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An Investigation in Student Agency between Vocational and Research Students in Chinese Higher Education



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Abstract

Despite improvements in Chinese higher education, vocational education and students still experienced stagnation, in terms of both resources and perceptions. Their disadvantages include structural, institutional and cultural aspects. The study investigates and compares student agency in both vocational education and research universities, enriching and critiquing the macro-level structural lens by emphasizing students as active agents. It offers a bottom-up explanation of student agency, investigating contributing factors from all of internal, external, and collective perspectives.

The study deploys a mix-method design. The survey of students shows no significant difference in composite agency factors between the vocational and research university students t(69) = *.427, p = .670*. However, it finds that students who received bursaries were significantly lower in agency than students who did not, t(66) = -2.13, *p* = .037. The institutional constraints on low SES students are discussed in relation to structural theorisations such as the Bourdieusian framework. In contrast, the semi-structured interviews with twenty-three participants revealed the transformational and reflective power of student agency. The thesis argues that among these students, habitus and capital were not determinants of student agency. Misfits between habitus and circumstances led to habitus transformation, resilience and resistance. The process of transformation was apparent in evolving identity, values and future plans. Reflexivity was encouraged through deep learning, participatory activities and mobility. Finally, conformity was identified as a form of collective agency among Chinese higher education students as a means of resisting 'powerlessness'.

Agency works both as a mean and as an end in the recognition and empowerment of less resourced members in the higher education system. Recommendations are made in relation to both students and policies.

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Abbreviations

HEI = Higher Education Institution

VE = Vocational Education

VHE = Vocational Higher Education

SCL = Student Centred Learning

SES = Social Economic Status

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Chapter 1 Introduction

This chapter provides contextual information on vocational higher education, especially in the context of Chinese society. It presents the rationale and aims of this study and ends with an explanation of the thesis structure.

1.1 Statement of the problem - Chinese Context

Chinese higher education (HE) in recent decades has experienced radical reforms. But despite recent achievements in the Chinese HE system, the sector of vocational higher education (VHE, i.e. colleges) still experiences stagnation in both resources and status. The hierarchy is obvious. University graduates receive a larger graduate premium. VHE institutions are usually regarded as inferior to universities, have poor teaching quality, less funding, and fewer prospects. Joined with poor quality, colleges often have rigid regulations due to outdated bureaucracy and constraining schedules with little freedom and space left for student personal development. Vocational schools have proven largely insufficient in training employees with advanced skills for the Chinese high-tech labour market (Wu & Ye, 2010).

Issues in social justice are pronounced, considering that students who went to vocational colleges often experience poor learning experiences in the past and come from lower social-economic backgrounds. As a result, students entering this route are assumed to enter a vicious cycle of learning. We need to know more about their experiences. For example: How are individual identities in vocational education challenged, transformed, and influenced? What is the role of higher education in this process? Most importantly, how is student agency plays a role in shaping their learning trajectory?

The existing literature suggests that higher education programmes do not typically or systematically support students' conscious agency building but, rather, focus on content-based knowledge construction. In response to these challenges, particularly in relation to vocational education, Wu and Ye (2018) mention a need for student-centred teaching, a teacher role that exerted less control, and critical thinking abilities among the students, labelled as 'integrated teaching' that constitute both Confucianism along with pragmatism. Meanwhile, Chinese policymakers have begun to put forward a humanist approach to Chinese higher education. This suggests that there is a need to recognize and strengthen student agency in higher education, especially among vocational students who experience more structural constraints.

Empirical education research in China has largely focused on research universities, and few have studied the social impact of vocational colleges (Wang & Guo, 2019), especially at the upper level. Even though in VE, the structural and developmental constraints has been widely recognized (Wu & Ye, 2018), the micro student level and how

students' life is shaped has often been neglected. For instance, since the purpose of vocational education is directly linked at the labour markets, early research is focused more on the relevance of VHE to labour market needs, supply and demand issues (Lam & Xiao, 2000), or graduate employabilities (Velde, 2009). Research at the student and institutional levels mainly deploys a systematic and quantitative approach, aiming at generalizable policy suggestions (Ding, 2004). Studies from mainland China have rarely considered the socio-cultural dimension or personal stories behind the big statistics. Together, these considerations suggest the need for more research that embodies a qualitative and integrated approach pitched at the student and institutional levels, and that considers how students are impacted and act within structures.

Discussion of the relationship between actor and structure can meaningfully build on Bourdieu's theory of capital and field. For example, Ciupak and Stich (2011) explore the relationship between the college experience and choices, and family and institutional habitus. This study focuses largely on the behaviour and perception of urban middle-class families, and reveals their sense of reflexive agency embedded in China's dual-reward structure through accumulated political-social capital. However, they undermine human agency despite social class embedded in each student. Arguably, Bourdieu's theory to some extent overlooks the role of agency and stresses more the influence of structure. He sees the operation of practices occurring in higher education dependent on habitus, whereby individuals in the field act or think in certain ways. Therefore, an agentic perspective on the relation between structure and agency provides a more integrated perspective and a potentially more positive outlook on students in disadvantaged contexts.

1.2 Focus of the study

The current study has two focuses. The first aim is to explore the nature of student agency in Chinese higher education, from a bottom-up approach. Secondly, the research aims to understand how agency can be encouraged or restricted in different kinds of higher education institutions. This will help us understand how student exercises their agency in different institutional structure. In particular, the research investigates how vocational students currently use, or can use, their agency to break the vicious circle the society has created for them.

My interests in this area stem from advocacy for a liberal purpose of education. The family aspirations and social expectations of everyone are the same: getting the highest degree possible and assuming direct economic and social status returns. Yet, the reality clearly shows a more complicated relation between education and the labour market. If the end goal is the same, to secure a job, how is university better than colleges to prepare young people for life? Why should students in vocational education lack opportunities for liberal enlightenment? Although hierarchy and disparity of resource are inevitable,

knowledge does not have to be distributed in hierarchical fashion. I would like to find out more about how higher education functions as a 'sieve' (Steven, Armstrong, & Arum, 2008) to stratify population; whether, why, and how students become seemingly less capable, or less intellectually stimulated in different education systems, from an agentic perspective.

In this project, I have aimed to identify inhibitors and encouragers of student agency in institutional structures. I have also hoped to understand and crack the stereotypical stigma of vocational students in Chinese society. Hopefully, this paper can offer an alternative understanding of Chinese higher education from a humanistic perspective. With my limited time in the one-year Masters degree, and geographical restriction with the pandemic, there are limitations in the scale and implementation of the study. Nevertheless, the study aims to shed light on the current Chinese policy orientation to 'quality reform' and introduce an agentic rather than passive perspective on the student experience.

1.3 Research Questions

This mixed-method study has been carried out to acquire in-depth insight into students' experiences. The research has used a combination of surveys and interviews to collect contextual data from colleges students in China. The research questions are:

1. What factors restrict or encourage student agency in one's university experience?
    Sub 1: What factors encourage student agency in one's university experience?
    Sub 2: What factors restrict student agency in one's university experience?

2. Is there a difference in the exercise of student agency between vocational and research universities?
    Hypothesis 1: The agentic orientation of vocational students is different than that of students in the research university.
    Hypothesis 2: The agentic orientation of vocational students is not different than that of students in the research university.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis begins with an introduction that covers key information about the context, rationale and aim of the study. The second chapter is a literature review, which provides an overview of the previous studies relevant to the interplay of structure and agency. The third chapter constructs a holistic conceptualization of student agency that underpins the theoretical framework of the current study. The fourth chapter explains the methodology, philosophical underpinnings, and a mix-method design with questionnaires and semi-

structured interviews. The fifth and sixth chapters present respectively results and discussion of major findings. This thesis ends with a conclusion that entails limitations, recommendations for institutional practices and further research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature on structure and agency in the field of higher education. The literature includes a variety of types such as theoretical papers, empirical studies, and journal articles with a geographical focus. It is not limited to Chinese higher education. It will discuss how higher education constructs student experience, in relation to social, institutional, and cultural aspects, with specific implications in relation to students from vocational higher education.

The chapter starts with a discussion from one end of the theoretical spectrum, which is the social reproduction function of higher education systems on a macro level - how higher education as habitus socially constructs student experience based on the Bourdieusian framework. However, reflexivity is used to transform habitus by disadvantaged students. In the second part, alternative institutional theorists and new conceptualizations will be introduced to discuss higher education as field of practice, especially its contribution to the restriction or liberation of student agency. The third part will discuss the cultural underpinnings that restrict the idea of vocationalism. Compared to neoliberalist values, collective social values can be cultivated in vocational education to resist hegemonic discourse.

2.1 Higher education and social reproduction

Vocational higher education (VHE) represents an inveterate disadvantaged position in relation to general higher education. Previous research has identified issues and challenges facing VHE on the structural and institutional level (Durden & Yang, 2006; Han & Singh, 2004; Velde, 2009; Wu & Ye, 2018). On the macro level, VHE witnesses a higher degree of inequality, as indicated by its higher tuition, limited upward mobility, limited progression to further higher education, narrow skills development, and neglect of the humanities (Xiong, 2010). This is followed by a low degree of market orientation; an insufficiency of intellectual resources and financial investment; and a poor image as to the value of VHE as a tertiary education pathway, in terms of perceptions of the public at large (Durden & Yang, 2006; Shi, 2013). Specifically, Wang and Guo (2019) have examined the characteristics of participants in upper-secondary technical and vocational education (TVE), relative to upper-secondary academic schools. Students mostly come from disadvantaged backgrounds and tend to be female (Wang & Guo, 2019).

Vocational schools have become a unique site contributor to social and class reproduction. Yet there is a lack of discourse containing vocational students' voices. These are marginalised by the public and policymakers. An ethnographic study on the experiences and subjectivities of migrant youth in Shanghai highlighted their limited choice of majors and career trajectories, a problem that persisted because of state intention, market demand

and individual aspirations (Ling, 2015). This study, however, focuses on secondary vocational youth, who are described as passively resisting environmental restrictions such as their Hukou (i.e. Shanghai household registration). When students enter higher education in early adulthood, they may experience more autonomy and development away from the parent, where their agency can be strengthened.

In comparison, in an ethnographic study of two urban vocational high schools, Woronov (2008) identified a new class formed from vocational youth, using Weberian class analyses. This new class demonstrated distinct youth cultures, lifestyles, consumption practices, moral values, and staked a claim for their dignity and value despite their negative social status. These students followed a path that did not conform with the national narrative of individual development. In contrary to the social suspicion and label of 'failure' based on their scores, they grasp opportunities with optimism towards their future. A similar exercise of agency could also apply to higher vocational students where they are able to counter-hegemonic ideology by creating their moral communities and values derailing from public discourses of failure. A related idea comes from Young (cited in Watts & Bridges, 2006) who describes how people deal with mundane jobs, low status and low self-esteem by developing what he calls a 'counter system' or 'counter values' which validated their own lives and provided a source of hope (and aspiration) to the face of collective disadvantage defined by the society. These people developed their own sets of values which differed from the affluent middle-class values of achievement and ambition. As a result, student agency represents a powerful tool against structural constraints.

The Bourdieusian framework helps unravel the structural constraints and reproductive mechanism of the higher education 'field', providing a theory of practice that associate structure and agency together (cited in Burke, 2916). In this framework, higher education is understood as an intellectual field that generates its values and behaviour imperatives that are relatively independent of forces emerging from the economic and political fields (Enders, De Boer, & Weyer, 2013). In addition, universities are understood as social institutions with their power relations and cultural norms (Mann, 2008). The student experience is constructed by accumulated resources as 'capital'; and field-specific norms, values and dispositions as 'habitus'. The social genesis of disparity in life trajectory is accounted for by cumulative effect on the differing levels of participation - rather than a narrow explanation based just on access to economic resources. Capital includes social, cultural, and economic factors, in which cultural capital are internalized dispositions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu describes the habitus as 'socialised subjectivity' (1992). In other words, habitus is an individual process involving choice but is also influenced by structure subconsciously (Burke, 2016). These concepts act partly as methodological tools and a way to thinking to decipher structural effects (Reay, 2004).

The concept of habitus has been used widely in the Anglophone context that explains learner identities in relation to access, helping to widen participation as well as

influence youth decision making for the future. Student aspiration is constrained by a 'self-denying ethos' exacerbated by previous educational trajectories, family/ peer experiences and the general social environment (Bourdieu, 1966). Consequently, the higher education system is regarded as socially reproductive, imposing structural constraints on disadvantaged students in their future trajectories.

Research of habitus settings in China has focused on how disadvantaged students fit or misfit in elite universities (Chen & Tian, 2021; Li, 2015; Liao, 2016; Xie, 2016; Xie & Reay, 2020). On one hand, the literature suggests that habitus is a collective experience because inherent attributes work on an unconscious level - people reproduce their social disadvantages beyond introspection without challenging them. Students with less cultural capital can lack academic skills or social skills (Liao & Wong, 2020). Their families usually lack previous HE experiences so that students are given little guidance. It is at the same time an accumulated set of practices from past and present interactions. Chen & Tian (2020) claim rural students retain the idea of meritocracy in HE and regard studying as the priority in the continuation of previous habitus i.e. high schools. Although the academic achievement gap shrank between rural and urban students as time went on, gaps in student leadership persisted (Zhu, 2018). These bodies of evidence indicate that social and cultural capital can explain partially why students are not on equal ground when entering higher education, and explains why equality of treatment fails to account for these disadvantages.

2.1.1 Transforming habitus

While Bourdieu's thinking tool helps us understand the mechanism of social reproduction, his theory still largely overlooks the roles of agency and reflexivity. There are many examples of habitus transformation for rural students, such as persevering academic achievements despite initial setbacks (Chen & Tian, 2020) and shrinking differences in urban and rural students' self-efficacy and self-esteem (Xu, 2017). However, these studies assume students need to adapt to the environment and leave the responsibility to the individuals. For example, in a four-year longitudinal study on a small sample of students investigating the career preparation trajectories in a highly selective elite university in China, Chen and Tian (2020) highlight the importance of reflexivity in shaping a 'fluid' habitus and multi-faceted career preparation. Since the sample is limited to highly selected elite universities, the students are most likely to have high self-efficacy.

Despite rich in-depth data, this study emphasizes the fits or misfits of a presupposed habitus and fails to capture the agency of the 'downgrading' students. Meanwhile, there is little discussion on the role of the institutional factors that encourage or restrict the exercise of student agency. Resources here only refer to embedded internal or family capital. A life-course view that captures trajectories after graduation may better illuminate the individual development. In sum, the above studies provide a structural deterministic outlook on

student experience but lack an agentic stance that would holistically account for the deprived experience of rural students.

Habitus transformation is said to be compartmentalized because transformation often happens when there are conflicts between the individual's social identity and habitus. In other studies, habitus transformation or identity confusion was not apparent because rural students mobilize their personal capital and refuse to integrate socially (Granfield, cited in Chen & Tian, 2020). Scholars (Li, 2015; Liao, 2016; Xie, 2016; Xie & Reay, 2020) further illustrate the limitation of habitus as the yardstick to discuss the manifestation of student agency. Li (2015) criticised habitus as an outdated look at modern ways of acquiring work opportunities such as required institutional values. Students can gain insights and accrue capital from school-based culture and reflexivity (Li, 2015). In general, Bourdieu did not recognize the construction and growth of habitus from early experience where one's social identity is transforming and becoming all the time.

In addition, while ideas such as field, habitus, cultural capital, and practice are among the influential ideas in studies of educational equity in China, it has been argued that the use of Bourdieu has been largely introductory, selective, and uncritical (Shi & Li, 2018). The use of Bourdieu has been criticized also in the West as too simplistic and selective. Apart from the aforementioned studies, existing research on transforming habitus has largely been based in academic research institutions (Chen & Kang, 2019; Xie, 2016), transnational higher education (Dai, Lingard, Musofer, 2020; Han, 2019), or samples of Chinese students studying abroad (Xu, 2018). Until recently, Chinese scholars have engaged with resilience in relation to Western dominant legitimated theories such as Bourdieu (Mu, 2020). New conceptualizations have developed in recent years, such as the incorporation of network thinking and regression analysis (Mu, 2020). There is also recognition of localised pedagogical capital, discovered through teacher training programs in rural schools (Yin & Mu, 2020).

Theorising the multiple and often contradictory social and identity positions across and within institutions enables the micro and macro power relations between individual and institutional identities and practices to be more closely analysed in widening participation research - thereby revealing the complexity and fluidity of power that includes but extends beyond class differences (Webb et al., 2017). Studies that solely rely on habitus draw from an ideology of liberal humanism, fail to connect habitus to fields of power and the recognition of structure in narrative accounts of agency (Warren & Webb, 2007). A learner identity argument reminds social theorists to integrate into social categories not only power struggle, but also resistance/subversion of power by individuals. Thus this study attempts to capture both sides by recognizing difference resources and practice of fields, and investigating life-stories in context.

2.2 Higher education and institutional practices

Bourdieu's theories, however useful as a toolkit to challenge meta-narratives concerning theory, has become a meta-narrative unto itself (Webb et al., 2017). Since Bourdieu's framework must conflate individual and institutional habitus, this limits the attention given to the impact of institutions' own social status. These oversights dampen the theoretical and empirical richness of the concept and obscure a significant influence on institutional beliefs and behaviour as well as a mechanism of exclusion for marginalized populations (Byrd, 2019).

Institutional theorists shift the focus on power struggle away from 'fields' as a unit of analysis to practice as 'sites of the social' (Schatzki, 2002). Here the restriction of agency is contingent on the availability of resources, institutional and contextual factors influencing the students' lived realities. Research evidence suggests the importance of the mediating role of institutions and how that, in turn, shapes the structure, the possibility and the degree of agency over time (cited in Tran & Vu, 2018). For example, the pedagogic process has been shown to inhibit or constrain working-class students' engagement through lenses of Bernstein's concept of framing and pedagogic device (Crozier and Reay, 2011). Specifically, Bernstein's (2000) suggests that the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment form 'codes' through which dominant actors define and control the particular practices and values required to participate in academic communities. The field is structured by hierarchy in the sense that agents and institutions occupy dominant and subordinate positions.

Similarly, Nixon, Martin, Mckeown & Ranson (1997) proposes a 'pedagogy of recognition 'examine the construction of educational 'failure' in institutions of disadvantage in UK rural areas, and the effects on the empowerment of learners. Therefore the issue is determined by more than the binary structure and agency. It is necessary to also consider the mediating role of institutional practices (Tran & Vu, 2018). These theories together encourage us to thinker about social inclusion and exclusion in a more nuanced context to break through the assumed fields of the university (Webb et al., 2017).

2.3 Higher education and vocationalism

The restriction of vocational higher education not only comes from a socially organized structure but also comes from a cultural and ideological perspective. Increasingly, China has been under the influence of neoliberal policies, such as privatization and marketization. Consequently, education has become more like an investment than a public good. VHE, in general, is widely supported because it is seen as the solution to educational problems in developing economies. It is seen as a way of solving the financial crisis in education, easing pressures on higher education budgets, and also of reducing the unemployment rate among college graduates (Tilak, 2003). However, such 'vocational school fallacies' are recognized in

the seminal work by Foster (1965). The instrumental purpose of vocationalism does not have the utility of face economic returns assumed by a linear relationship between rationalisation and employment (Blaug, cited in Tilak, 2003)

Culturally, scholars believed that the idea of vocationalism was in discrepancy with Chinese traditional culture. Vocationalism is associated with neoliberal ideology, capitalism, and individualism with its emphasis on skill-centred knowledge at the centre of the higher education curriculum. In contrast the Confucian's tradition values theoretical knowledge related to good governance (Xiong, 2011). Brindley (2009) studied the classical texts of Confucian and critiqued the Junzi ideal (a noble man, or a moral ideal) which is associated with high socio-political status (the class or Shi) and the educational elite, as distinct from narrow, practical-minded expertise and trade. Confucius believed that occupations such as farmer or artisan are not compatible or effective in being a Junzi.

In modern China, such embedded ideology can be misleading. The working element of vocational education can be both beneficial to the students and society. Hui, Pun, Qiu, and Koo (2020) reveal that work experience could facilitate pro-social behaviour via the increase of knowledge of both contract-based rights and labour action. It is also associated with other positive outcomes, such as cooperation, civic engagement, and solidarity, among working-class youth. Students of lower SES build work solidarity despite accelerated competition (Smith & Pun, 2018). Shye (2010) provided a systemic study of volunteering with possible benefits. The unfolding agency of the self through interacting with each other, helps to build shared understanding, and fosters a society of trust and cooperative action.

While middle classes' success was based on a 'self of value' in capitalist competition that turns social values into exchange values, working-class subjects are deemed as lacking value and having negative 'self of value', so being unable to play the neoliberal game of self-optimisation or self-enterprise by marketing, exchanging and adding more value to themselves (Skeggs, 2004). A recent paper challenged the exchange-value of neoliberalism and rediscovered new social values of care, cooperation and solidarity that were embedded/created in working-class youth in vocational schools in China. This emerged from in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation (Lu, Koo, & Pun, 2019). This paper sheds light on the potential of vocational education for more than skill-development, and points to collective values derived from personal agency.

These 'micro-foundations of social values' formulated by the working class are highly significant for those who lack cultural capital, yet have gained more value by refusing to defer to exchange value. In rethinking Marx, the role of social values is defined as providing a political ethic for solidarity and social protection. Woronov (2011) helps us recognize how Chinese students in vocational schools are creating alternative forms of 'resistance' to the hegemonic notion of class mobility by not following the rules of schools or teachers, and through their rejection of class, learning has turned them into the 'privileged' marginal, who would build their own culture. The social mechanism of values consists of care in school;

cooperation at workplaces; and solidarity in the community. Overall, the value practices of students' solidarity inform us that value exercises are not limited to the personal level; they can be a grounded practice, gradually developed from one's inner circle to a larger community (Sanghera, 2016).

In conclusion, the work-related element of vocational schools, if carried out properly and supported resourcefully, can potentially realize grassroots cooperation and non-government actors to realize 'education as a public and common good' (Locatelli, 2018). In opposite to the instrumental purpose of vocationalism, education as common good calls into question the current utilitarian model which sees education as a mere individual socio-economic investment. It favours a humanistic approach that places people and their connections with the community at the centre. This vision implies the enhancement of the cultural, social, and relational dimensions of each educational process.

2.4 Summary

This chapter reviews literature from the standpoint of structure argument, pointing out the social reproduction role of higher education and how agents are depicted in the Bourdiesian framework. It introduces institutional theories to deepen the understanding of the higher education field. A recognition of pedagogical constraints in institutional hierarchy helps us understand more the disadvantaged position of vocational students. However, the potential agency was also argued, seen in habitus transformation and class resistance. Finally, the idea of vocationalism is discussed in relation to Chinese culture. The chapter also provides a reappraisal of instrumental, practical, and neoliberal views about pursuing and defining vocation as well as general higher education.

Chapter 3 Operationalization of the Framework of Agency

This chapter rethinks the higher education experience from the other end of the structure-agency debate. It starts by defining what agency is drawing from a range of disciplines, thereby conceptualising and introducing a composite understanding of agency. Following, it operationalizes student agency as three aspects: internal, external, and collective agency, and how students feel encouraged or restricted in relation to each composite factor.

3.1 Conceptualizing agency

Agency is a common and fluid concept that is interpreted differently in various disciplines. For example, in philosophy agency is referred to as free will and voluntary action (Biesta, Ecclestone, & Hughes, 2009). A psychological understanding of agency focuses on the endogenous human ego as the main driver of agentic action (Levine, 2005). This field of study usually stresses rationality as seen in rational choice theory, self-responsibility (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003), and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006). In modern sociology, agency is widely recognized to be bounded by opportunity structures, social networks, and institutions as discussed previously (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Giddens, 1991; Hitlin & Elder, 2007). The structuration theory by Gidden essentially describing how an individual's autonomy is influenced by structure, while structures are maintained and adapted through the exercise of agency. However, a single facet of agency undermines its potential analytical power, thus a holistic approach towards agency is needed (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Hollis (1994) makes the distinction between individualistic and holistic strategies in understanding and explaining human action, in that structural and cultural approaches that count as holistic strategies are more helpful when seeking wider, more encompassing structures and processes.

Modernisation forces individuals to become more agentic and take control of their lives which makes agency more necessary, as well as increasingly difficult to achieve (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Since living in a world of fluid modernity with contingency and uncertainty, individuals are experiencing a heightened sense of freedom and responsibility, accompanied by new anxieties (Sarid, 2017). Sarid (2017) pointed that reflexivity is an important factor in the constitution of agency, but it is not a substitute for moral responsibility. The main point he makes is that an educational process committed to an ongoing reflexive process of identity transformation neither support the development of individual responsibility nor claims to promote freedom and emancipation. Individuals may be over susceptible to external authority while making choices without meticulous moral compasses or value preferences. This corresponds to Beck's idea of a 'risk society' where 'individualization' is a compulsion rather than a free decision of individuals (Beck, 1992). This type of reflexivity

described may be on a psychological or metaphysical level, cognitive ability, or skill. Sarid (2017) was worried that living in liquid modernity, people are influenced by an 'illusion of freedom' (Lee, 2011), or 'negative liberty' (Bauman, 2000) freed of true emancipation. Thus, even when students are given freedom by institutions structurally, they are not morally responsible for their actions or in effect able to achieve effective agency.

Instead, I argue that higher education is one place that can make up for the concern. The sense of agency as under external pressure, as perceived by Bauman (2000), has undermined individuals' ability to develop a strategy that speaks to what they value. Biesta and Tedder (2007) thus raise the question: 'What kind of learning is involved in or follows from living one's life under such condition, and what educational needs follow from this?' Education not only functions as a means of developing cognitive and mental faculties but a critical ability for individuals to create and find meaning within a fluid social climate. Higher education should therefore reflect the kind of people develop and sort of values cultivate from knowledge learning.

Learning promotes agency enables students to act with a sense of purpose, which guides them to flourish and thrive in society (Mead in Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Agency is a way across lifespan in preparing individuals for life and developing greater freedom and personal responsibility, without applying dominating and coercive value systems upon students. Some practical manifestation is concerned with the notion of transformative knowledge (Dirkx, 2012), learning (Mezirow, 2003), curriculum (Ashwin, 2014), and communicative teaching (Huttunen & Murphy, 2012; Sarid, 2012).

3.2 Operationalizing student agency as an analytical tool

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) first distinguished agency as an analytical category in its own right, using a relational pragmatic approach 'as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past, but also oriented toward the future and toward the present'. This idea of agency as social action is influenced both by the dynamic element of agency itself, but also the temporal-relational contexts of action. Similarly, Archer (2007) moves away from a dualism but recognised interdependent yet analytically separable nature between structure and agency. This enables us to empirically account for the contexts of people's actions as causally influencing as well as being influenced by those actions (Hopwood, 2010).

To apply agency in education, Biesta (2006) in 'Learning lives project' studys the interplay between learning and agency and argued that agency is achieved from an ecological way. As Biesta and Tedder (2007, 137) posit, agency is comprised of 'achievements', which 'result from the interplay between individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors in a unique 'ecology' construct throughout

life-course. Therefore, rather than seeing agents merely in the 'field', the university can be seen as a self-narrative ecological system that encompasses actors in transactions.

Hitlin and Elder (1998; 2007) conceptualize agency comprised of self-efficacy, optimism, social support and self-esteem. Agency, in this model, represents an individual capacity, one that is both the result of individual differences (planfulness) as well as achieved successes (self-efficacy) and a sense of temporal, self-reflective understanding about one's life chances (optimism). These theoretical accounts discuss agency in social psychological and life course perspectives.

Empirically, different conceptualizations of agency developed from qualitative narrative data for specific types of populations and in a specific field. Hopwood (2010) studied doctoral students' capacity to enact agency in an Australian university and specifies two forms of agency: needs response agency and agency as struggle. Students exercised needs response agency through their attempts to achieve particular learning, social or wellbeing needs. They enact agency as struggle and resistance when they struggle against or 'breakaway' from injustices or inequalities (Hopwood, 2010). Methodologically, it sheds light on real-life manifestation of agency derived from narratives. Along with Tran & Vu (2018), these research also test institutional forces play a crucial role in supporting or enabling students' capacity to enact agency and in shaping the wider social structures over time.

Tran & Vu (2018) apply positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) to study the agency of international students in VET in Australia. They find four primary constructs for 'agency in mobility': agency for becoming, needs-response agency, agency as struggle and resistance and collective agency for contestation. Similarly studies suggest that students exercising agency as struggle and resistance can potentially transform their present, their future beings and the communities with which they interact. However, this research indicates that international student agency appears to be distinctive as compared to other forms of human agency because the conditions for this group to develop and enact agency involve cross-border educational spaces and transnational relationships, which have strong implications with regard to their potential to redefine their perspectives and their 'selves' or develop 'agency for becoming'. The current study focus on marginalized population aims to show whether these agency constructs apply to local or non-mobile students.

Taken together with the review above, and to fill in the gap, the next part of the review will outline each component of agency and potential enablers and inhibitors.

3.3 Factors determining Agency

3.3.1 Internal Agency

What an agent does at the moment is always informed by his or her past experience, also known as the iteration element defined by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). Past patterns of thought and action give rise to a schematisation of social experience which actors use to

sustain their behaviours in ongoing social interactions. This can range from family upbringing, social relationships, cultural backgrounds, educational experience, and economic circumstances. Empirical studies show that working-class and middle-class students have different access to courses of institutions, restricting achievement of agency and social mobility (Ecclestone & Hughes, 2009). Human capital can be seen as a useful concept to partially explain the psychological manifestation of an agent, corresponding to the social and relational conception of agency.

However, this can be counter-balanced by an agentic personality. A psychological understanding of agency sees humans as inherent proactive agents whose personal characteristics make causal contributions to the course of events. In social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2006), there are four core properties to define internal agency: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness (self-regulation), and self-reflectiveness. Forethought corresponds to the future-oriented 'projective' capacity in Emirbayer and Mische (1998).

A projective dimension of agency gives shape and direction to future possibilities, seen as the first step toward reflexivity (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). There is a popular discourse centre around the role of aspiration in higher education attainment. Harrison and Waller (2018) have identified probable future selves and 'possible selves' are encouraged by engagement and challenges from the community. Furthermore, the exercise of projective freedom also has the potential to imagination of collective projects and in pursuit of common good (Dewey in Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Measurements in psychology are useful in tracking internal agency, yet they are limited because all of them are descriptive rather than than explanatory. Scales such as self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2008) or self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000) are effective in measuring states of mind, but they are mostly more descriptive than explanatory. These scales don't reveal the how and why questions. Since these scales are only on an individual level, the single-discipline approach neglects the collective and external factors. Thus only account for internal agency may risk the over-genetic view of human action, overemphasis on self-responsibility to one's action, next we move on to the external agency.

3.3.2 External Agency

In comparison to internal agency, external agency is understood not only as innate and initiative-creating but also as a response to the environment (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Individual agency is shaped by opportunity structures, social networks and institutions, and often unconsciously reproduce their social-structural milieu (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Giddens, 1991; Hitlin & Elder, 2007). The external agency is demonstrated to be in direct contact with different environments of university, conceptualized as the 'practical-evaluative' capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects in the present (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Specifically, according to Klemencic (2017), student agency is built on two premises. The first one is the possibilities of freedom that lies outside of students, such as students' real opportunities and positive freedoms to do and to be what one values. This premise is similar to MacFarlane (2012)'s definition of student academic freedom, 'both as a right to full and free expression and as a means by which learners can experience a genuinely 'higher' education that enables them to become critical thinkers. The other premise is students' agentic orientations which refer to students' predispositions and will to enactments of agency (James & Biesta, 2007). Restriction of low internal agency can be eased by a well-supported environment or aggravated by a deployed habitat. These theories highlight the importance of social and cultural institutions as enabling factors for the enactment of agency towards things one values.

3.3.3 Collective Agency

The third and often neglect component of agency comes from a collective level. The collective agency is known as the third mode of agency in social cognitive theory, wherein the exercise of collective agency, agents pool their knowledge, skills, and resources, and act in concert to shape their future (Bandura, 2006). People's conjoint belief in their collective capability to achieve given attainments is a key ingredient of collective agency (Bandura, 2006).

While the individual level remains predominant both in the capability literature as well as in agency literature, Griewald and Rauschmayer (2014) and Zimmermann (2006) point out that one limitation of the capability approach is that it does not differentiate between the individual and collective levels. In Sen's conception of agency, human motivation is not only in self-interest but can go beyond to involve sympathy, generosity and commitment to others, such as taking part in community development, poverty reduction (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009), environmental protection (Sen, 2009) and local sustainable development (Pelenc, Bazile, & Ceruti, 2015). Internal agency alone is too individualistic and the idea of habitus lacks concern for social justice. Collective agency recognizes a critical approach in emancipation where there can be no individual emancipation without societal emancipation. Therefore, collective agency is a key construct that is embedded in the discourse and should be recognized.

According to Evans (2002), acts of collective agency are mainly determined by prevailing communal values and social structures. Indeed, it is not because each individual possesses freedoms and rights that he/she will automatically commit him/herself to work with others (Ballet et al., 2007). Collective agency arises from the recognition of one's commitment that gives meaning to this responsibility (Ballet et al., 2007). Similar to individual agency, Pahl-Wostl (2006) demonstrates that collective agency cannot be imposed but emerge through a learning process.

Culture is another important element in collective agency (Elder & Shananhan, 2007). In sociological perspectives, culture is conceived as an overarching frame and narrative of common values, beliefs, attitudes in higher education institutions or common understandings that bind actors together and shape behaviour. The cultural frame of teacher-student and university-student relationships differ significantly across higher education systems between 'authoritarian-paternalistic, democratic-collegiate or managerial-corporate arrangements, each of which invokes different conceptions (or metaphors) of students, such as students as pupils, as a constituency or as customers (Klemencic, 2017). As a result, students' agency may be limited by the expectations as to their role and behaviour inherent in given cultural frames. For example, students conceived of as customers with a high degree of autonomy, assume responsibilities and express individualism undermine the spirit of collective academic experience.

3.4 Differentiating agency in relation to similar constructs

3.4.1 Agency vs capabilities

Freedom is centre stage in Sen's conception of development (Pelenc, Bazile, & Ceruti, 2015). Sen (2014) differentiates two aspects of freedom related to various 'functioning' and wellbeing of a person, namely the opportunity aspect and the process aspect. Opportunity freedom refers to people's ability to achieve things they value, also described as capability. The process of freedom refers to people's capacity to change their situation and, more broadly, to change the social environment that they live in according to their goals and values captured by agency. According to Alkire (2008), human development should not only advance capabilities (opportunity freedoms) but also process freedom (agency). As opposed to passive and docile recipients, Crocker and Robeyns (2010) explain that agency reflects the capacity of individuals and groups to shape their destiny effectively and to help each other to be active participants in the process of change. The normative goal of human development can be subsumed in the improvement of people's capabilities through the exercise of their agency. When people lack agency, i.e., when human development is blocked, empowerment is required to unlock the process aspect of freedom. Therefore, the concepts of capability and agency are closely related (Pelenc, Bazile, & Ceruti, 2015).

3.4.2 Agency vs engagement

When advocating for student-centred learning (SCL) and constructivist learning in higher education, Klemencic (2017) differentiates student engagement from student agency, where she argues that student engagement conceptually fails to sufficiently address student autonomy, self-regulation and choice. Typical measurements of student engagement ask about involvement in educational activity at school, yet do not collect any insights into students' experiences and beliefs about the freedoms and opportunities they have had that

have influenced their learning pathways. The central problem lies in the focus of the student engagement concept on behavioural patterns of students, and the propensity of students to specific behaviour, rather than the student capabilities which are central to SCL. In comparison to the use of the engagement concept, the concept of student agency has adhered more to the conceptual underpinnings of SCL. It also pays more attention to students' sense of their efficacy as their capabilities to exercise control over their functioning in the higher education context.

3.4.3 Agency vs identity

Higher education experience marks a crucial period for identity development (Levinson, 1978; Erikson 1950) and self-formation (Marginson, 2014). For some scholars, identity is defined as an 'unstable point' in which the social, personal and cultural meet but in effect change through complex interactions between different forms of capital (Hall quoted by Wetherall 2005). While identity is a point of contact, agency is a more active and purposeful concept that helps us recognize that identity can be transformed if students are empowered rather than deprived.

A stigmatizing gaze of a culturally dominant other can result in a negative internalized self-image. Such disadvantages sometimes turn into moral weaknesses that are embedded in deep 'codes' of inequality (Nixon et al., 1997). This is certainly evident among vocational students. Rural students in elite universities can also experience identity conflict (Chen & Tian, 2021), and identity. Identity processes are second only to force as to how power is affected in oppressive and exploitative systems (Nixon et al., 1997). A pedagogy of recognition as compromising self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect, and the fundamental intersubjectivity of these processes for full identity formation (Nixon et al., 1997). Recognition from others is essential to the development of a successful and powerful learning identity which in turn, contribute to effective agency.

3.5 Summary

Overall, this chapter has provided an overview of the literature and analytical framework of agency, positioned in higher education. Living under liquid modernity, agency is especially salient, and as such higher education needs to reconsider learning as well as the kind of students produced who are responsible for the changing society.

It proposes an interdisciplinary and composite understanding of agency, drawing from both structure and agency arguments. The agency model of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) is introduced that encompass the past (iterational aspects), present (practical-evaluate capacity) and future (projective capacity). This research also utilizes Biesta and Tedder (2007)'s ecology understanding of agency. Moving beyond a psycho-social perspective, a composite understanding of agency is presented. Internal Agency draws from

iteration and prospective elements, measured by psychological construction including self-regulation and self-efficacy. External Agency is understood in relation to the present structure encompassing the institutional resources of support, participation, and freedom. Collective Agency considers higher education institutions as a learning community and investigates the embedded culture that influences agents in action.

Finally, agency is discussed in relation to engagement and capability, and identity. The differences and connections among these constructs are identified. While they are often used in a bundle, agency represents a distinct analytical framework that marks the reflexivity, empowerment and transformative power of students.

Chapter 4 Methodology

This chapter describes the qualitative and quantitative approaches taken to address the research questions. This study employed a mixed-method approach. The quantitative method used surveys to capture student agency using the analytical framework identified in the last chapter. Equally, semi-structured interviews were carried out online to investigate in-depth the factors behind the quantitative data. This chapter explains the author's philosophical underpinnings and positions. It presents the framework analysis process in relation to the qualitative data. Limitations on sampling are justified. Finally, ethical issues are considered.

4.1 Design

This study administered a mixed-method design, carried out in two parts. Firstly, a between-subject, cross-sectional analysis of surveys was conducted. The independent variable was types of institutions and student characteristics. The dependent variable was student agency. On the basis of the surveys, the second part employed a qualitative semi-structured interview design to provide an in-depth narrative account.

4.2 Rationale and Positionality

4.2.1 Why a mixed-methods approach

A mixed-method design (MMD) has been used in order to reconcile the paradigm divide between quantitative and qualitative and perceive multiple realities. Arguably, this approach can provide a greater understanding of agency that either method on its own could provide (Clark, 2011). Mixed methods align with a cross-disciplinary approach and multiple philosophical perspectives (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017). 'Agency' is essentially subjective and reflexive, this is more accessible from narratives. Miller and Glassner (1997) break out of the objectivist-constructivist continuum and argue that qualitative interviews provide us access to social worlds, as evidence of both what happens' within them and of how individuals make sense of themselves, their experiences, and their place within these social worlds. A survey alone may risk the bias of self-report and reduce people into data points. In addition, Jääskelä et al. (2017) also suggest a mixed-methods design utilising both quantitative and qualitative approaches helps deepen understanding of the students' experiences.

MMD provide a practically-based, problem-based approach to research, and enable compensation between research strategies through triangulation (Dencombe, 2014) to increase accuracy. Quantitative data are useful to support the interview data to increase analytical power and make the phenomenon more generalizable to some extent. The survey

of student agency used here was derived from literature and existing constructions of agency, while the semi-structured interviews adopt a bottom-up approach to explain the quantitative data. Survey and interviews thus work complementary to each other.

A survey is useful to make the interview data more rigorous and applicable and speaks to a practice-based pragmatism approach. While 'agency' and 'structure' are both abstract and fluid concepts, a pragmatic approach helps us put them in context and adhere to utility. The interview data confirms whether the constructed survey data works in real life or not and allows for further discoveries of novel themes outside of pre-determined themes. MMD thus offers a nuanced and authentic account to investigate the complexity of the issue to discover what works while investigating a social phenomenon.

4.2.2 Philosophical underpinning

Mertens (2007) suggests that paradigms are philosophical frameworks that underpin ethics, reality, knowledge, and systematic inquiry. This research employs a constructivist approach to understanding subjective experiences constructed socially and individually by actors, whilst adopting a transformative paradigm to investigate the empowerment and disempowerment of agents in different institutions. This is termed 'methodology pluralism' (Morgan, 2007). One can adopt a constructivist approach in developing a research problem or question, and then adopt a transformative paradigm for investigating it (Flick et al., 2012).

This study starts with a socio-psychological outlook on agency. Meanwhile, the author is also interested in underprivileged social groups. Interviews can uncover the restricting factors experienced by individuals beyond a macro-structural level. As such, the study progresses to a critical lens of agency from a structural, social, and cultural perspective. Mertens (2007) argues that MMD operates in a transformative paradigm, often used in critical theory with its agenda in empowerment, emancipation, equality, and social justice. The study uses theories such as Sen's (2004) capability approach as a starting point to investigate a socially disadvantaged group in higher education. This is also supported by an interpretivism approach to interviews based on humanistic and existential ontologies and epistemologies.

4.3 Participants

4.3.1 Inclusions

The study included 139 students who are currently attending or have completed higher education in China (48 female, 25 male). In all 51 per cent of participants completed the survey with100 per cent of completion rate. One person has a completion rate of 95 per cent. In the end, a total of 73 participants were included in the final analysis. Their ages ranged from 19-31 years (M = 23.69, SD = .30). Among the 73 participants, 47 participants

attended research institutions, with 32 participants having completed undergraduate degrees from 28 institutions. On the other hand, 26 participants attended vocational institutions from 13 institutions, of which 9 are identified as key vocational institutions. Full descriptive data of the survey participants are presented in Table 4.3.1 (Appendix A).

Participants come from a wide range of disciplines (*N* = 51). A majority of participants were in full-time study (94.5 per cent). Over half were graduates (*N* = 44) from 1-12 years before (*M* = 3.1 years). A majority of participants studied in Shanghai (69.9 per cent), split into local students (*N* = 30), and non-local students (*N* = 20). Others came from Harbin, Guangxi, Henan, and Heilongjiang provinces.

Interviews included 23 participants, among which 12 participants studied general higher education, and 11 participants studied vocational higher education. In addition, two VHE teachers were also interviewed to gain insights into the field, but their data are not included in the analysis. The expected number of participants was at least 10 for each group to ensure a viable comparison as well as achieve data saturation. The interviews last between 30 and 60 minutes. The full demographics of interviewees are presented in Table 4.3.1.1 (Appendix B, Participant 1 as P1).

4.3.2 Sampling limitations

Sample size analysis in G* Power using differences between two independent means at effect size *d* = .50 (*p* = .05) and power of 0.95, showed that the total sample size required was 176 (88 for each group); this suggests that the current sample did not achieve required size to detect effects. On the side of the researcher, this may be due to low completion rates, resulting from a long survey design. The researcher has considered such an issue beforehand, thus many items have emerged from the adopted survey (discuss later in 4.4.1). Since the researcher has been based in UK schools for a long period, there has been a lack of institutional connections in China, especially in vocational schools. In addition, the whole research process was carried out online outside of China due to the unprecedented restrictions of travel. If the fieldwork had been carried out offline when the researcher was able to visit schools or teachers, the quality and quantity of data collection would have been enhanced.

On the side of the participants, students from vocational schools presumably lack the motivation to participate in a study when it is not mandatory. For example, upon requests from friends, vocational students refused to do interviews, stating it was unnecessary, or claiming to be too shy. Some did not want to mention their vocational college experience when they have 'moved on with life such as pursuing an undergraduate level' (P7). People who completed further education beyond vocational qualifications were more willing to talk openly about their experience and how it helped them develop (P15). Most vocational students who accepted interviews did so upon the requests of their respected mentors. This might have caused bias because they had maintained decent

relationships with their teachers, demonstrating presupposed good social relationships and a supported environment from their experiences. Nevertheless, this may be valuable because it could reveal how vocational students acquired agency such as social relationships and teacher support.

In comparison, students from well-known universities were more open in sharing their thoughts. This may indirectly have reflected their self-efficacy and how qualifications are associated with a sense of pride in general. Their motivations for participation included being interested in education (P4, 9) or thinking one had a diverse background (P12).

4.4 Measures/materials

4.4.1 Survey materials

The agency survey was composed of 12 multiple choice or open-ended background questions on age, gender, HE institutions, types of degree, course of study, average grades, year of study, student status (full time/part-time), high school education, immigration status, and bursary status. Then it was followed by 38 statement questions measuring participants' student agency on a five-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The higher the score, the higher students' reported agency. The survey was divided into three pages, namely internal agency (10 questions), external agency (22 questions), and collective agency (6 questions) (survey questions see Appendix B).

The survey ended with three questions asking about future educational aspiration and the prospective-self, but the open-ended questions received little response. Oppenheim (2000) notes that interviews have a higher response rate than questionnaires because respondents become more involved, and hence more motivated. As a result, these questions were included in interview schedules.

The survey was adopted from the Agency of University Students (AUS) instrument by Jääskelä et al. (2017, original scale see Appendix C). However, the researcher had to design a separate questionnaire because of copyright issues. After requesting the survey through email, Dr Päivikki stated that AUS scales are only used for the considered research collaborations /collaborative research project.

The AUS has gained external and internal validity from a large-sample study in a Finnish university. Cronbach's alphas varied, respectively, from 0.74 to 0.91 for each factor, indicating good internal consistency for the factors. However, the scale was course-specific and therefore adjustments were made to apply it to a wider college experience. The current scale was designed according to published information about the AUS with emergence and alternative items. All 11 themes were kept but there was an emergence of themes and items to suit the length of the survey.

Internal Agency included two factors, namely motivation and utility (5 questions), and self-efficacy beliefs (4 questions). The former was adapted from the AUS scale, and the

latter was adopted from Bandura's scale of self-efficacy. The internal reliability Cronbach's alpha (α) = .77 and .66 respectively.

External Agency was divided into five factors: equal treatment (3 questions); teacher and peer support (5 questions), (α) = .61; institutional freedom (5 questions), (α) = .80; participation activity (4 questions), (α) = .78; and opportunity to influence (4 questions) (α) = .69. Most factors had a high reliability. However, a reversed item was eliminated because Cronbach's alpha marked low reliability (α) = .26 under equal treatment. The revered item described social hierarchy so may not fit appropriately into equal treatment. After refinement, equal treatment had a reliability (α) = .75

Collective agency measured sense of community (5 questions) and ease of participation (1 question), together has a reliability (α) = .70. These themes and factors also acted as initial codes for interview data analysis.

4.4.2 Interview material

The interview schedule comprised of 13 open-ended questions (Appendix D), with content progressing from past, present and future educational experiences. Questions and prompts were based on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) understanding of agency, corresponding to iteration, the practical-evaluative factor, and the projective element, and also literature on ecology and a life-course view of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

4.5 Procedures

4.5.1 Survey

The survey was piloted with three Chinese international students which led to minor alterations in design and wording to improve user experience. Surveys were presented on Qualtrics and downloaded to SPSS for data analysis.

The recruitment methods were convenient sampling and snowballing. Surveys were advertised through social media and word of mouth and accessed through QR codes. Two rounds of advertisements were carried out. When attempting to find administrators within schools, it was found that few were allowed to disseminate surveys to students. For the first round of the research, the study was only limited to students in Shanghai to reduce variability in geographic aspects. However, due to difficulties in recruitment, the study criteria were widened to include participants outside of Shanghai. This may cause bias when discussing structure influence. However, this decision was based on careful consideration that personal agency, transformation, and reflexivity is not limited to geographic regions. It was also helpful to capture more variability as well as commonality externally and collectively.

4.5.2 Interview

Following the survey, participants could leave their email in an open-ended question if they would like to proceed with a follow-up interview. The interviewer sent official emails attached with an anonymised identification code to negotiate time and methods of meeting. There were 18 participants provided their email addresses. Only 8 participants replied to the invitation for the interview, among whom 1 person did not show up to the online interview. The attrition rate was high, partly because the method of contact was entirely online. Another reason may be that Chinese people are not used to using email for common communication. The use of online meeting apps is still new too. Following, participants were recruited through snowballing, where the researcher asked participants to introduce the study to their friends. In addition, the researcher also asked teachers in HE to introduce their students to the study.

The interview schedule was piloted with a Chinese graduate student, following which redundant questions were reworded. The interview was carried out online through Zoom, Teams and Tencent meetings. Audio was recorded and transcribed verbatim using a Chinese transcription tool online and edited manually in Nvivo and MAXQDA for data analysis.

4.6 Data Analysis

4.6.1 Initial analysis and data management

For the quantitative data, descriptive analysis was carried out to generate demographic statistics about participants. Reversed items were corrected. Scores of each factor are added together to form the sum of each analytical construct.

For the qualitative data, Ritchie's and Spencer's (1994) five key stages framework analysis was employed exhaustively. In the data management phase, the researcher started by familiarisation with the interview scripts. Similar to thematic analysis, qualitative data was classified and organised into codes via Nvivo. There were pre-existing codes according to the agency survey as the basis but open-coding was also employed. It should be noted that this preliminary thematic framework was reframed constantly as the researcher has engaged with the data. Meanwhile, short memos were generated from the text.

Because of technical issues, Nvivo could not operate framework analysis. The next step was carried out in MAXQDA and Excel, data were sorted by theme or concept, displayed in a matrix allocated in rows and columns in three sheets. Raw data instead of synthesis were recorded, retaining the language of the respondent, to best capture the student perspective. This process is termed 'indexing' rather than 'coding' because this more accurately portrays the status of the categories and how they 'fit' the data. 'Coding' refers to a process of capturing dimensions or content of a text. A refined index of a conceptual framework was subsequently formed when fitting the data into categories.

Finally, themes in columns were revisited one at a time, further examined and reduced in dimension to keep the categorisation succinct.

In the data analysis stage, there were five mapping and interpretation techniques: a. description, b. create typologies (case-based), c. create categories (theme-based), d. mapping linkages and e. develop explanations. The following section will present how each technique was applied to the corresponding research questions.

R1: What factors encourage students' agency in one's university experience? What factors restrict students' agency in one's university experience?

Descriptive analysis was applied to the qualitative data to understand what was happening under a single sub-topic. A systematic typology was attempted to summarize elements and categories (Appendix E, Table 4.6.1.2). Finally, a central chart was constructed manually displaying the abstract classification and key elements (Ritchie, Spencer, & O'Connor, 2003). An explanatory account was investigated on qualitative data to detect patterns, linkages, or associations.

R2: Is there a difference in the exercise of student agency between vocational and research universities?

To the central chart developed earlier, the researcher interrogated patterns unique to subgroups. This step was also done manually by reorganizing data based on pre-determined groups i.e. vocational and research, as well as emerged sub-classification.

The detected associations were verified in two ways: 1. numerical distribution of the level of matching across data sets 2. interrogate the association by developing an explanation. The latter involves: using explicit reasons and accounts; inferring an underlying logic; using 'common sense'; developing explanatory concepts; drawing on other empirical studies, or using theoretical frameworks (Ritchie, Spencer, & O'Connor, 2003). Outliers of qualitative data were also warranted.

A factor analysis of the quantitative data was carried out. First, an exploratory principal components analysis was carried out to see the Principal Components, and 10 components were generated. A confirmatory principal components analysis was carried out to generate a single agency score to compare overall performance. This was based on the observed Scree plot and a maximum of 2 variables were used (Appendix A, Figure 1). Factor 1 accounted for 28.89 per cent of variance, others factors account for less than 10 per cent of variance. After observing the Rotated Component Matrix (Appendix A, Table 4.6.1.1) and factor loading, factor 1 had all positively correlated items and the second variable had the reverted item. Therefore, factor 1 was used as a dependent variable in t-tests, which was

used to compare the composite agency value between two vocational and research students.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethics committee approval was obtained from the University of Oxford, Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) and the study adhered to ethical guidelines (Appendix F for the full form). Participants needed to agree with the consent form before proceeding to the survey. They were given an information sheet and debriefed verbally at the beginning of the interview. Names and files were replaced by identification numbers for confidentiality purposes, such as Participant 1. The study was carried out on a voluntary basis. The participants could withdraw from the process at any point of the study. Participants were given ways to contact the researcher if any questions arose.

Potentially sensitive questions such as gender, bursary status, or immigration status always had the option of 'other' or 'prefer not to say'. The survey was phrased in a non-biased way using plain Chinese to be easily accessible and to avoid eliciting negative emotions. No potential harm was detected from the feedback of participants.

The interview started by building a rapport and chat about everyday affairs to ensure the participants were at ease. Video was not required so the interviewees both felt at ease to talk, as well as keeping anonymity and privacy. The interviewer's camera was open all the time to simulate a real-life situation and made the interviewer more trusted. In effect, an audio-only interview helped interviewees speak more freely. Notably, although the interview questions were designed to be open and non-leading, participation may have brought back traumatic memories from the school lives of the participants. In unexpected situation like this, the interviewer chose to employ active listening and sympathy. In the end, interviewees were offered a space to ask questions or share any comments on the process. Each of the interviews ended on good terms and the participants were willing to recommend friends to participate in the study.

Chapter 5 Results

This chapter provides a comprehensive descriptive and analytic account of interview and survey data in relation to the research questions. In order to address the first two research sub-questions, this chapter will describe emergent outcome of agency namely personal values, reflexivity, future plan and transformation, and associated factors. For the second research question, this chapter will present characteristics of vocational institutional environments and students themselves, and how they engage and resist external constraints. Lastly, quantitative results will be reported.

5.1 Agency and factors

5.1.1 Personal values

Prior to university, the students were restricted by a closed school system or by a specific geographic location where exam-focused values were shaped or given by classroom teachers (P7). In the university, value formation and all other aspects of internal agency are enabled by enhanced autonomy and opportunity to connect with the wider world created by the space of higher education (P1, 7). After coming to Shanghai, P4 claimed she was able to explore the world, changing from a person who only knew how to write exams, liberated slowly from a stressed environment to open up more, and to be able to accept diversity.

Many participants referred to 'values', which encompassed outlooks on the world, life, and moral aspects, and how they formed and moulded their values throughout higher education. Inevitably, values and personality were first influenced by family, such that participants would internalize family values (P4, 19, 20, 21). Values were further shaped by learning and the discipline one has studied. For example, P2 studied economics and has formed a utilitarian view where she calculates cost and benefits whenever she analyses a problem. P7 studied accounting as his major which taught him to think logically. Social values were learned through reading Chinese classics, such as P14 and P18 who internalized Confucian ideals, aspired to do good and give back to society.

Knowledge learning was not the only method of value formation; P8 developed work integrity and ethics through an internship and learned through experience with the support of her colleague as her role model. Values were also demonstrated or confirmed through participation in specific activities. When asked about the proudest thing one has done in university, many participants referred to community services, such as volunteer teaching (P4), volunteer translation (P12), blood donation project (P17), book exchange projects (P9), or fund-raising for disaster relief (P20), as distinct from to being the president of the student government body.

Lastly, values could be influenced by others, leading to homogenous thinking, such as P6 adopting a utilitarian ideal because all her peers thought similarly.

5.1.2 Transformation

Most participants began university with few or no goals but transformed their agenda through university. Prior to university, the purpose or motivation is usually career-oriented (3), and instrumental (e.g. money, houses, and family), or to achieve credentials.

The initial perception of the university affects how students adjust when they arrive, and subsequent behaviour leads either to proactivity or passivity. A more positive and open outlook helps students to embrace what comes ahead (P 1, 2, 4, 10). Originating from a collective culture in high school, P10 felt confused about the individualistic culture in the university. However, through her exploration, she drifted less with the crowd and became an independent person with her own mind, having found that 'learning is enjoyable'. P12 underwent such transformation from undergraduate to a part-time master, where she had more time being by herself. The time alone made her feel richer inside. She recognized her ignorance and started to think more carefully during communication. The transformation period was described by P4 as 'four years of confused period' and as the 'darkness before light'.

On the other hand, participants who represent a passive perception and who adopted inertial thinking, maintained the same mentalities and activities they had at high school. P6 thought 'learning in university is useless', 'you won't have a job related to your major', or 'people said the first year you can have fun' (16). These students were more likely to feel regret after they graduated.

Furthermore, universities or colleges also represented a key site for identity change. For example, participants recognized that they changed from being students to independent adults concerning practical things (P3, 12), one also changed from being rebellious to accepting and adjusting to society (P15). Others were more accepting of the inequalities of the world and the shortcoming of themselves (P22).

Many participants not only reported became more confident (P4, 19), humble (P9), and mature (P10, 15, 16) but also had clearer goals about their careers (P17). Social, communication and interpersonal skills witnessed the most important improvements (P1, 2, 3, 4, 10, 17). This was because of the wider social community at university, which allowed for more interaction with people from other parts of the country, this is especially among one of the advantages of students studies in Shanghai. Specifically, transformation was also related to the geographic space, P4 & 18 thought that Shanghai had broadened their horizons and given them a wider outlook of the world.

There were also increased participatory opportunities that required communication both within and outside of the school setting. Most students took part in at least one extra-activity or took on a leadership role. Taking on leadership roles meant one had more opportunities to interact with teachers, which can be a key enabling factor for students, especially among vocational students (P20). The mechanism of activity is described by P19:

It's the question of 'starting point'. Students who took part in a leadership role have practiced for a year or two, and experience many obstacles, meet more people, if one is even more reflective, he is able to learn how to communicate well and problem-solve well... This year is key because when one is in the labour market… and those who don't may never realize a competing mindset, a mindset to make contributions to the community and the collective. (P19)

Students who lacked participatory activities usually experienced stagnation (P6, 13). For example, P6 regretted playing games for her whole undergraduate career, but at least participated in various activities which she felt 'meaningful' and 'helpful' when she graduated.

However, participation in activity did not directly lead to personal development. For example, P3 found that the school governing body had limited power in developing social skills because there was a lack of communication between colleges, so she stayed in her comfort zone even after she was elected as the department president.

5.1.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity marks a key aspect of internal agency associated with one's transformation. Some participants had an explicit tendency to observe, think and reflect on themselves (P15, 19) from reading or early life experience. Others became more inward-looking, or more reflexive through university (P12, 14, 18).

Reflexivity could come from learning, for example, P14 claimed that after reading classics, he started to make reflection a daily practice, looked more inwardly and became self-disciplined.

Participants reflected on the curriculum, pointing out a common problem of the Chinese cramming system, rote learning, and lack of practical learning (P1, 11, 20, 21). The political study was also denounced (P1, 2, 6, 21) such as its lack of critical thinking.

Furthermore, mobility was also a key factor that contributed to greater reflexivity in relation to curriculum across borders in a globalized higher education. P1 was able to go on to a study abroad program and gain a deeper understanding of her major:

My major (social work) is a foreign/imported product, originated from the West, so when I was learning it in mainland China, it's very nondescript with everything mixed together, so it's not systematic nor professional. In Denmark (abroad programme), it was taught more systematic, deeper in theory and understanding, so I thought I should go to a foreign country (after graduation) e.g., the US, or Europe.

Globalization also affected the utility of the curriculum. P11 said that vocational courses for flight attendants only applied to China, so students were not competitive in the international job market. She criticized the leadership at her school as having a 'laggard mindset'.

On the other hand, reflection often happened after encountering some kind of difficulty or obstacle, followed by regret and introspection. P6 regretted her waste of time in university, but she admitted her 'mistakes' through deep introspection and used such experiences to caution herself in order to make better use of days in the future. After experience miserable times during her work experience, she realized the fluidity of the job market. She reflected on this adversity and decided to quit the 'easy' job she had right now to take a tougher route to grow. Since then, she started to use reflexivity and introspection as daily habits. In comparison, P5 also felt regret when referring to her university life as she wished to do more practical subjects. This was coupled with her disinterest in her major and lack of peer and teacher support, resulting in her experiencing stagnation. She later pursued her interest in Japan after graduation. P10 only realized her agenda in university after her learning opportunities were deprived. So, she decided to apply for a master's degree. P11 started to rethink her goal after the pandemic and regret not having a long-term goal during VHE. She studied to be a flight attendant and as the pandemic had severely disrupted her job opportunities, she decided to change her career and moved into education. Social wise, P8's reflections on conflicts while living in the dorm room had helped her grow interpersonally. As a result, struggle or pain might be a way led to reflexivity and transformation.

5.1.4 Future plans

Future plans were often the outcome of learning, reflexivity and transformation. Some participants opted to follow on from their previous pathways and accumulate capital, while others chose to break from their previous experiences. For example, P22 chose to use his research to pursue entrepreneurship. P2 saw university as a steppingstone, where one leads to another, her choice of major decided for her what kind of road she would pursue. P5 wanted to explore and find a job not restricted to her major.

These were different partly because of their specific majors. P2 studied economics which she internalized into her values system, thus identifying with her major, while P5 was never particularly interested in her major (English). In addition, a language major could be a tool to pursue another career rather than a career in itself. Participants who studied English for a major all went on to pursue a master's degree in a more applied field. Meanwhile, participants differed in their understanding of a language major. For example, P3 has learned more than the language, also acquiring different dimensions of knowledge and problem-solving, such as from social, vocabulary, or transnational viewpoints.

Learning here was not limited to knowledge derived from books but also involved interacting with and learning from more knowledgeable others. P9 wants to be a professor like her parents. P1 self-positioned herself through learning from her professor by precept and example. Her positive relationship with her professors had not only had a positive influence on her academic learning in terms of knowledge, thinking, and critical thinking

skills, but also on attitudes in relation to ‘practice, service provision, research, life, and how to achieve a good work-life balance’. Such a positive relationship had a huge impact on her and changed her from a 'nerdy' student to a balanced student. Likewise, P18 viewed his teacher as a role model who introduced him to Chinese classics, guided and supported him completely while he was the president of the school governing body. His reflection on education and later pursuit of a PhD in Buddhism researching redemption marked a profound influence of the teacher figure and his vocational experience on his later plan.

In contrast, the vocational students had a different set of work-related plans, aiming to improve their credentials after starting work. P8 had a simpler goal to work hard and get recognition from work. She was also studying for a diploma part-time. P16 would like to improve their working conditions by improving their credentials: getting an office job rather than being a labourer. After achieving a PhD in Korea, P19 still wanted to study more and gain more knowledge because he thought an undergraduate degree provided a better foundation for his advancement in education. Education and credentials acted both as a means and as an end. [credentialism]

Future plans were also formed by personal histories that were pertinent to higher education. P4 was a mobile student who originated from Shandong. She wanted to give back to disadvantaged students in rural areas because of her beneficial educational experience in Shanghai. In addition, a formulaic basic education also led to a pursuit of liberal education by P10. Students found their passions through participatory activities in HE. Through classroom activities and internships, P21 realized he enjoyed teaching and P19 took part in sub-teaching roles before realizing he was well suited for the job and decided to pursue education in the future.

5.1.5 Engagement and conformity

Different institutions had different cultures and practices, encompassing learning, assessments, and administration. Everyday interaction in university with administrators was reported as passive (P2, 7), and in terms of negativity (P6). Others reported loose connections with course teachers (P2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 16). These were reflected by lack of communication, regret about lacking communication (P6), individualism, low teaching quality, and conformity. Biases on master’s course applications (P1), scholarship applications (P5, 18) and Party membership (P5, 11 14, 17) were examples of the workings of bureaucracy.

Most students did not engage actively with school policy: thus, conformity was a common way of facing adverse issues. They lacked the self-efficacy to achieve change (P14, 17) because of a lack of engagement culture or power. Most participants would reflect on their own problems before criticizing issues at school. Many people described themselves as non-innovators, conformists, or people who do not seek power (P9). P5 thought changes or reporting were unnecessary subconsciously because she had no power compared to the

school leaders: ‘I try to change a little thing, but was not successful, because the problem is collective, and you can't control other people's behaviour’. Furthermore, engagement was sometimes regarded as a ‘negative mentality’ in vocational education.

Others were hindered by school responses and lack of support. P1 witnessed protests against the school policy because her school (a 985 university) was known for its inclusive and supportive environment, and a high response rate. Unfortunately, she felt such culture was also not stable because ‘attitudes of the school is sometimes confused’. P21 reported a class as meaningless but was failed by his teacher. P12 had no idea where to report because of the lack of information and support provided by her counsellor.

Overall, students choose to remain in conformity. The reasons encompass fear, bureaucracy, lack of institutional response and lack of collective power of students.

> *At the time we are afraid to report because they think he (the staff) is like that (inefficient) every year, and students can't do anything about it. He has connections in the leadership team, so students choose to stay safe, and not interact with him’ (P6).*

Meanwhile, a culture of challenging school conduct was encouraged by the school-head master but was later repressed by a new lead from the government who ‘does not like to receive complaints from students ’ (P10). The management of the school governing body was determined by school funding so students had little say in their activities (P7). Students claimed they were only the point of contact in such organizations and responsible for implementation (P23). Passivity might be cultivated by both social and school culture.

Table 5.1

A Central Association Table Derived from Qualitative data: Factors that associated with agency

Agency / Resources	**Internal Resources**	**External Recourses**	**Collective Resources**
Personal Values	Family Capital Learning	Institutional Freedom Teacher Influence Participatory Activities	Collective Culture Learning Community Institutional Practice
Transformation	Motivation & Goals Identity	Participatory Activities Geographic space Institutional Freedom	
Reflexivity	Learning	Teacher Relationships Peer Relationships Mobility	
Future Plans	Reflexivity Learning	Teacher Relationships	

Table 5.1

A Central Association Table Derived from Qualitative data: Factors that associated with agency

Agency / Resources	**Internal Resources**	**External Recourses**	**Collective Resources**
	Gaol & Purposes		
Engagement and Conformity	Self-efficacy, engagement	Curriculum	

5.2 Differences between vocational and research student agency

5.2.1 Characteristics and cultivation of vocational students' internal agency

Like most participants in the current sample entering higher education, vocational students too lacked a clear goal or purpose. While university students had four years of relatively free time to explore themselves and the world, goals were usually set for vocational students. The expectation of the school is limited to 'successfully graduate without making any trouble' (P8, 15, 11), or studies at this particular major. P8 internalized such a goal and 'just wanted to graduate successfully' and showed little interest in the school. However, vocational students usually did not identify with the goals or positionality given by schools (P11). The data show that internal motivation was a stronger driver of student agency. For example, P12 found the major she liked during VHE by accident, so she ended up pursuing such a major later in her undergraduate and master's degrees.

Meanwhile, vocational students lacked pride in schools and confidence in themselves (P19). Their self-efficacy and internal motivation came from external forces such as family, teachers, or the environment. As a result, they required more guidance than university students in seeking their self-positioning. A similar idea was also expressed by another vocational student, who thought that vocational students were *too* free, and that teachers lacked focus in guiding them (P19). This was in contrast with research students who felt more comfortable being left alone by schools (P2). Maximizing freedom was thus not necessarily among the highest priorities in vocational education.

> *Although the university represents a free space, it also requires time-management skills, motivation, and self-efficacy. Such levels of freedom are good for people who have goals, ambition, and the ability to achieve such things, to do whatever he wants; however, for those in confusion, who never thought of life, such freedom is harmful, because he would hold back and waste time, there was no one to guide you or teach you. It depends on whether a person can fit into such freedom. (P2)*

5.2.2 External constraints experienced by vocational students

Many vocational students stressed the balance between practice and knowledge (P8, 11, 20). Teaching quality was relatively low (P14), and not systematic. P8 also stressed the downside of the specialisation: students don't know anything outside of the industry except their major. Relational resources were less than normal to university: for example unequal support, lower quality of teachers, modest participatory activities (P14), and inadequate physical resources such as libraries, and basic infrastructure (P22, 23). Opportunities to participate mostly relied on teacher recognition: 'sub-teacher', chosen by teachers, was a regularly occurring activity across participants in vocational institutions.

Students had even less to say in much compulsory activity (P19), especially regular students who were not in leadership positions. For example, P18 was a student president and arranged many activities during his tenure. However, on the other side of the picture, P19 thought these activities were meaningless, arranged and required only by the leaders and governments. He 'had no way out'. He thought that there were too many regulations and disciplines that took up the time he needed to study and think. The school would create these activities every day, 'because they want to occupy students' thoughts, and to not break the role, to become a good student'. Such a rationale of school was also confirmed by P18: 'to occupy students so they won't make trouble'.

There were also constraints in mobility. For example, there was a strong restriction of vocational credentials in job-seeking. This was why vocational students sought to improve their credentials at work. The transition from vocational to undergraduate education was difficult too (P9). However, P20 had a more positive outlook: he was able to apply for professional certification because he had vocational credentials.

5.2.3 Collective constraints experienced by vocational students

Many participants described the university as a small society with many bureaucratic practices (P7, 15). This was especially the case in vocational institutions that presented a negative image of school culture and environment, combining a negative environment for peers with a weak learning culture (P1).

The learning environment was often imposed. Some vocational schools implemented a school-like environment, with a closed setting and 8 lessons a day (P8). P15 attended both vocational and research universities and found that at the research university, there was a collective mentality of learning for its own sake, its enjoyment, and a sense of pride in studying for the country. At the vocational school, the students would learn for the grades. Vocational schools are only responsible for the safety of the students and not for the cultivation of students' minds (P15).

In contrast, P21 studied at a 211 university and was amazed at how good the school learning environment was. This is not always the case: P22 was in a second-tier university

which reported a lack of learning atmosphere where she was being laughed at for studying English in her first year. The latter slowly internalized this conduct and began skipping class as part of normal behaviour.

5.2.4 Agency in response to constraints

Participants from vocational institutions described themselves as 'swimming against the current' (P14, 19). In contrast to P9 who was carried by the trends to go with excellent people, vocational participants stated that 'it's good enough if they (your peers) don't pull you down' (P18). In the face of adversity, participants presented a great deal of resilience. For example, P12 was going to keep studying in the classroom despite others being 'crazy' because she was interested in her major. P19 felt inferior and he couldn't see his future at first, but he chose to stick to it and studied by himself. Years after his graduation, he appreciated that overcoming this period had made him 'special'.

Students who could resist adversity had a mixture of internal and external resources to support them, through which they achieved their transformations. Internal agency reinforced one's will to act. A high self-efficacy drove P15 to become the president of the school governing body and organize a singing competition with external organizations. He liked his school precisely because of all the activities he had done, which in turn reinforced his internal agency. P20 applied for his major because he had identified the potential of an industry's needs and positioned himself well and dedicated himself to learning a skill to work in that industry. P12 developed an interest in her major so that the vocational experience made her determined to work hard in the future.

In addition, goals and motivations reflected from 'failings', directed oneself to transformation. Some participants who ended up in vocational schools by accident felt resentful and disappointed at first (P18). P15 did not identify as a vocational student and aspired to improve his credential by studying abroad when he first entered. Similarly, P19 wanted to go abroad to upgrade his credentials, so he applied for a self-learning course in school. Both of them succeeded in achieving their goals.

All discussions of agency in the first part of the chapter applied here. Learning could improve one's reflexivity (19) and resilience. Participatory activities led to the recognition of teachers, in turn, increasing one's confidence and self-efficacy, as opposed to a weak relationship with the teacher. Communication, encouragement, and achievement (P11, 14, 15, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23) helped students to build their confidence and self-efficacy. For example, P19 found a work position, through his counsellor, 'it's about the care of teacher as a non-local student, became a good motivation for me to learn'. Peers were of little influence on the development of oneself but served as a securing net for participants. P20 was supported by a good peer circle as he was in a dorm room with eight people and six were there to learn, in turn, forming a good learning atmosphere. P23 started to consider

improving her credentials because ‘people around me say undergraduate is good, and many people want to apply’.

5.3 Quantitative Data

Independent T-test of Single Agency Score derived from factor analysis between vocational and research students is nonsignificant, indicating that there is no statistically difference of agency between vocational and research university students in general, t(68) = .67, *p* = .51. There is no statistically significant difference between high achievers (grade > 80) and low achievers (grade < 80).

The mean score of composite agency score between male (*N* = 25, *M* = -.413, S*D* = 1.04) and female (*N* = 46, *M* = .224, *SD* = .911) differ significantly, t(69) = -2.673, *p* = .009. Females have higher agency scores than their male counterparts in general. Specifically, female have higher self-efficacy t(70) = -3.124, *p* =.007 and reported receiving higher support from teacher and peers t(70) = 3.01, *p* =.004.

The mean score of the single agency score between students receiving a bursary (*N*=21, *M* = -.40, *SD* = .91) and students not receiving a bursary (*N* = 47, *M* = .15, *SD* = 1.02) differ significantly t (66) = -2.13, *p* = .037, they also score lower in self-efficacy t(67) = -4.00, *p* = .000.

Chapter 6 Discussion

This chapter discusses the results of the study in the light of existing research and theories. To acknowledge the structural constraints, the findings will first be discussed in relation to Bourdieu's framework and institutional theories. The second section will discuss findings in relation to the theorisation of agency. The study identifies constraints and enabling factors as well as key mechanisms that map agency in higher education, especially among vocational students.

6.1 Structural constraints

The Bourdieusian framework is useful in explaining social inequality and reasons why students with low social-economic backgrounds possessed less agency. Students who lack agency are usually those who lack family or social capital. For example, a negative family cultivating style, such as suppression, is linked with low confidence or self-efficacy and can lead to a low aspiration in higher education. A passive or proactive outlook of participants towards learning in higher education is likewise influenced by prior education history and social capital. Bourdieu confirms that the 'self-denying ethos' attitude to education is constrained by levels of capital. Meanwhile, successful navigation of the educational system requires cultural competency and an understanding of unwritten rules among dominant groups. In the study, participants who were local-Shanghainese usually felt naturally inclined to enter university, fitted better academically, and felt comfortable when forming relationships with teachers. The concept of capital is thus used to understand the structural constraints affecting iterational agency and explains social and cultural factors coupled with higher levels of SES.

Institutional theories help us to identify the interaction between institutional practices and the constraints of students' power, further explaining the mechanisms of conformity in collective agency. Vocational education schools had advocated for a collective community approach in order to manage students simultaneously as a group. For example, vocational schools have a strict timetable that is normalized by students. Class schedules are mandatory activities that are imposed on vocational students and deprive them of the institutional freedom to explore. This one-kind-fit-all administration not only undermines student agency but also decreases the potential for institution innovation.

On the policy side of higher education, the examples of the political studies required in China, and injustices in the conduct of institutions, indicate the top-down institutional hierarchy in relation to the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Bernstein, 2000). In the present study, institutions displayed confused responses to student reports, which disempowered student engagement. At the same time, bureaucratic practices in student government were common and there was limited collective agency to create momentum

for change. ‘Joining the Party’ was seen as something desirable yet hard to achieve. This ‘dual reward system’, defined as an ‘architecture of capital accumulation and transmission’ suggest the social reproductive role of higher education (Ciupak & Stich, 2012).

Certain unspoken rules in dispositional practices also reflected the effect of the habitus. Participants eported subjective evaluation on scholarships. These practices act as codes of the irreducible social structure of higher education. Such practices may put students with low SES in a more disadvantaged place because they lack the understanding of the ‘social rules’. It may be another reason explaining why students who received bursary felt less empowered by schools. Their disadvantage is reinforced by the need for cultural capital and institutional restriction. Essentially, the normality that leaves students ‘powerless’ in the face of a deep ontology is not something visible directly but rather becomes known through its effects in structuring practices.

6.2 Transformation and fluidity

Habitus becomes clearer at points of convergence and contraction. When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, students feel like ‘fish in water'. However, this can also have a disconcerting effect. Agents who are ‘swimming with the current’ (Blair-Loy 1997) rarely question their current actions, they take the world for granted and may unhesitatingly reproduce larger schemas. The difference in social navigation is apparent when local and non-local Shanghai students were compared, with the latter experiencing more' locus of struggle' to new habitus. It took non-local students longer to adjust or catch up academically, although they had achieved well academically in the Gaokao. They lacked social and cultural capital such as knowledge in career planning or ‘social connections.’ Their experiences of initial adjustments in elite universities coincide with findings in existing literature using a Bourdieusian framework that looks at how rural students fit in elite universities (Li, 2015; Liao, 2016; Xie, 2016; Xie 2020; Chen & Tian, 2021). Those who encounter a misfit of habitus ‘swim against the current’, triggering the development of reflexivity about themselves and their futures.

Eccelstone (2007) maintains that consideration of structure highlights the daily interactions between habitus, adaptation and progression through specific transitions which shape identity and agency in transformational ways. This also corresponds to individuals’ self-questioning, whereupon habitus moves from unconscious to consciousness level, leading to the person develops new facets of the self (Reay, 2004). Here the limitation of habitus is that it does not fully capture the living experience of the vocational students in the study, whose varied agency is associated with diverse trajectories after graduation.

To illustrate, Ciupak and Stich (2012) note that although students from various SE backgrounds have similar levels of aspiration, rural students lack the ‘projective element’ of human agency, whereby they imagine future trajectory of actions and corresponding coping

strategies. This projective element is affected by possession and activation of various forms of capital. Yet students in the current sample foresee the evolution of future plans and trajectories in spite of class elements. For example, P19 came from a rural background and struggled with an unsatisfied environment, an inferior identity, and a probable self. Nevertheless, he regained his confidence by setting a pathway for himself, and later found his calling through a teaching role. P9 experienced a different pattern of adaptation and resistance. She attended a key university in Shanghai and specialized in Economics. In comparison to P2, who developed utilitarian views, she resisted the homogenous values derived from the institution and longed for 'collisions' with 'different people from different majors, and different thinking' usually seen in a comprehensive university. P22 was treated unequally by the school administrator, yet she resisted common practices and hoped to pass on the ideas that student leaders were 'only serving students', and 'universities were not that complicated'.

Furthermore, VHE represents a positive advantage for rural students, and marks upward mobility for the 'peasant worker'. Participants who came from rural areas regard VHE as a good opportunity and was more motivated to learn. 'I don't have antagonist thinking, it's about my mindsets that made things go unequal; rebellious thinking is for those who are spoiled'. He possessed and reinforced a positive self-concept, which resonates with Young's 'counter values' when living in a meritocratic society (2007). Young, helps us escape from a simple classification based on class. He recognizes many different status values in society.

This study, which sought to explain agency as it intersects with structural constraints, without using a rigid view of social class, has generated important insights into the lived experience of less-resourced students . Class no longer contains the whole of capital given the fluidity of family, education, and social environment. Capital mobilized in different ways led to habitus resistance and habitus transformation. Participants who did not identify with the habitus, showed adaption and resistance to the dominant culture. Less resourced groups such as vocational student possessed 'family solidarity, respect and ambition' as symbolic capital to break through the middle class social and culture capital (Watson et al., 2009). 'My mom is a rural woman, she had taught me *etiquette*, one might be surprised, but she had taught me to be polite, to work hard, and to be responsible (P19).' Students with low SES also represented great resilience to resist stereotypes.

Participants came from diverse life experiences, representing various characteristics and future trajectories. Given the right self-positioning, they were able to achieve their goals and resist stereotypical failings. They also acquired personal capital and social values along the way, derived from agentic reflection. For example, non-local students thought that Shanghai had broadened their horizons and given them a wider outlook of the world. They exercised their agency through acquiring new social and cultural capital whilst living in new habitus. 'I have changed in personal character, such as dealing with people (P4)'.

Participants were able to catch up both academically and socially where they developed resilience, acquired social skills, gained confidence, and formed future plans accordingly.

Meanwhile, participants had transformed instrumental purposes to reflect on what they value, shown by their formation of 'future plans'. This way of 'transforming the path' is also identified by Chen and Tian (2021). Students with less privileged family backgrounds showed creative and diverse reactions to the evolving habitus (Li, 2013; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). For example, P4 acquired agency from studying in Shanghai, and thus built a 'meta-reflexivity' (Archer, 2007) to act in accordance to what she valued at the cost of social mobility. 'After seeing the possibilities of Shanghai, I hope to go back and help rural students have the same opportunities to come' (P4). Archer distinguishes three types of reflexivity, and argues to see students personal projects as important, rather than social mobility per se. Meanwhile, higher education also produces a kind of 'intellectual capital' (Clegg, 2011), whereby it cultivates an alternative vision of social good. The higher education field represents a liquid field in modernity for transformation, if we recognize power of human agents. The thesis will discuss later how HEIs could mobilize student capital and agency to help students to become more reflective about their position and resist the common culture.

6.3 Agency as becoming

Corresponding to the fluidity of class and capital discussed in the last section, the "transformative" characteristic is believed to be inherent in agency, as suggested by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). Their study identified four aspects of internal agency, namely personal values, future plan, reflexivity all pointing to the 'becoming' nature of agency that is manifested in the constant formation and transformation of oneself through higher education (Chickering, 1993). The developmental attribute of agency speaks to the point by Biesta and Tedder (2007) that agency is 'something that is achieved, rather than possessed' (p. 132). It also conforms with Confucian ideas of self-cultivation, pertaining to German 'Bildung', and Marginson's (2014) 'self-formation' in higher education. Agency for becoming is identified by Tran and Vu (2018), who experienced self-transformation through mobility and future aspirations. Yet the present study shows that while mobility can help in the process of transformation, agency for becoming is not limited to international students. The study challenges the idea that only transnational higher education generates self-formation and reflexivity.

The development of future plans resonates with Emirbayer and Mische (1998)'s projective dimension of human agency. This involves the first step in reflexivity. The shift is evident when students generate their own goals in relation to their personal development. That marks a major transition to young adulthood, in contrast to simply adopting the goals previously imposed by families or wider society.

6.3.1 Transforming identity

The higher education environment allows students the time and space to mature and develop a stronger sense of identity (Whelan-Ryan, 2019). However, the study finds that while research universities allow freedom of time to explore oneself, vocational students lack time or space to explore their aspirations. Astin (1984) expounds on student development theory, based on student involvement, and suggests that the most precious institutional resource may be student time. ‘During undergraduate, you really started to discover what you like, because when I had a lot of time… there were all kinds of things before I really found what I liked, and then I should say that I knew myself better' (P10). Different from the focus on self-efficacy that focuses on ability, the focus on the formation and transformation of evolving self-identity recognises the role of a holistic agency in action. Students cultivate more than academic capabilities. They also develop general skills and characteristics. As opposed to identity as a static point, a transforming identity is termed ‘self-positioning' in agency theory (Tran & Vu, 2015) in line with positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). This is an independent and reflective process. As one participant said: 'In university, it was completely up to you to decide... It wasn't until my sophomore year that I began to slowly adapt to such a change in the environment.' This student re-positioned herself through adaption, transformation trial and error, and reflexivity.

The vocational students originally had a less formalized or stable self-identity or self-concept because of their social perception and prior academic achievement. As expressed by P19, ‘what is the common problem for vocational education? That is, students can’t find their own position…’ For example, P13 had neither a strong sense of goal, nor identification with the environment. As a result, she became identified with her major in nursing. However, her internship was exploitative. It failed to account for student safety and well-being. The school 'provided no support. She felt deep regret for the 'wasted years' in a vocational college. This indicates that the construction of identity is not entirely internal, but cultivated or restricted by external forces.

Vulnerability to external forces might be partly explained by previous academic failures, contributing to the development of a lesser and weaker self-concept (Hussey & Smith 2010). Another reason is that some students enter a vocational education arranged by families or influenced by peers. Granfield (1991) also observed identity ambivalence and identity struggle among working class students. A non-biased perception of vocational education and of students themselves helps form more positive identity.

Students’ capabilities in learning processes are limited by expectations as to their role and behaviour inherent in given cultural frames (Klemenic, 2017). Vocational students view higher education predominantly as a way to a degree (‘credentialism’) and neither have strong professional orientations nor a serious interest in learning (Grigsby, 2009). For example, the initial perception of the university affects how students adjust when they

arrive, and subsequent behaviour leads either to proactivity or passivity. Crehan (2012) notes that incoming higher education students are essentially moving from an extrinsically motivating learning environment to one which is more intrinsically motivated. Participants built their confidence through learning and internal motivation: 'it's an adjustment of mentality', said P12 in describing vocational education.

From an adult developmental perspective, university marks a stage in which a person makes more concrete decisions regarding their occupation, friendships, values, and lifestyles (Levinson, 1978). Developing a clear sense of identity is one of the primary developmental tasks of the transition to adulthood, and is tied to developmental milestones in life, including problems such as identity crisis or role confusion (Erickson, 1959). Thus, James and Biesta (2007) argue a need to re-establish or re-work students' identities as learners in the context of this new environment.

A deep and close relationship with teachers helps build their confidence and self-efficacy, showing that positive interaction between staff and students play a significant part in encouraging and facilitating student self-formation especially among vocational students. Their results found that those who have a strong sense of purpose and self-efficacy required the recognition of teacher, peers or community to enable their enactments of capabilities. As seen in student-centred learning, democratic-collegiate settings where students are conceived of as members of the academic community and as such form part of the collective engagement in the educational process. This is helpful to cultivating student agency. This vision corresponds to the use of student-centred learning and communicative methods in vocational schools, which, according to Hua, Harris, and Ollin (2011), led to enhanced self-awareness and self-confidence. Communicative pedagogy encouraged communicative interaction, which in turn, led to equal positionings and deep connections.

The idea of student-centred learning (SCL) also suggests that different students' identities and dispositions call for careful consideration, to achieve an appropriate balance between students' choice and freedom while maintaining a structured and guided approach to teaching and learning. While formation of identities is associated with curriculum and pedagogical practices (Berstein, 2000), freedom alone is not sufficient. Archer (2000) elaborates on the role of the internal conversation in a person's ability to frame and pursue their own projects with real power to act. The next section explores the role of reflexivity.

6.4 Reflexivity

Reflexivity, working as 'dialogues with oneself' (Crossley, 2000), is identified as a key mediator between external incidents and internal psychological development (Kohlberg, 1968). Agency and reflexivity in life-course theory suggest the connection to biographic learning (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) i.e., learning about one's life and learning from one's life.

Although the members of the present sample are relatively young, the graduates are able to reflect back on their university experience and remind themselves of the lessons learned. The way one told his/her story could also indicate how that one derived meaning from that past experience, as well as their responsiveness in the present. The results also suggested that reflexivity was strengthened through overcoming difficulties, deep learning, and mobility. Challenge also motivates new, more comprehensive positions. This explains why active participation, achievements in social projects, and deep learning are more beneficial for students, while surface learning and rote learning constrain student reflexivity. As opposed to surface learning, deep learning is more agential (Biggs, 2011; Entwistle and Ramsden, 2015).

6.4.1 Participatory activities

Both reflexivity and transformation are encouraged by participatory activities. As Biesta and Tedder (2007, 137) posit, agency is comprised of 'achievements', which 'result from the interplay between individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors in a unique 'ecology'. In the ecology of development, the development of oneself is related most of the direct contact through participatory activities. The performative achievement informes one's sense of agency and personal identity, showing the interplay between structure and agency (Archer, 2000). Participants in this study developed positive self-affirmation as well pride in their social projects and achievements. This strongly suggests that participatory activities that are promoted to assist well-being and self-discovery can also stimulate the exploration of identity.

This kind of mental activity that occurred at the intersection between participatory activities, achievements and reflexivity can be explained by psychosocial theory. Children internalize speech from social interaction (Vygostyky, 1978), facilitating the emergence of self and reflexivity processes created through social exchange and language community. This mechanism applies to the enhanced social interaction of higher education. It may also explain different reflexive trajectories between student leaders and non-leaders, as indicated in the findings. 'The social connection are different: teachers have different ideas, and they don't talk or act in the same ways either. if you contact them, they may say that the information you get or the things you learn are different.' (P20) Through interaction with more knowledgeable others, students would internalize these communications and become more reflective.

The students in this study who exhibited stagnation and had low student agency in higher education also indicated disengagement with school activities. This conforms with Astin's student involvement theory (1984) which emphasizes both the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience. He assumes the accumulated effects of student involvement but neglects the interaction between institutional practices and student motivation and behaviour. The focus of the

student engagement concept on the behavioural patterns of students tends to lead to the overlooking of internal resources and student capabilities.

On the other hand, experience alone does not lead to personal development automatically or promote new ways of thinking, which depend on our reflections. in the present study some students achieved reflexivity through withdrawing from the crowd; while vocational students could develop themselves through resisting a non-stimulating environment. This corresponds to a lived microsystem in Bronfenbrenner (1979)'s ecological theory where mundane and meaningful work helps achieve resilience (Mu, 2018). Therefore, student involvement is not necessarily a matter of 'more is better', but gains meaning and inner impact from being 'fit for purpose' i.e. to what one values.

6.4.2 Deep learning

Learning is a recurring theme, in both the literature and the present study, in relation to the enhancement of reflexivity and the achievement of transformation. Like Barnette's association between knowing and becoming (2009), the results shows close relationship between learning and transformation. Knowledge works as one mediator between agency and structure (Marginson, in press). Specifically, discipline knowledge can transfer a way of thinking that influenced one's 'epistemic values'. The transformational power of learning and knowledge is further confirmed by Ashwin (2014). A deep and personal encounter with knowledge calls for and helps to nourish certain ethically worthwhile forms of human being.

In the present study deep learning led to the internalization to personal values where students applied conceptual or academic knowledge in everyday life and made meaningful interpretations of the world as 'way of being'. This is described as a transformative experience by Pugh (2011). Dewey provides an account of how learning impacts experience. 'Transformative learning' is developed to cultivate general attitudes and capacities and connect the subject matter to students' everyday experiences. It is associated with the cultivation of internal agency such as freedom and self-efficacy from active engagements. This represents a distinct feature of higher education in relation to knowledge, curriculum and 'higher learning'. Here an epistemic understanding has ontological implications.

Knowledge provides ways for students to reflect on themselves and re-examine their valued ends (Walker, cited in Clegg, 2011). Vocational education has positioned itself to build technical skills and help student find jobs. This rhetoric neglects the need for general skills. In contrast to the common employability agenda in vocational education, the current data have identified an innovative curriculum introduced alongside technical studies i.e. reading Chinese classics. For example, P14 claimed that after reading classics, he started to make reflection a daily practice, looked more inwardly and became self-disciplined. This approach focused on personal building and attempted to 'bring knowledge back in' (Young, 2017). This resonates with incorporating a Confucian model in higher vocational education

(Xiong, 2011). While resources across different institutions are diverse, the cultivation of knowledge and knowing are beneficial in helping students to break away from marketized purposes.

6.4.3 Mobility

In the present study going abroad was seen as a way of achieving upward mobility. Vocational students who had international experience felt proud and confident. Building from Bourdieu, going mobile is a way to accumulate symbolic capital akin to 'titles of nobility' (Bourdieu, 1984) in the form of 'a socially recognised qualification'. Mobility represents an achievement and helps a person to build a positive social identity.

The power of mobility in contributing to agency formation has been researched widely among international students (Tran & Vu, 2018), along with how international mobility changes students' agency and self-formation. These insights also apply to the current sample. Likewise mobility is associated with greater reflexivity, confirming an empirical hypothesis by Emirbayer & Mische (1998): 'actors who are positioned at the intersection of multiple temporal-relational contexts can develop greater capacities for creative and critical intervention.'

Amid the trend to global higher education, more students can learn subject knowledge that provides an international curriculum in China. These students become more open to diverse cultures. Many students who came to Shanghai from other cities claimed it was a good choice that changed their perception and view of the world and themselves. They developed criticism oftheir studies, as well as making comparison with or criticisms in relation to the educational quality at smaller cities where they grew up. This type of 'growing apart while growing up' is also identified by Lee and Kramer (2016). Similarly, students who receive transnational studies indicate reflexivity in relation to their universities such as their underlying meanings, virtues, or shortcomings (Dai, Lingard & Musofer, 2020; Jin & Ball, 2019).

The capacity for reflexivity is provoked by habitus-field dissonance, yet this does not necessarily catalyse changes to habitus. Conformity is discussed further in the next section.

6.5 Collective Agency

Agents are always situated in a temporal situation and a collective context of action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) where participants not only experience but also subconsciously construct a collective and learning culture.

However, collective agency was not observed explicitly in the present study. The current sample maintained a more individualistic outlook. Meritocracy was a prevalent ideology among the students. Individuals usually had different self-positions and personal projects to each other, which lead to different pathways, especially among VHE students

who lacked identification with community, or collective power. An individualistic approach to developing oneself may risk falling into a neoliberalist trap where there are no common goals in the higher education institution, that is, no spirit to achieve collective action.

There are several potential reasons. On a personal level, one reason might relate to the aforementioned evolving identity: individuals develop a personal identity that supersedes group identity through continuous reflexivity with the community (Archer, 2000). The notion of liquid modernity also points to increased reflexivity in the form of individualisation when negotiating institutions in higher education, as opposed to the structural composition of social space. On an institutional level, higher education, in general, represents more freedom compared to secondary school. Potential individualism is associated with loose connections formed with teachers or staff, leading to a lack of cohesion with the school and greater self-reliance. It was found that separated communication between disciplines and departments was common; and there was disengagement between the institutions and community. The other reason may be due to methodology and sampling limitations. Woronov (2015) pursued an ethnographic study and observed a whole cohort. The current study utilizes interviews with diverse sampling.

The current study identifies conformity as a form of collective agency. Culturally speaking, Confucianism places more emphasis on freedom of agency than on freedom of control. While Bildung relates to self-liberation and freedom, the end of formation in China must turn into nation-building and the education of the national elite, as opposed to forming independent thinkers through liberal studies (Marginson, in press). This is more apparent in higher education that is state-funded. Individual formation thus subsumes to citizen building. However, conformity can be seen as a form of agency that struggles with imbalances of power. It is interpreted as agentic internalisations when one feels powerlessness in the face of wider institutional or social structures. Through accommodating or resisting this discursive structure, the positioning and repositioning of oneself can be described as forms of individuals' agentive power (Tran & Vu, 2016).

6.6 Conclusion

On one hand, agency is bounded by structural inequality, and the power dimension in institutional practices, such as an ontology of normality leads to the degrading of collective agency. The way capital and habitus act as thinking tools can also be used to explain how misfits between habitus and circumstances lead to resistance and transform inequality between internal resources and student experience. However, they are not determinants to agency. This study recognizes socially constructed class experience, mobilized capital, and different status values. Transformation is seen in the becoming power of agents, in resistance to habitus, and evolving identity. Resources for reflexivity are encouraged by participatory activities, deep learning and mobility. Agency, in general, is encouraged by

positive social relationships and communicative culture. It was observed that the current sample maitained an individualistic outlook on the student higher education experience. Nevertheless, conformity can be seen as a form of collective agency in Chinese higher education, and one resistance of students to the imbalances of power.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This study set out to offer an agentic perspective on student experience and has identified factors and mechanisms that differentiate vocational students from students who studied in research universities. It has offered conceptualisation from both structural and agency theories, enabled us to see a story from two sides. It has recognized that culture, economic and human capital are not determinants of human agency. Agency has been seen not only as an end but also a mean to understand and explain human action. Structure and agency interplay with each other in ways that are transformational (Eccelstone, 2007).

This study has extended a structural determinist view to an ecological understanding of student experience in Chinese higher education. The study has made a novel contribution in investigating the disadvantaged position of vocational students and observing the resistance and transformational potentials and power of student agents. These insights were possible because the agentic orientation puts students as an active agent rather than a passive receiver of institutional culture.

The study also expands the understanding of learning in liquid modernity, in which a formation of value systems that develops individual responsibility through reflexivity, deep learning and self-formation, can take freedom beyond the limits of 'negative freedom'. Transcending an individualistic outlook, it has recognized the empowering role of institutions and the potentials of democratic collegiate relationships, supportive learning community, transformational learning experience and innovative curricula.

7.1 Limitation

Apart from the sample limitations discussed in Chapter 4, it's important to recognize the limitation of generalizability of the current study. The use of the questionnaire was designed to compensate for this limitation. However, due to various physical and time constraint, the questionnaire mode was not used to its fullest possibilities. A more rigorous design is needed in the future.

In addition, agency is an individualized process and can differ even given the same relational resources. People can develop agency both explicitly and implicitly. Not all participants mentioned agency but those who did not were observed explicitly and implicitly through the perceptions and reflections of the author. This is limiting because interpretation on metacognition was inevitably subjective. Because of the author's positionality and axiology, this study might have attended more to the positivity of the participants under study, overshadowing the lived experience of class negativity.

This study engaged closely with Bourdieu, but with the intention to build an agentic orientation. There was no engagement with the totality of Bourdieu's conceptual framework such as field, as well as with indigenous theoretical frameworks from China. It is

important to further investigate in terms of the research university and vocational fields and socially, historically, and economically constructed practices.

One gap lies in the gender difference which was identified in the agency scale in relation to self-efficacy and social support. This was not discussed extensively in the current study given length considerations.

Another gap of the study lies in the quantification of agency and the feasibility of applying agency in institutional ground-level processes.. Although the author believes that agency is subjective lived experience, quantification and direct correlation are of high value in identifying the importance of agency. There are challenges in balancing between cultivating agency and providing freedom, as well as the accountability of outcomes. This study takes a meaningful step toward conceptualizing and measuring agency in students' higher education experience.

7.2 Recommendation

To enhance the experience of vocational students and overall student agency, changes are needed at different levels of stakeholders.

First, it is necessary to challenge the institutional ontology that treats vocational students as a deficit group and tries to manage it. Policy on vocational higher institutions and higher education, in general, need to move beyond simply training people in rote knowledge and cognitive skills, to create spaces and opportunities for students to act agentively, including their participation in different areas of the community. In practice, curriculum and pedagogy practices require reform towards a student-centred approach that aims to deliver transformational learning. Participative activities can be diversified through engagement between departments, in-school work opportunities, in local community cooperation, or through provincial-level competitions. Policy efforts should be made to raise awareness of the need to develop confidence, identity, and positive self-concept among vocational students, and to view them as equal and active agents who have the potential to transform themselves and create their own values.

To enhance student agency will also require the liberation of teacher agency, and institutional agency. Research-oriented assessment only may decrease teachers' agency, further fostering a consumerist logic between teacher and student. The mentor relationship can provide students with more than academic assistance, by also engaging students personally. Policies should aim to build a community that is safe, encouraging, and non-hierarchical, to develop an institutional culture for learning and collective agency.

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Appendix

Appendix A Quantitative Tables

Table 4.3.1 Survey Demographics

Baseline characteristic	Full Sample	
	n	%
Geographic		
Local Shanghai	30	41.1
Non-local Shanghai	21	28.8
Outside of Shanghai	20	27.4
Prefer not to say	2	2.7
RESEARCH-TOTAL	47	64.4
Research (key)	4	3.6
Research (non-key)	11	8.6
Don't know	1	0.7
Undergraduate	32	43.8
Graduate	14	19.2
PhD	1	1.4
VOCATION-TOTAL	26	35.6
Vocational (key)	9	12.3
Vocational (non-key)	5	6.8
Don't know	11	15.1
Type of Study	26	52
Full time	69	94.5
Part time	4	5.5
Receive Bursary		
Yes	22	30.1
No	48	65.8
Prefer not to say	3	4.1
Gender		
Female	48	65.8
Male	25	34.2
Average Grades		
Below 60	2	2.7
60-70	2	2.7

70-80	19	26
80-90	37	50.7
90-100	13	17.8
Highest level of study		
First Year	1	1.4
Second Year	7	9.6
Third Year	3	4.1
Fourth year	5	6.8
post - graduate	13	17.8
Ph.D	2	2.7
Graduates	44	60.3

Figure 1 Factor Analysis Scree Plot

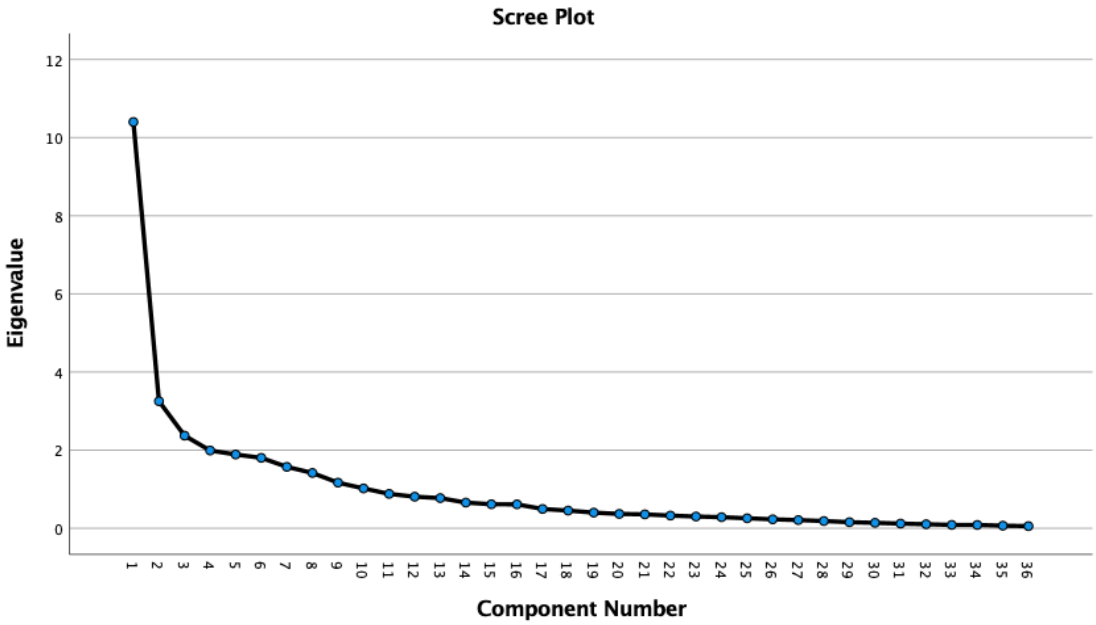


Table 4.6.1.1 Rotated Component Matrix

Pre-coded Items			2 Fixed Factor-Analysis Component	
			1	2
THEME 1 Internal agency				
a. Motivation and Utility				
[motivation1]	1	I am interested in my degree.	.559	.035
[motivation2]	2	I am motivated to study.	.721	.057

[motivation3] reverse	3	The course was not inspiring.	.043	-.642
[motivation4]	4	I have a desire to success in college.	.533	.002
[utility1]	5	I feel like what I learn is useful.	.433	.382
b. personal efficacy beliefs				
[Competence belief1]	1	I am very capable of succeeding at school.	.702	-.046
[self-efficacy1]	2	I believe in my ability to achieve what I wanted.	.374	.224
[self-efficacy2]	3	I believe I can solve most problems to given task if I invest the necessary effort.	.605	-.007
[Competence belief 2]	4	I learn things fairly quickly at school.	.518	-.013
THEME 2 External Agency				
Relational resources/ Real Opportunity				
c. Equal Treatment				
[treatment1]	1	I feel I am being treated equally as other students at school.	.414	.445
[treatment2]	2	I feel I am equal to students from other schools.	.147	.171
[treatment3] reverse	3	I feel I am inferior to my teachers	/	/
d. Support				
[teacher support1]	1	I receive consistent support from at least 3 teachers.	.659	.181
[teacher support2]	2	I know personally at lease one teacher.	.653	.120
[support] reverse	3	I am hesitatant to ask for support from staff at school.	.134	-.739
[Peer support1]	4	I receive academic support from my classmates.	.452	.206
[Peer support2]	5	I receive emotional support from my classmates	.387	.190
[support] reverse	6	I don't know where I can help me if I encounter a problem at school.	.111	-.787
e. Institutional Freedom [Opportunities to make choices]				
[opportunity to make choice1]	1	I can choose what I want to learn in my degree.	.449	.324

[opportunity to make choice2]	2	I am able to choose ways how to learn in my degree.	.675	.122
[freedom of time1] [opportunity to make choice3]	3	I can choose how to construct my timetable.	.488	.080
[freedom of time2] [opportunity to make choice4]	4	I feel I have enough free time to explore my interests other than study.	.494	.208
[freedom of speech]	5	I feel I can express my thoughts freely.	.770	.281
Participatory Resources				
f. Participation Activity				
[Participation activity1]	1	I ask questions and make comments in class.	.723	-.048
[Participation activity2]	2	I actively participate in school activities, outside of study.	.483	.084
[Participation activity3]	3	I take initiation to do things at school.	.696	.000
[Participation activity4]	4	I express my concerns if I have a problem, or I see a problem at school.	.591	.116
g. Opportunity to influence				
[Opportunities to influence1]	1	I feel like I can challenge things at school.	.545	-.013
[Opportunities to influence2]	2	I am encouraged to speak out at school.	.703	.267
[Opportunities to influence3] reverse	3	I feel like I have no opportunities to influence the main practices of the degree.	-.076	-.579
[Opportunities to influence4]	4	I feel like my view point is taken into account.	.555	.309
THEME 3 Collective agency				
h. Sense of Community/Collective Agency				
[community1]	1	I feel I am part of a community	.365	.508
[community2] reverse	2	I found it hard to participate in the community.	-.006	-.768
[community3]	3	I feel secure in school community.	.418	.146
[community4]	4	I share similar values or goals to people in my school community	.564	-.103

[community5]	5	I feel connected to people in my community	.628	-.048
[Ease of participation1]	6	I feel the school community is welcome and supportive.	.566	.297

Appendix B Full Survey

Note: Actual questionnaire is carried in Chinese

Demographic questions/Multiple choice		Please note that all questionnaires are anonymous.	**12 questions**
age:	**1**	16-25	
gender:	**2**	female/male	
school attended:	**3**	Vocational College/Research University	
		Please specify which school:	
Are you aware that your school is part of 'double high' plan?	**4**	yes/no/don't know	
What is your grades do you often get?	**5**	below 60/60 to 80/80 and above	
course study:	**6**	Text entry	
What year are you in?	**7**	1/2/3/4/graduate	
What kind of high school did you go to?	**8**	Technical High School/ Normal High School/prefer not to say	
Where did you finish your high school?	**9**	in city/ in town/prefer not to say	
Are you a…	**10**	local student/ non-local student/prefer not to say	
Are you a…	**11**	part time/full time student	
Do you receive student subsidies or state grant, or busury?	**12**	yes/no	
		On a scale of 1-5, with 1 **being strongly disagree**, and 5 being **strongly agree**. Please indicate your preferences to the following sentences	

		1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree.	
THEME 1 Internal agency			**10 questions**
a. Motivation and Utility			5 questions
[motivation1]	**1**	I am interested in my degree.	
[motivation2]	**2**	I am motivated to study.	
[motivation3] reverse	**3**	The course was not inspiring.	
[motivation4]	**4**	I have a desire to success in college.	
[utility1]	**5**	I feel like what I learn is useful.	
b. personal efficacy beliefs			4 questions
[Competence belief1]	**1**	I am very capable of succeeding at school.	
[self-efficacy1]	**2**	I believe in my ability to achieve what I wanted.	
[self-efficacy2]	**3**	I believe I can solve most problems to given task if I invest the necessary effort.	
[Competence belief 2]	**4**	I learn things fairly quickly at school.	ps: self efficacy vs ability self-concept/competence
THEME 2 External Agency			**22 questions**
Relational resources/ Real Opportunity			**14 questions**
c. Equal Treatment			3 questions
[treatment1]	**1**	I feel I am being treated equally as other students at school.	
[treatment2]	**2**	I feel I am equal to students from other schools.	
[treatment3] reverse	**3**	I feel I am inferior to my teachers	
d. Support			6 questions
[teacher support1]	**1**	I receive consistent support from at least 3 teachers.	

[teacher support2]	**2**	I know personally at lease one teacher.	
[support] reverse	**3**	I am hesitatant to ask for support from staff at school.	
[Peer support1]	**4**	I receive academic support from my classmates.	
[Peer support2]	**5**	I receive emotional support from my classmates	
[support] reverse	**6**	I don't know where I can help me if I encounter a problem at school.	
e. Institutional Freedom [Opportunities to make choices]			5 questions
[opportunity to make choice1]	**1**	I can choose what I want to learn in my degree.	
[opportunity to make choice2]	**2**	I am able to choose ways how to learn in my degree.	
[freedom of time1] [opportunity to make choice3]	**3**	I can choose how to construct my timetable.	
[freedom of time2] [opportunity to make choice4]	**4**	I feel I have enough free time to explore my interests other than study.	
[freedom of speech]	**5**	I feel I can express my thoughts freely.	
Participatory Resources			**8 questions**
f. Participation Activity			4 questions
[Participation activity1]	**1**	I ask questions and make comments in class.	
[Participation activity2]	**2**	I actively participate in school activities, outside of study.	
[Participation activity3]	**3**	I taking initiation to do things at school.	
[Participation activity4]	**4**	I express my concerns if I have a problem or I see a problem at school.	
g. Opportunity to influence			4 questions

[Opportunities to influence1]	**1**	I feel like I can challenge things at school.	
[Opportunities to influence2]	**2**	I am encouraged to speak out at school.	
[Opportunities to influence3] reverse	**3**	I feel like I have no opportunities to influence the main practices of the degree.	
[Opportunities to influence4]	**4**	I feel like my view point is taken into account.	
THEME 3 Collective agency			**6 questions**
h. Sense of Community/Collective Agency			
[community1]	**1**	I feel I am part of a community	
[community2] reverse	**2**	I found it hard to participate in the community.	connected to participation?
[community3]	**3**	I feel secure in school community.	
[community4]	**4**	I share similar values or goals to people in my school community	
[community5]	**5**	I feel connected to people in my community	connected to support?
[Ease of participation1]	**6**	I feel the school community is welcome and supportive.	
		Open ended question: What do you fee restrict your motivation in learning and participation?	
THEME 4 Future Agency			**3 questions**
How much education would you like to receive in the future?	**1**	undergraduate degree/graduate degree/doctorate degree/training program/other please specify:	
How do feel that degree had help you advance your career?	**2**		
Where do you see yourself in 5 years time?	**3**	open ended question.	

Endings		If you would like to talk more about your experience at school, please leave your email and the researcher will contact you with an invitation or follow up interview. During interview, you will have the opportunity to reflect on your college experiences. The process will last less than 20 mins. This will help the researcher to understand what students think about your personal agency and what school can do better to offer help for future students. Please leave your email below so I can contact. By entering the email, you automatically enter in to the poll for survey.	

Appendix C AUS Survey

Items
Opportunities to make choices
1. No possibility to choose between various ways of completing the course
2. Possibility to choose the way to complete the course
3. Possibility to take a stand on working methods used in the course
Equal treatment
4. Equality among students
5. Other students have a stronger influence on the course
6. Equal treatment of students by teachers
Participation activity
7. Asking questions and making comments in the course
8. Expressing opinions in the course
9. Taking responsibility by being an active participant
10. Enjoyment in taking initiatives and collaborating in the course
11. Possibility to express thoughts and views without being ridiculed
12. Ease of participation in discussions
13. Difficulties participating in discussions
14. Willingness to participate even when having other things to do
15. Courage to challenge matters presented in the course
Ease of participation
Interest and utility value
16. The course was not inspirings
17. High motivation to study in the course
18. The course was not inspiring because of unclear utility value
19. The contents of the course were interesting
20. Desire to succeed in the course
21. Desire to learn in order to understand
22. Maintaining persistence in the face of the high effort demanded
Self-efficacy
23. Belief in one's ability to succeed in the course
24. Belief in succeeding even in the most challenging tasks
25. Belief in successfully completing the course
26. Belief in attaining personal goals set for the course
27. Confidence in oneself as a learner in spite of challenges
Competence beliefs
28. Understanding of the course contents

29. Sufficient basis for participation in discussions in the course
30. Understanding of the constructs presented in the course
31. Experiencing course contents as too challenging
32. Lacking basic knowledge for understanding the course contents
33. Experience of a need for revision of basic concepts prior to the course
34. Course demands have not been excessive
Teacher support
35. Belittling of students by teachers
36. Teachers' friendly attitude towards students
37. Experience of being oppressed as a student
38. Teachers' contemptuous attitude towards students
39. Not enough room for discussion given by teachers
Peer support
40. Experiencing other students as resources for learning
41. Providing support for other students in challenging study tasks
42. Asking for help from other students when needed
Trust
43. Experience of being welcome in the course
44. Approachability of the teachers
45. Supportive course climate
46. Experience of being able to trust teachers
47. Encouraging students to participate in discussions
48. Experience of teachers' interest in students' viewpoints
49. Possibility to be oneself in the course
Opportunities to influence
50. Student viewpoints and opinions were taken into account
51. Student viewpoints were listened to
52. Experience of having to perform according to external instructions
53. Possibility to choose contents that one finds interesting
54. No possibility to influence the course contents

RE: PERMISSION TO ADOPT RESEARCH SCALE

JP

Jääskelä, Päivikki <paivikki.jaaskela@jyu.fi>
To: [redacted]

Wednesday, 10 March 2021 at 9:53 pm

This message is flagged for follow-up.

Dear [redacted]

I apologise for the delayed response. Unfortunately, we have a very tight copy right agreement among the developers concerning the use of AUS Scale. It means that we only allow the use of the AUS Scale for the considered research collaborations /collaborative research project at this stage of the scale development. So, I hope you can proceed your degree work with another measurement or approach.

Best regards,

Päivikki Jääskelä

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Appendix D Interview Questions

- Self introduction; Introduce my research
- Ask for any questions
- Start:
  1. Could you please introduce your own educational background (from how your parents educated you, or from school education, some examples in your life that you think have a great influence on you)
  2. What is your understanding of the university?
  3. What is your ideal college life like?
  4. What do you want from the university?
  5. Do you have any goals in college?
  6. Does your school have any campus culture and philosophy?
  7. Comment on your life in college
     - How do you feel about your adaptation in school?
     - Is the management system strict?
     - learning aspect
     - In terms of extracurricular activities, what activities have you participated in in school?
     - Can you integrate well into the school community in your life?
     - Are there any situations that make you think you are restricted? difficulty
     - You have achieved those things in college, what have you done to make you proud
  8. What do you discover/aware of injustice in the university?
     - Have you tried to change it? Did you challenge anything in school? authority
     - Have you ever heard of other students challenging the school? How did the school cultivate it? Sense of competition
     - Is there a hierarchy between students and teachers?
     - Do you think those measures in the school allow you to participate in improving the existing problems in the school.
     - What changes are caused by students?
  9. What resources do you use most in school?
  10. What do you think college brings you the most?
  11. Do you think there is anything that can be improved?
  12. If you want to change one thing or one aspect in college, what would you change?
  13. Future
     - Do you have any expectations or goals for the future?
     - How do you think your college experience helped you achieve your goals?

- How much do you think your university has changed? How do you think college affects you? Do people around you have any influence on you?

- Finish:

In the conversation just now, what do you think can be shared with me?
If you have any additional questions about my research, you can ask me now.
Thank you very much for your participation.

Appendix E Qualitative Tables

Table 4.6.1.2 Descriptive qualitative data - a central chart

1. Internal Resources	

1.1 Family Capital	• Talent introduced family (Shanghai immigration status) [1, 5, 10, 21]
	  • Better qualitied recourses, feel more secured
	• Internalised values [4, 19, 20, 21]
	  • Personality [20]
	  • Role model [4]
	• Lack of role model [14]
	• Family influence on major or career choice/ aspiration
	  • Family career [9, to pursue similar career]
	  • Family arrangement [12, 18]
	  • Gender bias [6, female; 15, male]
	• 'Free' as Family cultivating style
	  • Open-minded, do not force on compulsory tuition [7, 9, 10, 15, 17]
	  • Supportive of choice [18]
	• Suppression' as family cultivating style - link with low confidence [11, 13, 15]
	  • *Negative response* - can't escape from family influence [13]
	  • Restriction on interest development [15]
	• High Economic status [12]
	• Low Economic status [13, 16, 20] - lack of financial support
	  • The need to be financial independent
	  • *Positive response:* actively apply for bursaries [20]
	• Normal working-class family [6, 23]
	• Family supportive of education [16, 18]
	  • Economic support [19]
	• The collective values of family - respect, proud [14, 15, 18]

1.2 Social Capital	• Geographic difference in k12 educational resources and quality [1, 2, 4, 21]
	  • Academic/rigid only (exam-oriented) vs all-round development/flexible, round, more extra-curriculum [2, 3, 22]
	  • Students need to adjust academically [2, 4]
	  • Feel anxiety to catch up [2]
	  • Don't know how to 'play' [22]
	• Students in Shanghai have more social capital such as knowledge and information assessed to internship, career planning [2, 4]
	  • Lack of social capital feel loss and anxiety to catch up b/c little help [2]
	• Kinds of high school before university have different rate of how many people go into vocational/elite university
	  • [1] 50%
	  • [3] good learning atmosphere
	  • [5] normal public small school,
	  • [6] 80% went into vocational schools
	• Good teacher relationships [9]
	• Bad learning experiences [13]
	• High school friends who went into the same university [17, 21]

1.3 Goal & Purpose	• Purposeless
	• Career-oriented
	• Future-prospect oriented (towards money, houses, and family)
	• Exploration oneself
	• Credentials
	• Lack of understanding of job market
	• Family infleunce
	  • Family arrangements
	  • Family influenced major
	  • Family implicit aspiration

1.4 Motivation & Utility	• Player (2)
	  • Job-oriented (2)
	  • Improve credentials in order add more personal value
	  • Have actionable gaol [15, 19, 21] future-oriented e.g. improve credentials, certificates, go abroad
	  • Clear self-positioning in the market [20]
	• Purist [4, 6]
	  • Inertial thinking to study [6, 17]
	  • Follows what teacher say
	  • A purist goals
	• Interests of major [9, 12], seeking for a career that one really enjoys
	  • Enjoy learning [10]
	  • Transform from job-oriented to pursue one's interest [5]
	• Lack of understanding of university [22]
	  • Perceived as useless (from wider discourse)
	  • Just want to graduate, not very concerning with schools
	  • Family orientation [13] - lack of self-positioning
	• New environment thus seeks for a change [7]
	• Prove to family [11]

1.5 Self-efficacy	• Hardworking [1]
	• Time management skills [1]
	• Proactive & self-driven [2, 4, 17]
	• Agency in learning [9]
	• Learning style
	  • Against Indoctrination [15]
	  • Hands on skills [16]
	• Self-discipline: vocational has less [18]
	  • High self-discipline [19]

1.6 Identity	• Do not identified as vocatioal students [15] • want to pursue higher social status [16] • think negatively about the shcool [22]
1.7 Personality	• **Conformist** [2, 3, 20] vs Rebellious [15] • Introvert [5, 13] vs extrovert [17, 20] • Not ambitious [9]

1.8 Learning	• Mindsets [14]
	  • Problem solving mindsets [7, 17]
	  • Critical thinking [1, 3]
	  • According to major e.g. economic - utilitarian [2]; humanities vs science thinking [7];
	  • Method of learning and thinking [3]
	• Self-learning [7]
	• Depth of knowledge [3]
	• Learn about oneself [4, 12, 19] through variety of activities
	  • Self-discipline [14]
	  • e.g. what one likes to do
	• Social aspect of learning
	  • Learn about the world [5] & dft people
	  • Social & Communication skills [11, 17]
	• Metaphysic [6]
	• A foundation [19, 20] in terms of the broadness of learning
	• Artefact
	  • Internet [4, 7]
	• The uselessness of the knowledge itself [6]
	• Interlink between knowledge & skills [8]

2. Internal Agency	

2.1 Values 价值观	• Utilitarian values derived from major [2, 6]
	• Social values
	  • Giving back to society [4, 14]
	  • Advocate for social just [4] - helping disadvantaged
	  • Do good to others/ altrurism [9]
	  • Making positive influence [9, 14, 18]
	  • Patriotism [14]
	  • opposed to materialism, but spiritualism [15]
	• The formation of values
	  • Autonomous, and interaction with the world [7]
	• Work ethic [8]
	• Idealistic & romantic [9]
	• Liberal values towards education [10]
	• oppose to formulaic education, appreciate ‘‘characteristic development’
	• Hard work pays off [20, 21] than Opportunistic

2.2 Transformation	• Personal transformation
	  • Develop social, communication and interpersonal skills [1, 2, 3, 4, 10, 17] - changing in behaviour
	  • develop personality [1]
	  • strengthen good qualities of oneself [14]
	  • More confident [4, 19]
	  • Humbler [9]
	  • More mature [10, 15, 16]
	  • More independent of one's own mind [10]
	  • More inward focus [12, 14]; Richer inner world [18]
	  • Adjustment of mentality [12]
	  • Temper one's temperament [15, 16]
	  • Know about one's passion [10, 19]
	  • Realize who is more important to oneself [7, 10]
	  • Clearer about one's career [17]
	• Shift social identity [3]
	  • From a student to an independent adult concerning practical thing [3, 12]
	  • From a rebellious person to accepting and adjusting to the society [15]
	  • More accepting the inequalities of the world and shortcoming of oneself
	• Broaden one's horizon [4: through being in Shanghai]; wider outlook of the world [18]
	• *Appreciate the getting through the darkness, confusion or toughness [3, 6, 19]*
	  • *Develop Resilience [13]*
	• *Negative:*
	  • *Regrets [5]*

2.3 Reflexivity	• Know about oneself [1, 20] - self-positioning
	• Future orientation
	  • Realisation of Future [6]
	  • Think about/regret long term plan [11]
	• Obstacles
	  • Reflect / learn from hardship & mistakes [6]
	  • Reflect after learning opportunity is deprived [10]
	  • Reflect after pandemic [11]
	• Interacting with different kinds of people led to practice of interpersonal skills [8]
	• More inward-looking [14, 6, 18, 19]
	  • Reflective person as habits [6, 14,18]
	• Reflect and conclude about the lessons learned from social activities [15]
	• Observant person [15, 19]
	• Reflect after mobility

2.4 Future Plan	• Look up to teachers [1]
	• Build on previous experience and progress [2]
	  • vs: to explore and find a job that one like not restricted to the major [5]
	• Consider how to build oneself a rounder person [3] - self-improvement
	• Work-life balance [4,8]
	• Make good impact on society [4, 22]
	• Aiming the life that one wants to live, than jobs or money
	• Work hard & learn [8] & get recognition
	• Become a professor [a clear goal] [9]
	• Improve working condition [16]
	• More knowledge [19] through education
	  • Vs: Improve credential [16]
	• An entrepreneur using one's research [22]

3. External Resources	

3.1 Participatory Opportunity	• new students incomer activities [1]
	• in-between college/ across major activities [1]
	• societies [1, 8]
	• Study abroad program [1, 21]
	• Placement Transfer systems to study across university [3] - competitive
	• School government body [6, 19, 22]
	  • A worker for 上传下达 [23]
	  • Competitive [22]
	• Part-time job [6, 21]
	• Recreation
	  • galleries, concerts, art, literature [10]
	  • Game contests [13]
	• Relationships [6]
	• Innovation & Entrepreneurial Competition *2 [10, 17]
	  • Vs no competitions [14]
	  • Research project [22]
	• sub-class president [19, 22]
	• Classroom presentation [21]
	• Join the party [22]
	• & Implication [17, 19]

3.2 Institutional Freedom	• Free environment
	  • Free time & schedule [1]
	  • Lots of tolerance
	  • You are up to yourself [2] - with little teacher support
	  • No regulation [2]
	  • Free space to explore [4]
	• Closed environment [8, 13, 14]
	  • Meaningless activities [19]
	  • Restriction & disciplines in terms of schedules and formality [19]
	• Little time to explore yourself [3]
	  • Lack of resources that enable exploration [4, 5]
	  • Lack of energy to develop hobbies [7]
	  • Lack of guidance to explore [5]
	• Mandatory activities
	  • Requirements of schools [3, 23]
	  • School policy restriction [7]
	  • (Lack of) Freedom of choice [17, 18]
	• Interaction between enviornment & students
	  • Fit in [14, 23]
	  • The strict environment help eliminate accidents [8]
	  • Vocational students is too free, teachers lack of guidance on them [19]
	  • Freedom is good for people who have have goals, ambitious and ability, but harmful for people who don’t where there is no one guides students [2]

3.3 Curriculum	• (dislike) Rote learning [1, 21]
	• (too) Desk focused [11, 20]
	• Lack of practical learning [11, 20]
	• dissatisfied with compulsory course on politics study [1, 2, 6, 21]
	  • Lack of critical thinking [21]
	• Majors
	  • A foreign major that is originated from the west [1] thus not very comprehensively taught in china
	  • Too broad that it is tough for vocational learning e.g. medicine [8] < nursing
	  • Not comprehensive or systematic [1, 17, 很杂, 21]
	  • Language major - lack of the language environment/ motivation
	• Assessments
	  • Lack of definite criteria [7] on design course
	  • Less subjective evaluation
	• Interships [1, 7, 8, 23]
	• Skill/professional learning [8]
	• Courses
	  • Only apply to china, unapplied internationally [11] - 'laggard mindsets leadershiop'
	  • Low qualities compare to another elite school [3, 10]
	• Part time - feel confused, and unequal resources to full time [12]

3.4 Social Connections
 	
Most participants who falls into this categories were in leadership positions.
	• Networking [1, 6, 10, 17, 20, 21]
	• Social connections across colleges
	  • Lack of [3]
	  • Find friends [17]
	  • Friend circle [20]
	• Social relationships with dorm room members
	  • Lack of [5]
	  • conflicted [6]
	• Social relationships with society members [7]
	• Friendliest from local people [4] made her feel welcomed
	• Social relationship at work vs at school [8]

3.5 Teacher relationships	• Staff:
	  • Passive [2, 7]
	  • Negativity [6]
	  • Lack of ethic [6]
	  • Positive spirit [19]
	• Loose connection with course teacher [2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 16]
	• Deep connection
	  • Positive teacher influence in life [1, 4, 11, 14, 15, 18, 19]
	  • As role model [18, 19, 20]
	  • Communication [20, 22, 23, 3, 6]
	  • Caring [9, 19, 20]
	  • Encouragement [11, 16, 19, 20]
	  • Recognition [19]

3.6 Peer Relationships	• Peer support [2,3,4]
	• Common activity [6, 21]
	• Befriend with similar personality [4, 7, 10, 18]
	• Friendliness from local [4]
	• Positive peer influence [6, 9, 20]
	• Romantic relationships influence [6]
	• Dorm room life [9, 21, 23]
	  • Lack of communication [7]
	  • Lack of cohesion [12] with classmates [9]
	  • No influence [15]
	• Hard to make friends [11]
	• Negative experience [12]
	• More inclusive [9, 21] through reflexivity
	• Transform in collective to isolated [10]
	• Isolated [12] in graduate school [19] - did not find people with similar mind
	• Interact with International student [20] - lack of [7]

3.7 Relational Resource/ physical	• Physical resources
	• Library [1, 3, 17]
	• Physical constraint
	  • Suburb campus [10]
	  • Small campus
	  • Cheap housing [12]
	  • No access to digital library [12]
	  • Lack basic infrastructure [22, 23]

	• Lack quality of teachers • Financial difficulty [13] • multi-university [3]
3.8 Relational Resources/ soft	• Alumni connection [1, 2, 20] • Lack of workshops or guest speaker [4] • Lack of career guidance • Special classroom - experimental class, with supervisor system [9] • Low Teaching quality [8, 12, 14, 19(rote learning)] • Lagged mindsets [22] • Teacher Lack of ethics or responsibility [5, 6, 20] • Low quality of career platform [21] • Other: • 1. career workshop or guidance for each grade 2. cooperation with local companies for internship opportunity 3. one on one personal communication b/c class teacher have three classrooms, counsellor has very few contact
3.9 Geographical Spaces	• Dorm room • peer interaction [3] • Lonely [5] • International students and local students separated by different dorm room • Department interconnections divide geographically - buildings • Campus divide [3, 5] • The impact of a city [4, 12] • Choice of school by city [15] • Engagement restricts by distance [7, 9] • Space decide activity and communication [11]
4 External Agency	

4.1 Participatory Activities	*Social activity:*
	• Volunteer
	  • Community/Social Projects [9, 17, 20]
	  • 支教 [4]
	• Work experience [2, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 17, 21, 22]
	• Further Learning
	  • Research on going abroad [4]
	  • Study for Certificate [19]
	  • Going abroad program [2]
	  • Second major in another school [4, 21]
	School activity
	• School Government Body [3,4, 7, 15/president; 17/president, 18/president, 19, 20/vice-president, 22, 23]
	• Societies [1, 6/president, 9, 21, 22]
	• Class executive member [6,19, 20]
	• Competition [6, 7, 14, 15, 18]
	• Course rep [8]
	Others
	• Play games [6]
	• Relationships [6, 9]
	• Explore the city [12]
	• Nothing [13]
	• Gangster [16]

4.2 Mobility	• Transition between vocational to undergraduate [9] • Cross-major [11, 17, 23] • Full time & part time study value divide [8] • Restriction of vocational credentials in job-seeking [18] • Advantages of vocational credentials [20] • Going abroad reflection [21]
5 Collective Resources	

5.1 Institutional Practices	• Assessment subjectivity [1, 21. 13]
	  • Vicious cycle of assessments [3]
	• Evaluation of teacher based on research over teaching, led to low teaching quality
	• Master application bias [1]
	• Scholarship application bias [5, 18]
	• Issue of Party quota [5, 11 14, 17]
	• Student Government body
	  • bureaucratic [2, 15, 22]
	  • Implement policy
	  • Little autonomy [7]
	  • Funding comes from school
	  • Needs to do shifts every day, and do nothing
	• Policy - 3+2 to encourage vocational
	• Responsive to student opinions [9]
	  • Mixed responsiveness to student reports [1]

5.2 Institutional Community/ Culture	See separate table below
6. Collective Agency	

Continue: Collective Resources and Agency descriptive Chart

P	Type of institution	Collective Environment Culture	Engagement
1	985 University, Shanghai	Inclusive & supportive	Protest
2	211 university, Shanghai	business like, factory of job seeking, less like a 'school', peers are among the best, with ambitious	
3	Non-211/985 key university, Shanghai	don't think motto was implemented, on our life only on presentation	
4	Non-211/985 key university, Shanghai		Report to adverse case

5	Non-211/985 key university, Shanghai		Unnecessary, Useless, Conformity
6	Non-985-211 key university, Shanghai	unequal morality' (素质不齐)	Conformity
7	Undergraduate through self-recruitment	self-studying; 'school is like a miniature society'; not a strong research atmosphere	
8	Health Vocational College	normal studying atmosphere (8 classes d day); segregate local/non local students	
9	Non-211/985 key university in Shanghai	interest-based; foreign curriculum; inclusive; people around me are very fine & excellent people, very hardworking	Carried by excellent people
10	Non-211/985 key university in Shanghai	individualised, less learning, more socialised	
11	Vocational	negative environment from peers; little learning environment	
12	Vocational	vocational/undergraduate - purer master - more alone time	Will study despite others being crazy have no idea where to report complaints
13	Vocational 3+2		
14	vocational		Lack of self-efficacy to change
15	Vocational	bureaucratic	逆流而上
16	Vocational		
17	Non-211/985 key science university		Lack of self-efficacy to change

18	Vocational	bureaucratic, ‘a miniature of society’; 专科学校不拖你下水就是好事	
19	Vocational	bureaucratic, adverse environment; upset & disappointed at first by the learning atmosphere	Be able to tough through, help him grow 逆流而上 alone and study for myself
20	Vocational	has a dorm room of learning environment	Conformity
21	211 research university	internship is common, major as a tool; great learning atmosphere, people are hardworking, and are brave to try new activity	Failed for reporting a course
22	Second tier university	bureaucratic in social conduct; lack of learning environment, but good in dorm room	
23	Vocational	‘humanity is fairly good’	

Box 1 An Index for student Agency

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Appendix F CUREC 1a approval letter, participant information sheet, and consent form

Dear [redacted]

Title: An investigation of Student Agency in Vocational Institutions in China
Ref: ED-CIA-21-148

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.

If your research involves participants whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question (this includes those under 18 and vulnerable adults), then it is advisable to read the following NSPCC professional reporting requirements for cases of suspected abuse http://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/information-service/factsheet-child-abuse-reporting-requirements-professionals.pdf

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application you should submit details to research.office@education.ox.ac.uk for consideration.

Good luck with your research study.
Best wishes

[redacted]
Member of the DREC

An investigation of Student Agency in Vocational Institutions in Shanghai China
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

General Information

This study aims to investigate student experience of vocational education in China.

We appreciate your interest in participating in this online survey. You have been invited to participate because you are a current or a recent graduate student of vocational colleges in China. Please read through this information before agreeing to participate (if you wish to) by ticking the 'yes' box below.

You may ask any questions before deciding to take part by contacting the researcher (details below).

The Principal Researcher is [redacted], who is attached to the Department of Education at the University of Oxford. This project is being completed under the supervision of Professor [redacted]

What will happen to me if I take part in the study?

You will be asked to complete a 54-item-questionnaire with open-ended questions anonymously. This should take up to 20 minutes. The questionnaire aims to assess student agency from personal, relational and participatory perspectives. No background knowledge is required.

At the end of the questionnaire, you will have the option to opt in for an interview. If you agree to talk more about your college experience in this way, you will be invited to an interview using an online platform e.g. Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Skype. This should take up to 20 minutes. You can also ask to pause or stop the interview at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. With your consent, there will be audio recording to more accurately record your thoughts in the conversation during the interview.

Do I have to take part?

No. Please note that participation is voluntary. If you do decide to take part in the survey, you may withdraw at any point for any reason before submitting your answers by pressing the 'Exit' button/ closing the browser. We have included a 'Prefer not to say' option for each set of questions should you prefer not to answer a particular question.

As previously explained, you can also withdraw from the interview, if you have one.

How will my data be used?

We will not collect any data that could directly identify you.

The data we will collect that could identify you will be auto-generative numbers. If you opt-in for interview, please leave your email at the end of the questionnaire. Please note that your email address will only associate with the identification number. You are not required to provide names.

Your IP address will not be stored. We will take all reasonable measures to ensure that data remain confidential.

The responses you provide will be stored in a password-protected electronic file and may be used in academic publications. Identifiable information will be deleted as soon as it is no longer required for the research, prior to completion of the study. Fully anonymized research data and consent records will be stored for three years after completion of the study.

Are there any potential risks in taking part?

You may feel reluctant to discuss about your backgrounds and grades. Your can always choose not to say.
If you opt in-for the interview, your personal email will not be paired with transcriptions. Only identification numbers will be used.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

The benefits of taking part is a better understanding of the different perspectives of agency as a student. You will also have the opportunity to reflect on your college experiences.
As a participator in this dissertation research, you are contributing to understand how practitioners and policy makers can better empower student agency in vocational education.

Who will have access to my data?

This research will be written up for a Master degree dissertation. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. The data will be accessed only by Masters student Yiwen Zhang and her academic supervisor Professor Simon Marginson.

Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/compliance/gdpr/individualrights/.

Who has reviewed this study?

This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

Whom do I contact if I have a concern or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please speak to [redacted] or their supervisor [redacted], and we will do our best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee; Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD **OR**
Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) Email: student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk

Please note that you may only participate in this survey if you are 18 years of age or over.

☐ I certify that I am 18 years of age or over

If you have read the information above and agree to participate with the understanding that the data you submit will be processed accordingly, please check the relevant box below to get started.

☐ Yes, I agree to take part

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) Approval Reference:

An investigation of Student Agency in Vocational Institutions in Shanghai China

Purpose of Study: This study aims to investigate student experience of vocational education in China.

		Please initial each box
1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or penalty, and that I may withdraw all data collected.	☐
3	I understand that research data collected during the study, in fully anonymised form, may be looked at by authorised people outside the research team such as readers of articles arising from the research. I give permission for these individuals to access my data, on the understanding that it will be impossible to identify the persons from whom the data came.	☐
4	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.	☐
5	I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
6	I understand how this research will be written up and published.	☐
7	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐
8	I consent to being audio recorded.	☐
9	I agree to the use of pseudonymised quotes in research outputs.	☐
10	I agree to take part in the study.	☐

Name of Participant_____Date_____Signature

Name of person taking consent_____Date_____Signature