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From Stepping Stone to the Springboard: Alumni Mobility, Identity, and Capital Conversion in Transnational Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines alumni perspectives on the long-term impact of a Sino-U.S. joint-venture university. Qualitative interviews (n=13) and a supplementary survey (n=63) reveal that the institution functions as a strategic stepping stone to graduate education (88.9%) and fosters a global mindset. However, its effectiveness is moderated by persistent prestige deficits, inadequate career preparation (M=2.66/5), and underdeveloped alumni networks, reflecting tensions between American-modeled ideals and local realities. Applying Bourdieu's framework of capital conversion, we find that PAU successfully facilitates cultural capital acquisition for graduate mobility but struggles with capital convertibility in domestic labor markets. As one of the first studies to center long-term alumni outcomes in Chinese transnational higher education, it offers critical insights for policymakers and practitioners navigating a post-pandemic landscape of constrained mobility and geopolitical uncertainty.*

Keywords: alumni perspectives, Chinese-Foreign cooperation, cultural capital, Internationalization at Home, student mobility, transnational higher education

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INTRODUCTION

Sino-foreign cooperative universities (SFCUs), established under China's Regulations on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2023), represent a distinctive model of transnational higher education (TNHE) designed to cultivate globally competent talent within the domestic system. Understanding why students initially choose these institutions, a decision often driven by the desire for international curricula and pathways (Zhou et al., 2024), provides context for examining their long-term outcomes after graduation. Pacific Alliance University (PAU), founded in 2012 as a partnership with a US liberal arts institution, exemplifies this approach: a four-year, English-medium, US-style curriculum delivered on the Chinese mainland. By 2026, it enrolls approximately 4,000 students annually, with institutional data indicating that over 80% pursue graduate studies overseas. This study adopts Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital reproduction, specifically cultural capital, habitus, and capital convertibility, as its primary analytical framework.

The convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating U.S.-China geopolitical tensions has fundamentally reconfigured transnational higher education in China. As travel restrictions and visa uncertainties made physical mobility precarious, policymakers and institutions accelerated an "Internationalization at Home" (IaH) strategy, positioning joint-venture campuses as localized alternatives to study abroad (X. Li et al., 2024). This recalibration, while ensuring educational continuity, threw into sharp relief the structural tensions inherent in TNHE, tensions between global aspirations and national control, and between imported pedagogies and local practices. This study examines how alumni of one Sino-U.S. university navigate these intensified contradictions, drawing on their narratives to illuminate the lived experience of this transformed landscape. Recent US foreign policies, including heightened scrutiny of Chinese students, have further complicated this terrain, shaping perceptions and steering some students toward domestic TNHE alternatives (X. Wang, 2024).

Although the participants in this study are domestic Chinese citizens studying in their home country, their enrollment in a fully English-medium Sino-foreign cooperative university positions them within a growing body of transnational higher education research (Ren & Wang, 2021). As Wilkins and Rumbly (2018, 2019) note in their revised definition of international branch campuses, students at such institutions experience foreign curricula and degree-awarding structures without leaving their home country, a hybrid form of internationalization that the *Journal of International Students* explicitly seeks to highlight.

Building on recent analyses of first-year transition challenges in Sino-US cooperative universities (Noman et al., 2023), this study foregrounds alumni voices to illuminate how these hybrid Chinese contexts shape long-term outcomes. While a robust body of research has examined policy frameworks, student experiences, and institutional strategies in TNHE, the field has paid far less attention to graduates' long-term outcomes. Existing work often focuses on current students or institutional perspectives, leaving a critical gap in

understanding how TNHE shapes post-graduation mobility, professional trajectories, and identity formation in an era of geopolitical uncertainty and post-pandemic “glocalization” (Robertson, 1995). This study addresses that gap by foregrounding alumni narratives from a Sino-U.S. joint-venture university, offering empirical insight into whether these institutions deliver promised global citizenship or function primarily as prestige-compensating stepping stones in an increasingly nationalized higher education landscape. These findings carry implications for SFCU quality assurance and graduate employability.

Research Questions

- RQ1: How does PAU's transnational model function as a site for cultural capital acquisition and mobility strategizing among alumni?
- RQ2: How do alumni experience and navigate habitus clashes and capital convertibility failures during their transition from PAU to graduate study or employment?
- RQ3: What role does institutional support (or its absence) play in alumni's ability to convert transnational capital into further educational or professional opportunities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Expansion and Promise of TNHE in China

Transnational higher education (TNHE) in China has undergone rapid expansion and transformation since the early 2000s, becoming a cornerstone of the nation's internationalization strategy. As of early 2023, there are 82 active institutions (including Sino-foreign cooperative universities [SFCUs]) and nearly 800 programs offering bachelor's and postgraduate degrees (MoE, 2023). Policymakers frame this sector as a dual-purpose mechanism for enhancing human capital development and projecting soft power (Knight, 2016; Oleksiyenko et al., 2021). These institutions are designed to import Western curricula and pedagogical models to cultivate “globally competent talent,” explicitly aligning with national development goals (MoE, 2023). The foundational promise of TNHE has been to provide a domestic pathway to a global education, offering students the benefits of international learning without the immediate need to study abroad.

Scholars have extensively documented how exogenous shocks reshape transnational education landscapes. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted international student mobility through border closures and campus lockdowns (B. Wang, 2022; Yu et al., 2022), accelerating China's pivot toward Internationalization at Home (IaH) and repositioning joint-venture campuses as localized alternatives to physical mobility (X. Li et al., 2024). As X. Li et al. (2024) observe, the pandemic complicated the “intertwined global-national-local imbrications of TNHE in China,” encouraging students whose transnational journeys were hindered to receive global education at local institutions. This shift

did not introduce new tensions so much as amplify existing ones. L. Yang et al. (2020), writing before the pandemic, had already identified persistent frictions between TNHE's globalizing ambitions and China's regulatory frameworks, as well as between imported Western pedagogies and entrenched local educational practices.

Geopolitical Context (U.S.-China Tensions)

Beyond pandemic-related disruptions, escalating geopolitical tensions between China and Western nations have introduced a new layer of complexity for American-affiliated TNHE programs. While media coverage of U.S.-China rivalry is extensive (Gillies, 2021), scholarly work has documented concrete disruptions to academic collaboration and mobility, including heightened visa scrutiny, terminated partnerships, and shifting institutional risk assessments (X. Li, 2021; Marini & Xu, 2023; Tran et al., 2023). For students at Sino-U.S. joint-venture universities, this geopolitical friction generates a paradoxical landscape: the same American-affiliated credential that signals global mobility may simultaneously attract shifting perceptions of legitimacy or face selective barriers to U.S.-based opportunities (see also Duffy, 2025, on similar dynamics affecting academic staff). The Hong Kong context offers a parallel case, where the transition from British to Mainland Chinese governance has reshaped mobility patterns, informing our understanding of broader geopolitical shifts (Zou et al., 2022). As Yu et al. (2026) demonstrate in their analysis of China's transnational higher education strategy, these micro-level disruptions are embedded within a broader reconfiguration of educational partnerships as instruments of geopolitical statecraft.

Documented Benefits and a Pre-Pandemic Baseline of Optimism

A significant body of pre-pandemic research documented the tangible benefits of TNHE and established a baseline of optimistic outcomes. Empirical studies of Chinese graduates consistently highlighted the advantages of English-medium instruction (EMI) and U.S.-style curricula in preparing students for Western academic systems. This pedagogical environment helps reduce the culture shock of moving from teacher-centered to student-led classrooms, fostering the critical thinking and active participation norms valued in Western universities (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). For many students, this immersion creates a "seamless transition" to graduate programs abroad, as they arrive already familiar with academic norms, plagiarism standards, and digital learning platforms (Galloway et al., 2020).

Empirical studies of graduate outcomes reinforced this positive picture. Research by Mok and colleagues found that Chinese graduates of transnational programs highly valued the 'hard knowledge,' 'soft skills,' and 'cross-cultural understanding' gained from their international education and were overwhelmingly optimistic about the positive impact of this education on their career development (Mok & Han, 2016b). This research painted TNHE as a

successful strategy for enhancing human capital and global employability, with a majority of graduates securing employment swiftly, often in multinational corporations.

As Findlay et al. (2012) argue, mobility is shaped by social class and is often a 'strategic move' to accumulate cultural capital. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital reproduction offers three analytical tools. First, TNHE functions as a field where students acquire embodied cultural capital: Western academic norms and English proficiency. Second, the imported pedagogy creates a habitus clash: Chinese secondary dispositions (teacher-dependent) encounter a classroom designed for a different habitus (independent, discussion-based) (Yang et al., 2020). Third, a TNHE credential's value depends on its convertibility into economic or further cultural capital. When graduates encounter weak local employer recognition, they experience conversion failure. This Bourdieusian lens frames TNHE as individual strategizing, in which the Sino-foreign university serves as a stepping stone whose effectiveness depends on navigating these intersecting forms of capital.

Persistent Challenges and Structural Asymmetries

However, this optimistic outlook is tempered by a parallel literature detailing persistent and structural challenges. A primary critique concerns the prestige deficit of TNHE institutions. Despite their international branding, these universities often suffer from low recognition in both domestic and certain international contexts, a phenomenon linked to "reputational geographies" (Bobée & Kleibert, 2023, p. 3). This deficit is often exacerbated by operational realities, such as lower entry requirements for students and reliance on less experienced local faculty, which can undermine academic standards (Wilkins, 2021). Consequently, this creates a significant hurdle for graduates in the job market, with research from China showing that graduates from lesser-known TNHE institutions face higher unemployment rates and significant employment barriers (Wu et al., 2022). This internal asymmetry effectively prepares students for further study abroad. However, it can leave them underprepared for the nuances of the local job market, a dynamic that helps explain why career services at these institutions frequently prioritize graduate-school placement over direct workforce pathways (Dai et al., 2025; Mok & Han, 2016a).

However, the TNHE landscape in China is not undifferentiated. While no formal typology of SFCU tiers exists in the literature, observable differences in institutional resources, parent university prestige, and graduate outcomes suggest meaningful stratification across the sector. At one end of the spectrum, institutions like NYU Shanghai and Duke Kunshan University benefit from parent universities ranked among the global top 30 and offer direct pathways to home campuses in New York and Durham. A comparative analysis of ten SFCUs found that these institutions leverage a "logic of global prestige" to establish legitimacy, differentiating themselves through the symbolic capital of elite Western affiliations (Zhou et al., 2024). At the other end of the spectrum, the majority of the nearly 800 cooperative programs face a persistent "prestige deficit," struggling

for recognition in domestic labor markets and lacking the automatic international signaling power of an elite affiliation (Wu et al., 2022). Pacific Alliance University occupies a middle position within this differentiated landscape: it is not among the elite tier of institutions with top-30 global parent universities, nor is it among the lowest-prestige cooperative programs. Acknowledging this variation is essential, as alumni outcomes and mobility strategies likely vary systematically across institutions, a nuance often flattened in aggregate TNHE research.

The problem of GPA inflation and a perception of "soft rigor" created a significant mismatch between alumni confidence and the demands of elite graduate programs, a challenge that echoes critiques of academic standards documented across internationalized higher education contexts (Richardson & Bowen, 2023; Velazquez et al., 2025). This issue is not merely administrative but stems from a deeper pedagogical misalignment. Our findings closely mirror those of Yang et al. (2020) in their study of an Australian branch campus in Malaysia, where a clash between students' expectations for heavy teacher guidance and a curriculum designed for independence produced similar gaps in preparedness. At Pacific Alliance University, this cultural-educational misalignment left alumni feeling simultaneously over-confident in their grades and under-equipped for the autonomous rigor of top-tier graduate schools.

The Critical Gap: From Student Experience to Long-Term Alumni Outcomes

Despite this rich body of policy-oriented and student-experience research, a significant gap remains: a lack of longitudinal, qualitative studies that center on alumni voices to understand how TNHE shapes post-graduation outcomes. While recent scholarship has mapped macro-level geopolitical disruptions to Sino-U.S. higher education cooperation, including the impacts of deglobalization on institutional partnerships and student mobility (Mok et al., 2026; Yu et al., 2026), the micro-level effects on alumni mobility, identity, and career trajectories remain empirically underexplored. Existing work effectively maps structural features and classroom experiences but pays less attention to two critical dimensions. First, how alumni exercise strategic agency over time, navigating institutional limitations to convert their TNHE experience into meaningful "mobility capital." Second, the significant post-graduation identity work required of graduates. The literature on classroom culture shock (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015) typically stops at graduation. However, for many graduates, the more significant transition is from being the cultural majority on a joint-venture campus to being a racialized minority abroad, a complex process of identity negotiation involving encounters with microaggressions, shifting racial schemas, and the "forever foreigner" stereotype (Y. Li & Nicholson Jr., 2021; Okura, 2019; Yu, 2025; Yu et al., 2024). Unlike Chinese international students who move directly abroad, TNHE alumni are first socialized on an internationalized domestic campus, shaping expectations and identity narratives in ways not captured by existing research (e.g., Okura, 2019; Yu, 2025). How TNHE alumni, with their hybrid socialization, manage this

psychological “expectation adjustment” and navigate their evolving identities remains underexplored.

This study addresses these critical gaps by foregrounding the narratives of alumni from a Sino-U.S. joint-venture university. It moves beyond a framework of institutional provision to one of individual strategy and identity formation, offering empirical insight into how graduates leverage their TNHE experience while managing the complex realities of prestige, employment, and identity in an era of geopolitical uncertainty.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) to provide a comprehensive understanding of alumni outcomes. A quantitative survey identified broad patterns, while qualitative interviews explored nuanced experiences. The two strands were collected concurrently and integrated during analysis.

Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised all Pacific Alliance University alumni who graduated between 2016 and 2024, excluding those from non-degree or exchange programs. The alumni office database indicated approximately 1,200 eligible participants.

A two-phase recruitment strategy was used. **Quantitative phase:** A convenience sampling approach was used to distribute an online survey via the university's official alumni channels to all 1,200 eligible alumni. Of these, 63 completed the survey, yielding an overall response rate of 5.25% (92% completion rate among those who started). **Qualitative phase:** All 63 survey respondents were invited to participate in follow-up interviews. Of these, 13 agreed and completed semi-structured interviews. This self-selected sample reflects the practical constraints of alumni research, wherein willingness to participate, rather than researcher-driven purposive sampling, determined the final interview pool. Table 1 presents the demographic and background characteristics of the 13 interviewees.

Data Collection

Quantitative Survey: The survey collected data on demographics, educational pathways, employment status, and perceived outcomes using 5-point Likert scales and categorical items (see Table 2). Items were adapted from validated TNHE outcomes instruments (Dai et al., 2025; Mok & Han, 2016a, 2016b) and modified to align with the specific context of Sino-U.S. joint-venture universities. Internal consistency for Likert-scale items was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$; Nunnally, 1978).

Qualitative Interviews: Semi-structured interviews (15–30 minutes, conducted via Zoom) were conducted with 13 alumni. The duration was constrained by participant availability; this is acknowledged as a limitation (see below). The protocol explored graduate study decisions, career preparation, transition challenges, intercultural competence, and alumni support (see Appendix B). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively (means, percentages) in Excel. Cross-tabulations by graduation cohort (pre-COVID vs. post-COVID), major (STEM vs. non-STEM), and study-abroad participation identified subgroups for deeper qualitative exploration.

Qualitative transcripts underwent reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Quantitative and qualitative results were integrated iteratively. For example, low career-preparation scores contextualized qualitative themes of inadequate career services; emergent identity-related themes prompted re-examination of quantitative patterns by cohort.

Ethical Considerations

The study received IRB approval. All participants provided informed consent. Survey respondents were assured anonymity. Interview participants received pseudonyms, and identifying details were removed from transcripts.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

The following strategies were employed: methodological triangulation (surveys and interviews), thick description (verbatim quotes), member checking (n=8), and quantitative contextualization of qualitative themes.

Researcher Positionality

The first author is a faculty member at PAU, which facilitated access but required ongoing reflexivity. The second author was a graduate student at PAU during the research, offering a distinct perspective. Regular memo-writing and peer debriefing addressed potential bias.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the survey response rate (5.25%) is low, raising potential concerns about non-response bias. Alumni who responded may differ systematically from those who did not (e.g., more positive or more negative institutional experiences). Second, the interview sample (n=13) was selected from survey respondents, meaning that non-respondents to the survey are also absent from the qualitative data. Third, the brief interview duration (15–30 minutes) limited the depth of data collection on complex topics such as

identity negotiation and racialization; follow-up interviews were not conducted. Fourth, the single-institution design limits generalizability to other TNHE contexts, particularly elite institutions (e.g., NYU Shanghai, Duke Kunshan) or non-U.S. partnerships. Fifth, as with all retrospective self-report data, participant recollections may be subject to recall bias. Sixth, social desirability bias may have influenced responses, as alumni may have been inclined to either praise or criticize their alma mater based on personal experiences. Seventh, the first author's institutional affiliation may have influenced participant responses despite efforts to maintain neutrality. Eighth, the interview sample was self-selected from survey respondents who agreed to participate in the follow-up. Alumni who volunteered for interviews may differ systematically from those who did not (e.g., more engaged, more extreme experiences), potentially biasing the qualitative findings toward particular perspectives. Ninth, the survey instrument was not pilot-tested prior to distribution, which may have allowed ambiguous wording or response format issues to go undetected.

RESULTS

Table 1: Participant Demographics and Key Characteristics (n=13)

#	Pseudo nym	Gender	Major (at PAU)	Graduation Year	Current Location/Activity	Key Trait / Quote Hint
1	Alex	M	English	2021	UK – Film Production	London filmmaker, “cheated” on resume
2	Sophia	F	Accounting	2023	Hong Kong – Master’s	PolyU registrar issue
3	Sam	M	Psychology	2019	US – Doctoral Student	Graduated in 2019, strong faculty ties
4	Emma	F	English	2022	Malaysia – Master’s in Management US – Notre Dame	Malaysia → business master
5	Leo	M	Computer Science	2023	Computer Science Master's.	Gap year first
6	Mia	F	Psychology	2022	US – Purdue Ph.D.	Same desk as former prof
7	Ryan	M	Economics/Public Policy	2024	Japan – Master’s	Japan, economics/public policy

8	Claire	F	English (Literature)	2020	China – Teaching in Ningbo	Ningbo, literature → teaching
9	Ethan	M	Communication	2023	UK – Master’s	UK Master’s, research assistant
10	Olivia	F	Psychology	2023	US – UVA Ph.D.	UVA linguistics PhD
11	Nathan	M	Finance	2023	Gap Year → Graduate Study	Proactive mindset, gap year
12	Ava	F	Psychology	2023	US – New York (work)	Racism in NYC, "not surprised."
13	Ronnie	M	Finance	2023	Singapore – NUS Master's	CFA, expectation adjustment

A concurrent online survey (WenJuanXing, n=63, 2019–2024 graduates, administered before the interviews) provided quantitative triangulation and served as the recruitment source for the 13 in-depth interviews. The survey measured perceived preparation, TNE advantage, global competence gains, pursuit of graduate study, employment status, and transition challenges using 5-point Likert scales and categorical items.

Quantitative Results

Key survey results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Quantitative Snapshot of PAU Alumni Outcomes (Survey n=63)

Metric	Value
Pursued Graduate Studies	88.9%
Currently Employed	58.7%
First job within 6 months	60.3%
PAU preparation for career (M, 1-5)	2.66
TNE provided advantage (M, 1-5)	4.19
Improved global competence (M, 1-5)	4.06
Face transition challenges	68.3%

Note. Survey administered via WenJuanXing, 2025. Likert scales: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree. Additional survey results (e.g., year of graduation, detailed challenge breakdown) are presented in Appendix A.

Figure 1 displays the distribution of undergraduate majors among the 63 respondents, while Figure 2 shows the proportion reporting significant transition challenges to graduate school, the workforce, or other pursuits. Additional survey visualizations are provided in Appendix A (online supplementary material).

Cross-tabulations revealed that post-COVID graduates reported lower career preparation scores ($M=2.31$) than pre-COVID graduates ($M=2.89$), and STEM majors reported higher graduate school admission rates (94%) than non-STEM majors (82%).

The survey data reveal a striking paradox that foreshadows the qualitative findings. While 88.9% of alumni pursued graduate studies, reflecting PAU's success as a mobility platform, only 58.7% were employed at the time of the survey, and career preparation received the lowest mean rating ($M = 2.66/5$) among the measured outcomes. Conversely, perceived TNE advantage ($M = 4.19/5$) and global competence gains ($M = 4.06/5$) were rated highly. This divergence suggests that PAU effectively cultivates global aspirations and intercultural awareness but leaves many alumni underprepared for the practical realities of career entry, a tension explored qualitatively in Themes 2 and 3.

Qualitative Themes

Five major themes emerged from the thematic analysis.

Theme 1: The Host Campus as a Strategic Stepping Stone to Global Mobility

The most dominant motivation for attending PAU was its role as a pragmatic platform for gaining admission to higher-ranked international graduate programs.

The “Head Start” for Graduate School Applications

PAU's English-medium instruction and U.S.-style transcripts provided structural advantages that removed common bureaucratic and linguistic barriers. Emma, now at the University of Malaya, explained: "The University of Malaya just waived my IELTS... because I studied in PAU for four years with all English teaching." Similar experiences were reported by Ronnie, Sam, and Olivia, who noted that admissions officers treated them as graduates of an ordinary US institution rather than a lesser-known Chinese university.

The “U.S. Curriculum” as a Seamless Bridge

U.S.-bound alumni reported remarkably smooth transitions. Olivia (UVA) noted: "At UVA... I did not need time to adapt, same system, Canvas, plagiarism standards." In contrast, those pursuing UK or Chinese Master's degrees (Alex,

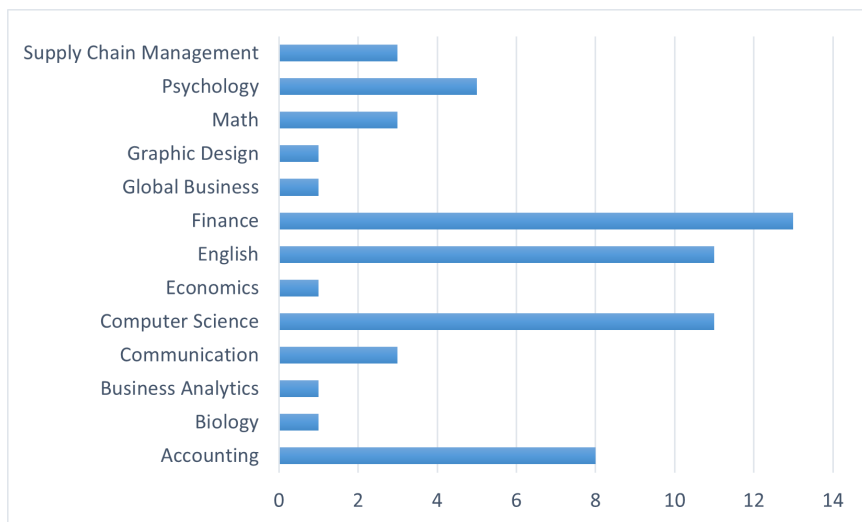
Sophia, Ethan) faced steeper adjustment curves in grading norms and classroom culture.

The Calculated Gap Year

Several alumni deliberately delayed graduation or took gap years to compensate for PAU's perceived prestige deficit. Ronnie, who later entered NUS, recalled: "I took a gap year... to get CFA... My resume wasn't strong enough for top universities." Leo and Nathan echoed this strategy, viewing the extra time as necessary to convert their PAU credential into competitive "mobility capital."

Building on this mobility foundation, Theme 2 explores skill development.

Figure 1: Undergraduate Majors of Survey Respondents (n=63)



Note. Business, STEM, and English-related majors together account for 73.1% of respondents.

Theme 2: The Dual Nature of Skill and Mindset Development

Alumni consistently praised PAU for cultivating soft skills and a global mindset, yet many identified gaps in advanced academic preparation.

The Primacy of Faculty Mentorship

International faculty emerged as the institution's most valuable resource. Mia (Purdue PhD) credited her former professor for ongoing collaboration: "Dr. Kumar... leading my academic path... helped me publish papers." Sam, Claire, and Olivia similarly described their professors as life-changing mentors who

inspired them to pursue graduate study and secured research and internship opportunities.

Cultivating a Proactive and Confident Mindset

Alumni described a socio-cultural "reskilling" from passive, teacher-dependent learning to assertive independence. Nathan reflected: "PAU taught us to be aggressive... show our abilities." This shift was repeatedly framed as essential preparation for Western academic and professional contexts.

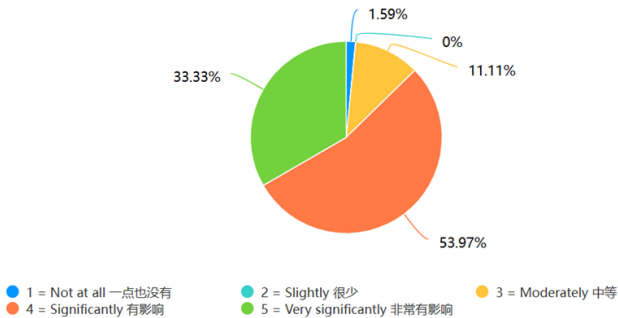
Foundational yet Incomplete Academic Preparation

Alumni consistently praised PAU for building foundational English communication and basic research skills; yet, many experienced culture shock when confronting the demands of elite graduate programs. The perception of "soft rigor" is corroborated by survey data: alumni rated PAU's career preparation at only 2.66/5 (SD = 1.03), significantly lower than the perceived TNE advantage (M = 4.19/5). This lack of rigor created a false sense of preparedness that crumbled under the weight of top-tier expectations: "GPA inflation... people get A- without showing up" (Ronnie). At PAU, students socialized in teacher-centered systems, expecting extensive support, encountered a U.S.-model curriculum designed for independence, leaving many alumni feeling both overconfident and under-equipped for elite graduate work. This cultural-educational misalignment reflects what Bourdieu (1986) terms a habitus clash: the dispositions developed through Chinese secondary education encountered a classroom designed for a different habitus.

This qualitative "reality shock" aligns with survey data showing low career-preparation ratings but diverges from high global competence gains (M=4.06; Table 2), suggesting skill gaps in practical application.

Transitioning from the academic to the professional realm, Theme 3 examines the challenges of reputation.

Figure 2: Proportion of Alumni Reporting Transition Challenges (n=63)



Note. The most common challenges are job opportunities (30.2%) and academic gaps (22.2%).

Theme 3: Navigating Institutional Reputation and the Job Market

The Prestige Problem

This theme addresses the challenges alumni face when the "PAU brand" meets the realities of the global and Chinese job markets. Low name recognition repeatedly hindered applications. Sophia recounted: "PolyU registrar never heard of PAU and asked for proof it's a real university." Employers in China often favored graduates from top-tier domestic institutions, rendering the transnational degree a liability locally despite its advantages abroad. This difficulty in leveraging the PAU credential represents a failure of capital convertibility: transnational symbolic capital could not be readily converted into local economic capital.

The Career Services Gap

Alumni overwhelmingly criticized career services as irrelevant. Job fairs featured local, low-prestige employers: "Best job was manager at Walgreens... not related to major" (Sophia). Career preparation was perceived as an individual responsibility rather than an institutional one. Survey results underscore this gap: only 58.7% of alumni were employed, and 60.3% of those took longer than six months to secure their first job.

The Necessity of Expectation Adjustment

Many entered the job market with aspirations of landing a role at "Goldman Sachs," only to accept regional roles. Ronnie summarized the psychological recalibration: "Not everybody gets Goldman Sachs... need to humble a little."

Theme 4: Evolving Intercultural Competence and Identity

While the primary focus of this study is mobility and capital conversion, alumni narratives also revealed a significant identity-related transition that warrants attention.

From "Safe Diversity on Campus" to "Racialized Minority Abroad"

PAU's campus offered a protected introduction to cultural differences within a Chinese-majority environment. International faculty, English-medium instruction, and daily exposure to non-Chinese professors fostered an early awareness of cultural difference without the full weight of racialized minority status. As Ava (New York) reflected: "While I live in [the host campus city], I'm kind of in a dominant group... With all the professors who came from all over the world, we can avoid the last thing... I know we have a culture clash."

This "safe" intercultural exposure prepared alumni for differences but not for the abrupt shift they encountered upon migrating to Western host societies. In the United States and the United Kingdom, nationality-based identity gave way to

phenotype-driven racialization as "Asian," often accompanied by overt hostility. The same alumnus, now in New York, described her first direct encounter with anti-Asian racism: "We do receive some racist stuff... someone will say, make the Asian go back to their country. But I was not that surprised, as I live in a cross-cultural university."

For PAU alumni, the campus thus functioned as a controlled laboratory for intercultural competence, yet it could not fully anticipate the visceral reality of racialized minority status abroad. The institution's "safe diversity" paradoxically both cushioned and partially blinded students to the depth of racial hierarchies they would later navigate. Qualitative narratives of racialization converge with survey challenges (68.3%; Figure 2), but diverge in intensity, as survey data undercapture the depth of identity.

Access to Information and "The Other Side"

Alumni valued unrestricted access to virtual private networks (VPNs, for bypassing internet restrictions), Google Scholar, and diverse faculty perspectives, which "expanded their views" (Ronnie). They reduced the shock they experienced when encountering alternative political narratives abroad. This epistemic advantage fostered critical thinking rarely available in domestic institutions.

Theme 5 summarizes the post-graduation relationship between the alumni and the university.

Theme 5: The Disconnected Alumni Community

A Need for Relatable, Not "Superstar," Connections

Alumni desired networks with "ordinary" graduates rather than exceptional success stories: "We need ordinary experiences... not Tesla or Alibaba" (Leo).

Practical and Logistical Barriers

Lost access to Grammarly EDU accounts, the Gmail-to-Outlook switch, and WeChat abandonment hindered engagement: "After graduation... support stopped" (Ethan).

A Relationship That "Stops at Graduation"

The prevailing sentiment was that institutional support ceased upon graduation, with engagement remaining passive and reactive.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Strands

The strands converge on mobility success (88.9% grad study aligning with "head start" narratives) and preparation gaps ($M=2.66$ career rating explaining the "agency gap"). Divergences appear in intercultural competence, where survey

gains ($M=4.06$) contrast with qualitative "reality shock" depth, suggesting surveys understate identity challenges.

These five themes: mobility strategizing, skill development, reputation navigation, identity evolution, and community disconnection, collectively portray an institution that successfully launches graduates into global pathways while leaving them to individually navigate persistent gaps in academic preparation, career support, and post-graduation belonging.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a central tension: the institution serves as a powerful stepping stone for global academic mobility, yet struggles as a springboard for sustained professional success. We focus our analysis on mobility and capital conversion (Bourdieu, 1986), treating identity-related transitions as a secondary finding rather than a core theoretical contribution. This focus responds to calls for sharper theoretical framing in TNHE research (Mok & Han, 2016a). In this study, we use the stepping stone/springboard metaphor specifically to analyze alumni mobility strategies and capital conversion outcomes, rather than as a framework for psychological or social identity outcomes.

The Stepping Stone: Capital Acquisition and Mobility Strategy

Theorizing beyond description: The quantitative finding that 88.9% of alumni pursued graduate studies is not merely a descriptive statistic. It represents empirical evidence of successful capital conversion: the embodied cultural capital acquired at PAU was effectively transformed into institutional cultural capital (graduate school admissions).

Our findings also extend Findlay et al.'s (2012) work on student mobility as a strategic action. Alumni did not pursue graduate studies by default; they engaged in strategic planning to maximize capital convertibility. Gap years, deliberate resume building, and targeted applications to US universities that recognize the PAU credential all demonstrate what we term strategic capital conversion, a form of agency exercised within structural constraints. Such a finding refines Bourdieu's notion of habitus by showing how institutional actors can consciously navigate and exploit field-specific convertibility rules.

The habitus clash: However, capital acquisition was not frictionless. The reported prevalence of GPA inflation and perceptions of "soft rigor" created, we theorize, a habitus clash (Bourdieu, 1986). Alumni entered PAU with dispositions shaped by China's teacher-dependent, exam-oriented secondary system. They encountered a US-model curriculum designed for academic independence, a different habitus. The resulting mismatch (overconfidence paired with under-preparedness for elite graduate work) is not individual failure but structural misalignment between educational fields. This finding extends Yang et al.'s (2020) work on pedagogical misalignment in TNHE by explicitly naming the mechanism as habitus clash, thereby connecting empirical observation to established sociological theory.

The Springboard's Shortfall: Capital Convertibility Failure

Beyond graduate school, the institution's role as a springboard into global careers was far less consistent. While faculty mentorship emerged as a powerful form of social capital, relationships that alumni leveraged for research opportunities, letters of recommendation, and ongoing collaboration, the formal career infrastructure failed to support capital conversion into local economic markets.

Theorizing the prestige deficit: The difficulty alumni faced in leveraging their PAU credential in the domestic Chinese job market represents a failure of capital convertibility (Bourdieu, 1986). The symbolic capital acquired through a transnational degree (the credential's prestige) could not be readily translated into local economic capital (job offers, salary, career advancement) within China's highly stratified higher education landscape. Employers favored graduates from elite domestic institutions whose symbolic capital was locally legible.

This finding contributes to Bourdieusian theory by identifying legibility as a key condition for capital convertibility. Capital is not universally convertible; its value depends on the field's classification schemes. In the Chinese labor market, the field's doxa favors nationally recognized institutional hierarchies over transnational alternatives. Alumni responded by seeking alternative conversion pathways, further graduate study abroad, employment with multinational corporations, or geographic relocation to contexts where the PAU credential carried greater recognition (e.g., the US and UK).

The geopolitical dimension: The geopolitical climate further complicates capital convertibility. As Yu et al. (2026) demonstrate, US-China tensions have reconfigured TNHE as a domain of strategic risk. For PAU alumni, this manifests as what X. Wang (2024) terms "safety concerns": gun violence, racial discrimination, and social instability that depress the perceived value of US-based conversion pathways. Geopolitics thus introduces uncertainty into capital conversion calculations, a dimension Bourdieu's original framework did not anticipate but which contemporary TNHE research must address.

Identity Transition as a Secondary Finding

While the primary focus of this study is mobility and capital conversion, alumni narratives also revealed significant identity-related transitions. Moving from PAU's culturally familiar campus (where they were the ethnic majority) to Western host societies (where they became racialized minorities) produced a "reality shock" that the institution did not prepare them for. This finding aligns with existing research on Chinese international student racialization (Okura, 2019; Yu, 2025) and suggests that TNHE's "safe diversity" may inadvertently underprepare graduates for the visceral realities of anti-Asian racism abroad. However, we treat this as a secondary finding requiring further research rather than a core theoretical contribution of this paper.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions to the TNHE literature.

First, it demonstrates the utility of Bourdieu's capital convertibility framework for understanding TNHE outcomes. By distinguishing between successful conversion (graduate school admissions) and conversion failure (domestic job market struggles), we provide a parsimonious explanation for the institutional asymmetry documented in prior research (Dai et al., 2025; Mok & Han, 2016a).

Second, we introduce the concept of *conversion arbitrage*, the strategic movement of capital across fields to optimize convertibility, as an extension of Bourdieu's framework. Alumni who pursued graduate degrees abroad before returning to the Chinese job market were not simply delaying employment; they were moving their capital into a field (US academia) where it was more convertible, then re-entering the Chinese field with enhanced institutional capital.

Third, we identify legibility as a structural condition for capital convertibility: transnational credentials face legibility deficits in local fields, suggesting that building local employer recognition may be as important as internationalizing the curriculum.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its focus on a single institution and reliance on self-reported data from a self-selecting sample of engaged alumni. Future research should employ longitudinal tracking to follow alumni trajectories over a decade or more. Comparative studies across multiple Sino-foreign models (US-partnered, UK-partnered, and Australian-partnered) would test the generalizability of our capital convertibility framework. Additionally, the brief interview duration (15–30 minutes) limited the depth on complex topics such as identity negotiation; future studies should allocate longer interview windows or multiple sessions.

Conclusion and Practical Implications

To fully realize its potential as a springboard for long-term success, Pacific Alliance University must address the structural asymmetries revealed in this study. The same hybrid model that enables seamless academic transitions abroad also produces gaps in advanced academic preparation, career placement support, and post-graduation community. The institution's effectiveness ends at graduation for too many alumni, leaving them to navigate prestige deficits, labor-market barriers, and identity transitions as individual burdens rather than institutional priorities.

Practical Recommendations

For the Institution:

- Academic rigor: Curb GPA inflation through standardized grading practices and mandate advanced, discipline-specific writing and research instruction across all majors.
- Career services globalization: Move beyond local job fairs to build field-specific alumni networks, cultivate employer relationships in key graduate destinations (US, UK, Singapore, Hong Kong), and provide tailored support for international job markets.
- Sustained alumni engagement: Transition from passive, event-based outreach to proactive, professionalized engagement via LinkedIn, sustained email communication, and maintained access to key resources (Grammarly, library databases, career counseling) beyond graduation.
- Identity transition support: Prepare students for the shift from majority to minority status abroad through pre-departure programming that addresses racialization, microaggressions, and the psychological labor of intercultural adaptation

For Students:

Prospective and current students should be encouraged to seek faculty mentorship from their first year, strategically supplement classroom learning with internships and research experiences, and cultivate a clear-eyed understanding of both the institution's strengths and its limitations. Managing expectations about prestige, career trajectories, and identity is itself a critical competency that PAU's transnational model demands.

For Policymakers and SFCU Leaders:

Quality assurance frameworks for Sino-foreign cooperative universities should extend beyond inputs (curriculum, faculty qualifications) to include longitudinal outcomes, such as graduate employability, alumni satisfaction, and post-graduation support structures. The success of TNHE cannot be measured at commencement; it must be measured across the lifetimes of the global citizens these institutions aim to create.

By confronting these challenges, PAU and institutions like it can evolve from highly effective stepping stones into truly transformative springboards, empowering graduates not only to move across borders but to thrive beyond them.

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In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for content creation in the following capacity:

□xSome sections, with extensive editing

The authors used generative AI tools, including Grok and Deepseek, to support brainstorming, drafting, and language refinement. All academic content, citations, and interpretations were created and verified by the authors. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and academic integrity guidelines. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

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