-time previously (e.g., media and cultural studies graduates working as a sales assistant manning a fashion store, and as a logistics coordinator in e-commerce packing goods and handling invoices, respectively), to take a teaching assistant job to finance an internship that was seen as a bridge to the desired career (e.g., creative arts graduate aspiring to a career in film production and direction), or to assume positions in marketing and public relations after a string of odd jobs in multimedia production (e.g., journalism graduates). Nevertheless, such experiences were not necessarily articulated in terms of mismatch. When understood in the context of the interview narratives, these experiences can be more meaningfully described as strategies for exploiting opportunities and accumulating resources to bridge oneself to an already-identified "right" job, or to help one identify such a job.

In contrast, narratives of relatively haphazard study-to-work transitions were absent in the interviews with the five graduates with degrees that were deemed to offer professional, specialised, and technical training. Derek, an engineering graduate, started as assistant engineer, was later promoted to engineer, and expected "promotion, which is a rather routine [process of] seven to eight years, then probably project engineer, then senior engineer." (20 August 2018) Kevin, a business graduate, started as junior auditor. At that time, he expected to "attain experience in an audit firm," "pass five papers [exams]," and become an accountant upon the employer's verification of his working experience. Afterwards, he would presumably "leave for a commercial firm, or become a financial controller in an established firm and not necessarily an audit firm." (25 August 2018) As for Frances, an information science graduate, he first sought advice about career options. He would later start as a system administrator in a bank doing project management, and seek further advice about "what certification is needed, [and] what makes you more valuable," (26 July 2018) before he attained the certification required for his preparation for impending job transition.

The above shows that the study-to-work transition of Derek, Kevin, and Frances was guided by an understanding of their possible

career paths and the professional qualifications required for career progression (registration as engineer for Derek, qualification for Chartered Financial Analyst for Kevin, and project management professional certification for Frances).

The cases of Cyrus, a testing science graduate, and Teresa, a design graduate, were different: Cyrus saw his training in testing science as "technical" but "not very professional," had no interest in laboratory work, and landed a job as a logistics officer in a shipping firm. Teresa was equipped with technical design skills. She did not consider her training "professional," but she landed a project assistant job in a design organisation anyway.

What the above discussion suggests is that seamless transition into "matched" jobs, as predicted by the logic of human capital theory, appears more feasible for graduates whose training benefits from professionalised and institutionalised career paths that had been made clear to them upon graduation, and/or from the technical skills with which they were equipped. This does not tell the whole story, however, and does not explain Cyrus' study-to-work transition. To explore further, an understanding of the context in which skills are applied in jobs and workplaces is required.

Construction of relevant skills in the workplace

Skills mismatch is often addressed as a result of macro-level labour market changes that require skills lacking in higher education graduates. How skills are applied in workplaces at the micro-level is examined in more depth below.

The ten humanities and social sciences graduates identified judgement, critical thinking, and foresight as the attributes required at work. Nevertheless, their discussion suggested that these attributes could only be exercised under certain circumstances. For instance, as an associate marketing officer at a retail bookstore chain, Ivan (journalism graduate) was delegated the responsibility and authority to plan marketing projects. He could inject his perspective into decision-making ranging from resource exchange to language editing. He constantly had questions thrown at him and had advice sought from him.

In contrast, circumstances such as short deadlines, assignment of monotonous tasks, and bureaucratic organisational culture were reported by other humanities and social sciences graduates to be stifling the application of what graduate attributes commonly allude to.

For instance, Jackie (creative arts graduate) emphasised the importance of unleashing her creativity in her first job as graphic designer. In fulfilling a copywriting task relating to coffee marketing, she took the time to do a lot of thinking with respect to the composition of an image, its focus, its text, etc. This, however, was from her perspective misunderstood by her employer as her being "loosely focused," "lacking concentration," and most importantly, "too slow." Similar sentiments about short production time were shared by her creative arts counterpart Ethan. In his first job as junior photographer, Ethan was routinely allowed only eight hours to produce what he considered to be 14 hours of work. This was asking simply too much of him; thus, he chose to give up meeting "expectations of [technical] quality" in his production.

6. All jobs referred to in the rest of the following discussion are full-time positions, unless otherwise specified.

Short deadlines aside, the lack of meaningfulness derived from monotonous tasks also explains why creative skills might not be optimally exercised. In her first job as a multimedia technician in a school, Mandy (a creative arts graduate) was required to produce “200 one-to-two-minute (video) clips” in a year. Her creativity dissipated:

I really wanted to [be creative], but eventually [I was only] turning them [video clips] into products speedily (...). I am a tool (...). I was being ordered [to do things] (...). Sometimes I find myself doing meaningless things, that is whatever tasks they [colleagues] don't want. (16 August 2018)

Corporate culture that emphasises meeting performance figures can also leave limited room for critical thinking. In her second job as marketing executive in e-commerce, Bonnie found it hard to share with her colleagues and superiors her perspective on how research data should be more meaningfully analysed. This was because she felt that everyone around her believed the job to be done “so long as [social media hit rate] figures are reported to the boss.”

Juxtaposing Ivan's experience with those of Bonnie and the three creative arts graduates, it becomes clear that the lack of room or expectations for graduates to contribute their original input is a particularly stultifying feature of the workplace for graduates. This kind of work experience should not, however, be understood as limited to humanities and social sciences graduates whose training seems focused more on generic or soft skills. Skills gained from what were deemed “professional,” “specialised,” or “technical” degrees could also find no room to be demonstrated at work.

As a system administrator in a bank, Frances expected to apply his expertise in programming, database, and project management. Nevertheless, such application was inhibited by the requirement to adhere to procedures in his organisation, where he believed that “your ‘flow’ is your boss's ‘flow,’” i.e., he must do the job the way as instructed by his superior. He commented: “what can you achieve when you keep following [the procedures]? Very constraining. Very troublesome, very tired of this.” (26 July 2018)

What should be borne in mind is that the requirement to adhere to procedures is not necessarily perceived as stultifying when room for original input and for the exercise of autonomy and authority is available. This could be made possible, ironically, in less-than-desirable work conditions of understaffing. This is exemplified in the case of Cyrus, who worked as a logistics officer in a shipping firm, a first job that on the surface did not match his technical degree at all. He reported to have “learnt the ropes” from a staff member not even formally employed in the firm. He was in charge of his own work schedule, and was soon assigned the responsibility to manage juniors. He admitted that all he did was clerical work in handling invoices and coordinating between clients, which required him “to have good memory, to bear in mind the flow,” and “to be clear about how to do it” (25 September 2018) at every step. At the same time, however, he also described how he took three months to “master” this process.

The discussion above shows that the meaningfulness of employment (Pham 2021) is key; how skills are applied cannot be read off simply through what is deemed to be the “professional” or “technical” nature of a degree, or the match-up of a degree with a job position and title. Establishing such meaningfulness and sustaining it

is a process that takes place over time. This explains why those who had graduated for a relatively long period of time were in a better position to articulate how higher education training can be translated into skills that can be transferred across job positions as one's career progressed. This is even if skills appeared mismatched when one began working.

For example, the tasks assigned in Kevin's first job as junior auditor were as monotonous as: “Examining the vouchers, invoices, ensuring correct counting. The whole day was about add, subtract, multiply, and divide using the calculator.” (25 August 2018) Kevin saw no room to apply his skills, which could have been drawn upon in drafting auditing reports and preparation of bank loans. Nonetheless, upon transitioning into the position of general banking officer and later relationship manager, he finally had the freedom to build upon his technical knowledge and his awareness of global trends to market insurance and investment products in his own terms about: “how to impart the ideas, to make the client feel comfortable, and to offer the knowledge to help the client know what he/she needed.”

In the case of Teresa, she began working as a project assistant in event management. In her description:

My tasks were then minor, catering, making sure they [the visitors to the exhibitions] eat this in the morning and that in the afternoon. Logistical matters, prop material preparation (...). Shadowing more experienced colleagues. Sending papers to speakers (...), setting up social media pages.

Notwithstanding the above, Teresa's interview narrative illuminates the critical role played by her ability to blend technical expertise in design with knowledge about sustainable urban planning to actively learn from the seemingly routine administrative work as presented above:

It looked like admin [work]. but when you entered a hotel, where to put the signage, how to make it a comfortable entry, the details needed to be applied. (...) You [the visitors] don't need to think (...), but the [setup of the] line [the pavement lane set up for exhibition visitors] took some planning [on my part] (18 August 2018).

Teresa highlighted how the aforesaid experience offered her what would later help her manage job transitions: the exposure to design thinking perspectives. She would later take on projects in social innovation, which involved communications, copywriting, even marketing, while at the same time taking up freelance design jobs. She saw her jobs as relatively low-paid and stressful, yet highly meaningful.

The discussion in this section shows that skills do not inhere in a degree, nor are they possessed by graduates in such a way that they can be seamlessly translated into “matched” jobs. Rather, the application of knowledge and skills necessarily involves interactions with employers and superiors, as well as colleagues and clients in the workplace. How skills are applied are dynamically constituted and change in response to how workers are observed and interpreted by employers and others (Boden and Nedeva 2010; Holmes 2015; Bailey and Belfield 2019). This perspective sensitises us to the ways in which skills become mismatched among graduates across disciplines regardless of whether they are deemed to offer “professional” or “technical” training. That being said, it is in the interview narratives

of humanities and social sciences graduates, rather than the others, that the articulations of the relevance of higher education training to employability are found to be fraught with tensions.

Tensions about “valuable” skills, “relevant” degrees, and “employability”

In examining how humanities and social sciences graduates articulated the relevance of their degree training to their employability, what emerges is that these graduates were drawing upon assumptions about the differential meanings and value attached to what were deemed to be “professional,” “specialised,” or “technical” skills.

These graduates might have had a relatively haphazard study-to-work transition, but they by no means failed to recognise the skills that their degrees offered. They described themselves as having been trained in “thinking” approaches and skills, which, as Mark (social sciences graduate) put it, are not confined or restricted by “strict frameworks.” Bonnie (media and cultural studies graduate) highlighted the training of “sense”: “the bosses do not even know what they want, but I can tell the ideas of what you [the bosses] want to express.” (1 August 2018) Selina (journalism graduate) reported learning how to identify original news angles and to empathise with people or matters on the margins of mainstream society.

What is remarkable is, however, the repeated comparisons made between these graduates and holders of sub-degree programmes. The latter were either considered to be competitors, or to have attained occupational statuses that these graduates envied. What emerges is the differentiation made between their (degree) training in abstract, theoretical, and “thinking” knowledge and the vocational training offered at the sub-degree level (Bailey and Belfield 2019). Poignantly expressed among creative arts graduates was how their training in aesthetic sense, logic, and abstract thinking sought to “enlighten”:

We emphasise that we are not [institution X which offers sub-degree A], not [institution Y which offers sub-degree B]. We teach about the mindset.” (Interview with Dorothy, 5 July 2018)

Commercial media production (e.g., photography), perceived to be sought after by employers in the labour market, was deemed: “workmanlike, [with the workers] only knowing how to manufacture things that look good, but know nothing about the underlying ideas.” (Interview with Ethan, 13 August 2018)

Despite what is presented above, the humanities and social sciences graduates reported difficulties in presenting their employability in job-seeking. Mark (personal secretary of a judge) aspired to a career in journalism, but could not find “special selling points” in his degree because he had no relevant internship experience. Conversely, journalism graduate Ivan lamented his lack of “concrete” training. Ivan’s counterpart Selina (communication ambassador in a utilities company) aspired to a job in media postproduction, but she compared her competitiveness unfavourably with sub-degree holders who were considered to have received relatively “specialised” training, in, for example, the basics of machine operation. Creative arts graduate Mandy compared her training unfavourably to her sub-degree counterparts as well, where:

Students [in sub-degree programmes] are taught in more detail how to do better lighting. People [employers] (...) think they [the said students] are more professional, really, [with] more specialised [training]. (16 August 2018)

Interactions with the labour market during study-to-work transitions sensitised these graduates to the superior value attached to “specialised” and “concrete” training in the eyes of employers. This led to the redefining of what they inferred as signals of what constitutes employability (Tholen 2015) and the adjustment of strategies in subsequent job transitions. Mandy, as well as media and cultural studies graduate Mario, both strategically emphasised their presentation of technical skills when seeking a second job outside media production (as welfare worker and class coordinator). They contemplated “what could have been” had they trained in dispensing studies, nursing, and physiotherapy, because the qualifications conferred would in their eyes be unproblematically articulated with employment (as dispensers, nurses, and physiotherapists respectively). Mario’s counterpart Bonnie struggled to effectively present her degree as fitting job requirements when seeking jobs in the marketing field; she eventually secured her second job by drawing upon her past work experience in e-commerce. Dorothy (after completing an internship and a string of odd jobs) and Alice (social sciences graduate, after four years as a programme worker) would later pursue a higher degree in response to perceived career stagnation.

In a nutshell, humanities and social sciences graduates’ narratives were fraught with tensions because they realised during their study-to-work transition that their training was not necessarily neatly aligned with the labour market. They had trouble “packaging” their training in relatively “amorphous,” “non-technical” skills and non-codified knowledge as directly transferable to the workplace (Bailey and Belfield 2019). In contrast, tensions in the articulation of the relevance of higher education training to employability are absent in the interview narratives of the other five graduates. The “professional,” “specialised,” or “technical” nature of the training of the latter group can be said to have been either taken for granted or not seen as relevant to employability. It can be surmised that they had less trouble in searching for external signals that define what constitutes employability (Tholen 2015). They negotiated their employability in the labour market by drawing upon interpretive frameworks distinct from those of their humanities and social sciences counterparts. The aforesaid tensions also foreground the differential value attached to (professional/technical/vocational/generic) skills and (degree/sub-degree) qualifications that can be understood as ranked on a symbolic hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984) unique to the Hong Kong context (Waters and Leung 2013; Lam and Tang 2021). What is striking (and ironic) is how humanities and social sciences graduates considered sub-degree holders to be more employable or in more enviable labour market positions, given previous findings of the disadvantage of sub-degree holders in employment earnings and status (Wu 2010; Lee 2016).

Conclusion and implications

The presented findings elucidate how skills are matched or mismatched in higher graduates’ study-to-work transitions and what

this implies for our understanding of graduate employability. Skills become mismatched not necessarily because employability skills are lacking or are not recognised by graduates (Dinh, Luong, and Pham 2023). Rather, employability is better understood as how skills are presented, interpreted, and negotiated in interactions in the labour market and in workplaces (Holmes 2013, 2015) in ways guided by interpretive frameworks specific to the institutional context (Tholen 2015). What are deemed professional, specialised, or technical skills and their associated knowledge and programmes are considered by the interviewees to be relatively more valuable on a symbolic hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984). In view of this, assumptions of human capital theory that higher education training equips graduates with skills that can be seamlessly translated into employment outcomes (e.g., earnings, time to land a first job, occupational status) and employability could therefore be skewed in favour of graduates of certain degrees but not others. What constitutes the “right” job for a graduate needs to be understood in the context of study-to-work transition and of the micro-level subjective and interpretive processes involved as graduates encounter and interact with the labour market and the workplace. Perspectives of graduates need to be better understood in order to realise the visions and objectives of the employability agenda of boosting prospective graduates’ skills.

Implications

Changes in higher education opportunities reshape public expectations about social mobility, with implications for social integration (Post 2010). Thus, at a time when higher education is perceived as increasingly irrelevant to graduate employment earnings, occupational attainment, and social mobility, the study of the experience and subjective interpretations of how higher education training is translated into graduate employability is highly pertinent. It informs our understanding of the extent to which society accepts the legitimate role of higher education institutions in distributing and allocating life-chances. This is especially true in the Hong Kong context when we consider how the higher education expansion is supported by privatisation, wherein full-time undergraduate students in the self-financing sector pay higher tuition fees⁷ (Post 2010; Lee 2016).

In this regard, the studies of Wong (2020) and Waters (2018) both demonstrate that local higher education students continued to have faith in meritocratic competition; this is what grounds the legitimacy of an unequal higher education system characterised by hierarchies of (publicly funded/private self-financing) institutions and (degree/sub-degree) programmes. Education and higher education continue to be seen as a legitimate means for achieving social success. It remains to be clarified, however, to what extent this holds at a time when debates abound concerning the relevance of higher education to graduates’ employment outcomes and social mobility. It thus becomes imperative for the meanings of graduate employability to be interrogated. Doing so permits an understanding of what these graduates consider to be acceptable jobs in relation to their training and qualifications. This helps us understand why, the aforesaid debates notwithstanding, degrees are seen to have become even more important nowadays for higher education graduates to secure employment of a relatively high status (Ip and Chiu 2016). This, in turn, helps us explain the opportunity trap (Brown 2003) that keeps people investing in higher education when degrees are shown to

be yielding diminishing returns (Mok and Wu 2016; Wheelahan and Moodie 2022). The interrogation of graduate employability is especially important in view of two developments in higher education in the post-Covid-19 era, both of which emphasise the relevance of (high-level) skills in higher education developments: (1) the launching of universities of applied sciences (UASs); (2) and the acceleration of internationalisation of higher education in connection with national integration.

Universities of applied sciences (UASs)

It was announced in the 2023 Policy Address that the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government will facilitate the establishment of UASs⁸ in a move to raise the status of vocational and professional education.⁹ Existing self-financing institutions will be supported to develop into UASs to offer applied degree programmes related to technical professions and to help students hone practical skills in relevant fields.¹⁰ The approval of an existing self-financing university to become the first UASs was announced on 21 March 2024. While it is hard to draw anything conclusive about this nascent initiative, degrees awarded by UASs are expected to make up for the vocational and technical skills that higher education graduates with traditional academic degrees are said to be lacking (Mok and Qian 2018).

Essentially, applied sciences degrees promise to combine the supposed status or esteem of a degree with concrete and practical training, the latter of which is associated with sub-degree programmes as suggested in the words of the humanities and social sciences graduates presented above. There is potential for UASs to disrupt and redress the effects of the symbolic hierarchy unique to the Hong Kong higher education context (Waters and Leung 2013): that is, as discussed earlier, the relative value attached to skills, qualifications, and institutions that varies along the degrees/sub-degree divide and the extent to which training is deemed professional, specialised, or technical. Nevertheless, the aspirations of UASs can still be said to be guided by the problematic assumption that higher education training can be seamlessly and “directly” applied to the workplace. As pointed out in the literature, the concept of “jobs that require a bachelor’s degree” cannot be assumed to be well-defined in the first place (Bailey and Belield 2019: 169). As the presented findings show, this is because skills can only be applied in enabling work environments and dynamic workplace interactions. Also, the relevance of skills and how their application is evaluated is constantly subject to the interpretation of employers in hiring processes and in the workplace (Boden and Nedeva 2010; Holmes 2015; Bailey and

7. Eligible students enrolled in full-time undergraduate programmes in self-financing institutions are subsidised by the Non-means-tested Subsidy Scheme for Self-financing Undergraduate Studies in Hong Kong (NMTSS), effective since 2017/2018, or by the Study Subsidy Scheme for Designated Professions/Sectors (SSSDP) for specified programmes (effective since 2015/2016).

8. Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, “The Chief Executive’s 2023 Policy Address” (paragraph 159, p. 68-9), 25 October 2023, <https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/2023/en/policy.html> (accessed on 27 June 2024).

9. For a discussion of the professionalisation of vocational education in Hong Kong, which is commonly understood as an alternative path to be taken by lower-achieving students often coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, see Lee, Lee, and Lam (2022).

10. Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, “The Chief Executive’s 2023 Policy Address” (paragraph 160, p. 69), 25 October 2023, <https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/2023/en/policy.html> (accessed on 30 June 2024).

Belfield 2019): even graduates of what are deemed “specialised” and “technical” degrees, such as business graduate Kevin and information science graduate Frances as presented in the earlier section, need to negotiate their identity as employable in workplace conditions that are not always considered to facilitate the application of their skills.

Most importantly, the effectiveness for UASs graduates of disciplines characterised by the training of knowledge of a more amorphous and less-codified nature (e.g., humanities and social sciences) to effectively present their employability in the labour market cannot be assumed. After all, the employability of these graduates hinges upon the interpretive frameworks that inform the understanding of the relative standing of graduates (Li Z. 2013; Tholen 2015). This is especially true when we consider that vocational education has historically been considered inferior in Hong Kong (Lee, Lee, and Lam 2022). The presented findings suggest that not all forms of vocational-oriented training are considered professional in the same way as training in engineering, nursing, physiotherapy, etc. The latter three degrees do not need to convince people that they are “applied” because they are professionalised, with career paths institutionally structured, while others, such as those providing training in creative media production, are not. It thus remains to be seen to what extent applied sciences degrees contribute to altering the way the value of degrees is signalled in hiring processes and workplace interactions (Tomlinson and Anderson 2020). This goes a long way in alleviating the differentiation in employment outcomes of graduates of different disciplines and the unevenness in the development of different industries and professions (Ip and Lui 2019).

Internationalisation of higher education and national integration

At the same time, it should be noted that the employability agenda geared towards strengthening the skills training of prospective higher education graduates in Hong Kong are buttressed by the internationalisation of higher education (Lo 2017; Pan 2021). This involves, among others, the recruitment of an increasing proportion of nonlocal students, the majority of whom come from Mainland China, into higher education institutions.¹¹ Access by Mainland Chinese students to local higher education has thus been widened (ibid.). In addition, skilled migrants, notably high-earning and skilled workers from Mainland China, are more aggressively pursued in the post-Covid-19 era. This is evident in the introduction of the Top Talent Pass Scheme (2022), which followed the steps taken via the Immigration Arrangements for Nonlocal Graduates (IANG, 2008) (which aims to retain nonlocal university graduates to stay, work, and possibly attain permanent residency (Chan and Chen 2024)), as well as the Quality Migrant Admission Scheme (QMAS, 2006) and Admission Scheme for Mainland Talents and Professionals (ASMP, 2003) launched much earlier. The continual relaxation or broadening of the eligibility criteria stipulated by the aforesaid schemes suggests that Hong Kong’s participation in the “global war for talent” (Brown and Tannock 2009) is a step towards deepening the special administrative region’s integration with Mainland China. Notwithstanding the effects of discrimination and prejudice in local sociocultural and political environments (Chan and Chen 2024), the employability of study migrants from Mainland China is expected to benefit from the intensifying economic ties between Mainland China and Hong

Kong, given their competency in Mandarin Chinese, networks, and connections on the Mainland, as well as their understanding of the legal institutions and tax systems therein, among others (Li Y. 2022). In the opposite direction, measures have been put in place to engage local youth in education and work contexts in Mainland China via exchange and internship programmes, as well as arrangements for admission to Mainland Chinese higher education institutions that were put in place since 2012.

What the above suggests are changes in the opportunity structure as “local” higher education increasingly serves a national agenda (Pan 2021) in the post-Covid-19 context. Obviously, the opportunity structure of Hong Kong has been continually reshaped since 1997, facilitated through the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) in 2003 and the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (the development plan of which was released in 2019). Nonetheless, the more recent challenges arising out of population ageing and manpower shortage has accelerated changes in the makeup of the transborder flow of people and capital, alongside changes in manpower needs and demands, decision-making in hiring, and strategies in job-seeking in Hong Kong. As the horizons of employment and career opportunities expand beyond the special administrative region’s territory, the interpretive frameworks upon which graduates and employers draw in making sense of graduate employability are bound to shift.

It is emphasised that education and career opportunities based in Mainland China would offer local youth upward social mobility opportunities (Pan 2021). Concerns about social and cultural integration remain disincentives for local youth (Mok and Zhu 2021) in this regard, however. Also, such opportunities are perceived to be more exclusively open to those with professional and specialised training (Fung and Leung 2018). What can be expected is that the divide between those who are mobile across the Mainland China-Hong Kong border and those who are not will become increasingly salient in differentiating graduate prospects. In this sense, the study of the translation of higher education training into graduate employability will shed important light on whether and how participation in a local higher education system serving a national agenda continues to be seen as relevant to individuals’ pursuit of social mobility. This, in turn, will inform our understanding of the role that local higher education plays in distributing and allocating life-chances and in fostering social integration in the post-Covid-19 era.

Final remarks

How can degree holders fathom their edge vis-à-vis non-degree holders in a massified higher education system when transitioning to work in post-Covid-19 Hong Kong? An understanding of this is pivotal to addressing the question of how higher education can continue to be accepted as a legitimate means for distributing social mobility opportunities, allocating life-chances, and achieving social and personal success. Without adequate understanding of the experience and subjective interpretations of the translation of higher education

11. Starting from the 2024/2025 academic year, the admission quota of nonlocal students to government-funded postsecondary institutions will be doubled to 40%. See Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, “The Chief Executive’s 2023 Policy Address” (paragraph 158, p. 67), 25 October 2023, <https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/2023/en/policy.html> (accessed on 27 June 2024).

training into graduate employability, debates about the relevance of higher education to social mobility will linger without a resolution. Qualitative inquiries can contribute to unpacking entangled discourses of (higher) education, credentials, skills, professional training/work, and employability. This sensitises us to the unfolding nature of the pursuit of employability (Pham 2021), socioeconomic advancement, and upward mobility. It avoids the pitfalls of reading off employability from job titles or from matching up degrees with job titles, and of proxying occupational information to the class position of young workers in the study of their social mobility. Instead, researchers are allowed an understanding of young people's experience and interpretations of their contexts in relation to their planning for the future (Furlong 2011) without being restricted by assumptions at the policy level (as in, for example, those underlying the employability agenda). Specifically in Hong Kong, it is important in relevant research to reflect how imaginations of "good" life, e.g., the stability and

security of middle-class careers that have long been associated with social mobility, do not necessarily figure in young people's aspirations and negotiation of their nonlinear transition to work and to adulthood. Research endeavours as such will more fruitfully complement observations of macro-level trends of youth employment, and inform policy and practice in higher education at a time when the local demographic and social and cultural makeup continue to diversify.

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