

Unpacking agentic capital in employability of international graduates

Thursday, 22 Jul 2021
14:00 - 15:00 (UK time)
Zoom webinar

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Some key points
of today's
presentation:

1. What have we known about agency?
2. Agency in in't graduates' employability
 - How much have we done in this field?
 - What enables and hinders agentic capital in in't graduates' employability?

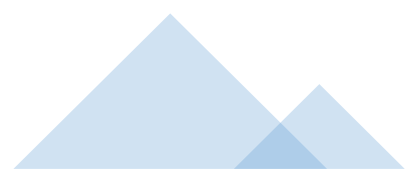
EMPLOYABILITY: A CONTESTED CONCEPT

Employability means **employment outcomes**, job satisfaction, professional skills growth, wellbeing and **sustainability** (Clarke, 2018; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020; Pham, 2020)





What have we known about agency?

- Agency has gained considerable attention of researchers in different fields – e.g., student learning (Edwards, 2011; Hopwood, 2014; Marginson, 2014), workplace learning (e.g., Billett 2006), social-cognitive psychology (e.g., Bandura, 2006), development economics (e.g., Sen, 2001) and sociology (e.g., Archer, 1982, 1995, 2000).
 - However, the concept of agency has remained relatively vague and abstract because different researchers have offered different ways to argue for what agency should be.
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In the field of in't students:

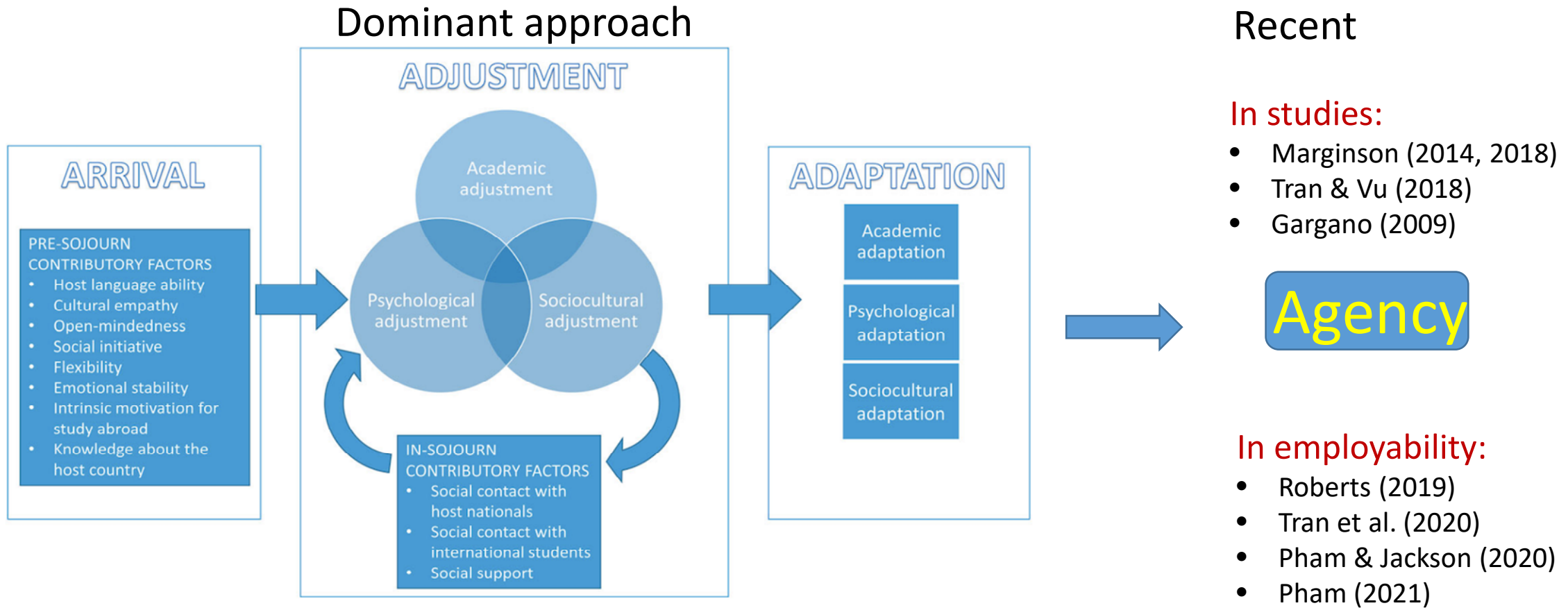


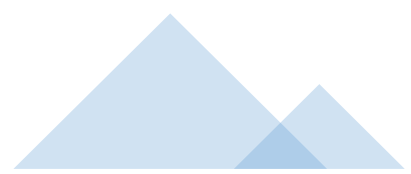


Figure 1. A conceptual model of international student adjustment and adaptation.

Schartner & Young (2016)



In in't graduates' employability, a range of questions remain unanswered:

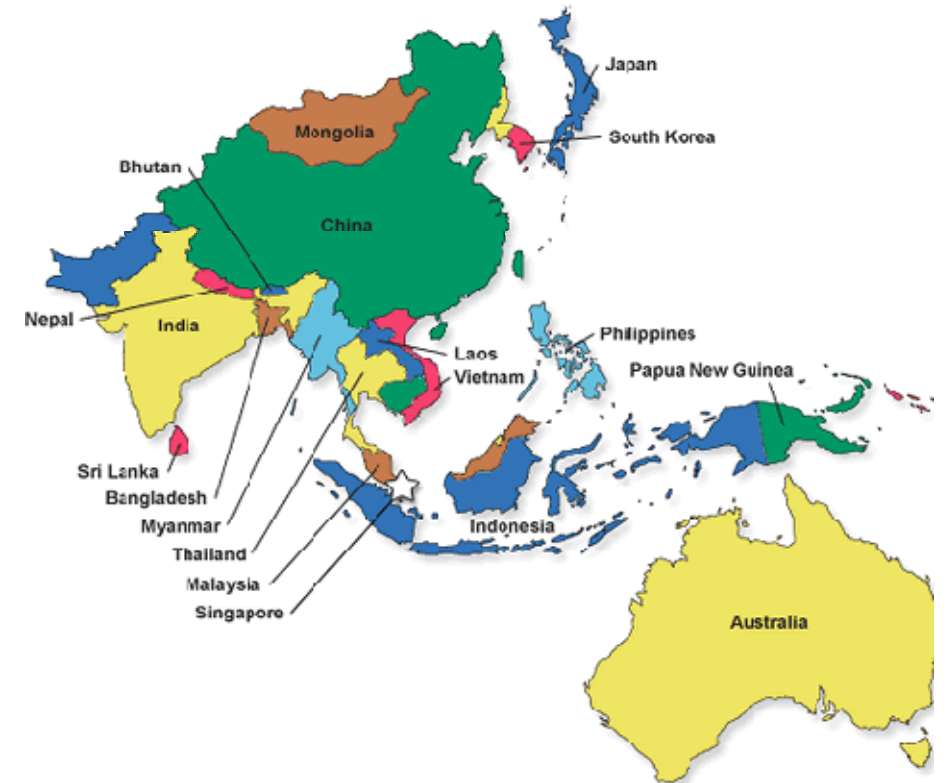
1. What constitutes in't graduates' agency in negotiating employability?
 2. What are strategies that in't graduates develop and utilize to negotiate employability? (present strategies: *Needs-response agency, Agency for becoming; Tran & Vu, 2017; Interlink capitals (initial work); Pham & Jackson, 2020; Pham, 2021*)
 3. What makes some graduates more/less agentic?
 4. How does the relationship between agency & structure (host labour market) look like?
 5. Is agency static or fluid?
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My research for the last few years

Purpose: I have done several research studies on employability negotiation of in't graduates who stayed in Australia and returned to their home countries like Vietnam, China, Singapore and Japan.

Sample size: Depends on the projects (from 30 for qualitative to 200 for mixed-method)

Theoretical frameworks: Bourdieu, Tomlinson's graduate capital model, Marginson's self-formation, Sen's capability, and agency and freedom, activity theory





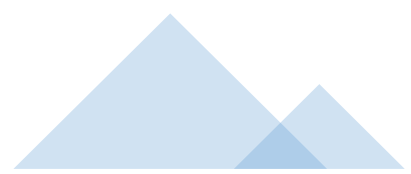
**The empirical findings
in this presentation
came from several
projects:**

Participants: 80 in't graduates (54 were from Asian countries; 26 were from other countries like NZ, Russia, US, Egypt)

Methods: Qualitative (narrative, biographical interpretive method, scroll-back methodology)



Allow for an **understanding of the dynamic nature** of the relationships between structure and agency by unpacking how in't graduates produced, mobilized, and accumulated different types of capital/resources.



What is agency?

Agentic features (Human agency)

Characteristics

Agency competence

(e.g., Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Marginson, 2014; Goller, 2017; Tran & Vu, 2017; Pham & Jackson, 2020)

- Ability to **visualise desired future & set goals**
- Ability to translate these goals into actions
- Capabilities for **self-regulation**
- Knowledge about own **preferences** and **capabilities**

Agency beliefs

(e.g., Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995; Goller, 2017; Giddens, 1991)

- Belief in being able to engage in **goal-directed** and **self-initiated** behaviours
- Belief in being able to **exercise control over** one's life and over environment

Agency personality/Proactivity

(e.g., Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Parker & Collins, 2010; Tornau & Frese, 2013; Tran & Vu, 2017; Pham & Soltali, 2021; Pham, 2021)

- Tendency to **take goal-oriented behaviours** that **bring about change** for oneself or the situation and to take control over one's own life and over environment by **making choices**
- Capacity to **decide how** one wants to participate in actions: **fully, partially, or entirely not participate.**
- Psychological trait, relatively stable over time

What is agency?

Agentic actions

Actively engaging (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Tran & Vu, 2017; Pham & Jackson, 2020)

Actively selecting (Billett, 2001, 2011; Shanahan & Elder, 2002; Pham & Soltali, 2021; Pham, 2021)

Characteristics

- **Past:** Reflect on and evaluate the past to identify personal and contextual affordances and constraints
- **Future:** Imagine alternative possibilities considering one's 'hopes, fears, and desires for the future'
- **Present:** Work out possible trajectories based on past experiences and future possibilities

Without active engagement, people tend to follow habits. This then holds them back from engaging with the present possibilities.

- Decide **how and the extent to** which people would participate and what is 'judged worth of participation'
- **Find, evaluate and select** actions and social settings that allow them to achieve their goals in the best way
- **Reflect** about the abilities and preferences

What is agency?

Agentic actions (cont.)

Characteristics

Actively learning

(Parker & Collins, 2010; Pham, 2021)

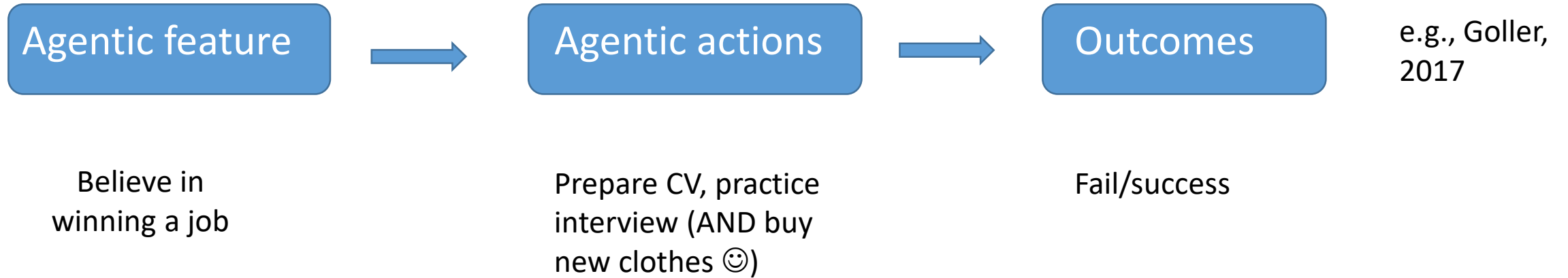
- Deliberately make efforts to learn so that one can make professional and personal improvements.
- Seek feedback and information about one's performance so that they can improve
- Volunteer to take responsibilities

Actively initiating

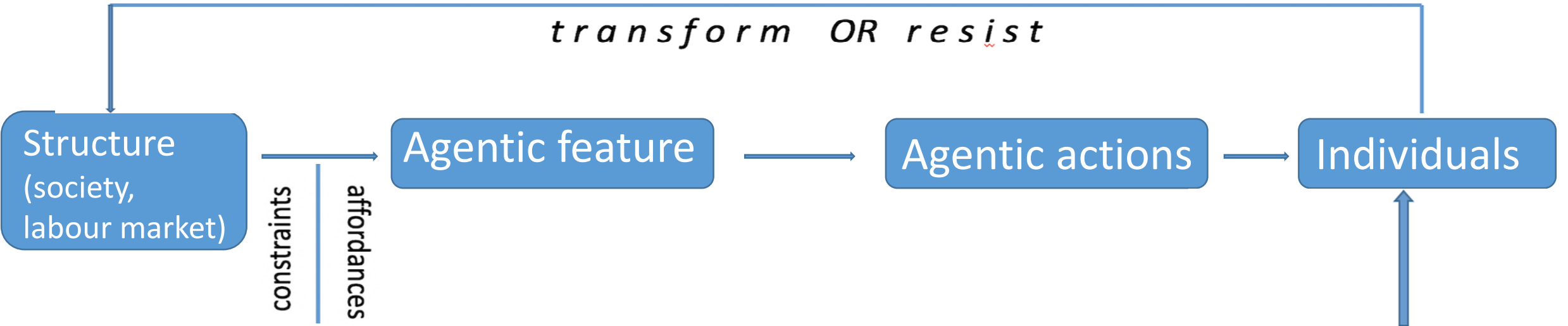
(Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Pham, 2021)

- Deliberately initiate changes
- Make people aware of issues
- Actively share suggestions and ideas

The predominant perspective



*Agentic
transform OR resist*



Society:

- Highly competitive
- Valid visa, PR, citizenship
- Discriminations

Workplace:

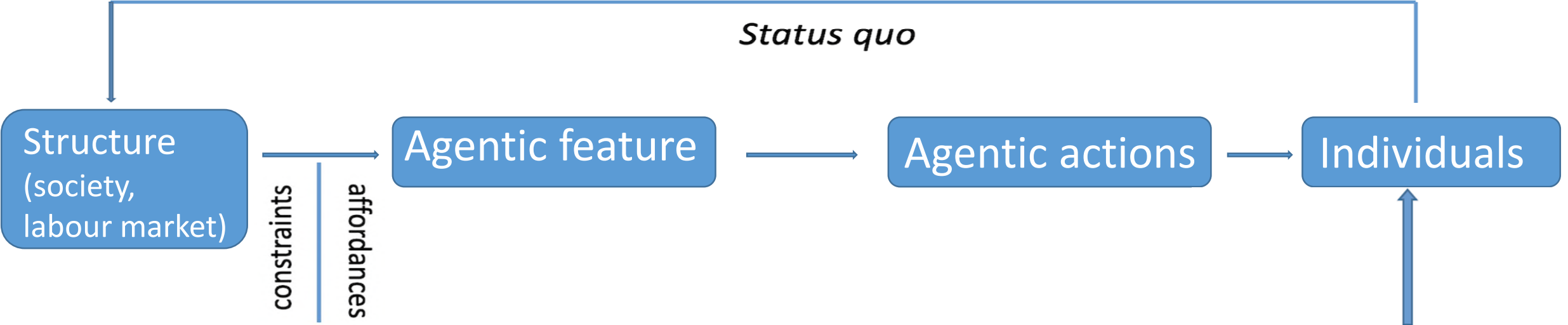
- Employers' expectations
- Mentorship/supervision
- Material resources
- Working culture

Individual resources:
Knowledge, experiences,
skills, resilience,
aspirations etc.

Limited work

Non-agent

Status quo



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Workplace:

- Employers' expectations
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Individual resources:
Knowledge, experiences,
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Limited work

FINDINGS

1. Non-agentic group/stage

1.1 Lacked *confidence & beliefs* in securing their desired job

- *I applied for fun indeed because the position required **local knowledge** and **excellent English**. I knew I will fail even before I applied.*
- *In that team I was the only one who had an MA degree but if they gave me a higher position, I perhaps had to refuse because I had **limited knowledge in that field**.*
(He did the MA mainly because it was on the MLTSSL)
- *As an international student, I **never thought** I could secure a job at a big 4.*
(But he actually got a job at a big 4)

1.2 Lacked *goal-directed* behaviours in managing their career

- *Oh, I did the job because I had nothing to do. My friend was working there and asked me to join him.*
- *I am doing 3-4 different jobs and I feel for every job I have something and I lack something.*



- ❖ Marginson (2014): **Plural identities**, '**space of possible**' as themes of in't students
- ❖ Rizvi (2009, p. 261): In't students find themselves being pulled between '**cultural flexibility**' on the one hand and '**cultural uncertainty and confusion**' on the other.

So, what do these quotes tell us about the position of these graduates in relation to the structure?

- These graduates were willing to accept that they had limited capitals (e.g., **human**, social, **cultural** etc.).



Especially for those
with little real-life &
work experience



Especially for those
with occupation not
connected to their
prior expertise.

- These graduates perceived structural factors as '**norms**' and '**standards**' and they could do little about it.



They **let the situation decide** how lucky/unlucky they would be.

Status quo

- Bourdieu (1986, domination, habitus)
- 'Cultural fit' (Marginson & Sawir, 2011; Leong & Ward, 2000)

Structure
(society,
labour market)

constraints

Agentic feature

Agentic actions

Individuals

Society:

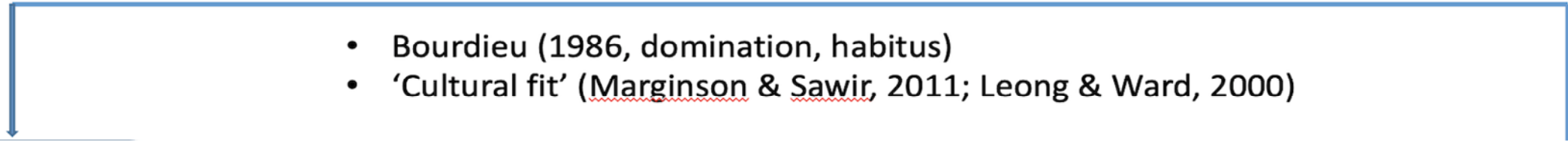
- Highly competitive
- Valid visa, PR, citizenship
- Discriminations

Workplace:

- Employers' expectations
- Mentorship/supervision
- Material resources
- Working culture

Individual resources:

- Limited capitals (e.g., human, cultural)
- Unclear about futures
- Lack real-life & work experiences



2. Agentic group/stage

2.1 Knew how to tap into ethnic capitals

- *[Name] completed an MA for 1,5 yr, so not confident about her English & cultural knowledge. She therefore targeted companies that allowed her to use Vietnamese. She eventually landed a job at a multinational company that collaborated with Vietnam [from a narrative]*
- *After two years working at a Chinese company, I felt confident enough, so I applied for an Australian corporate. I wanted to try new things, at least to improve my English or learn to eat sandwich.*
- *Why I do nursing? Well, many nurses are Filipinos. We have reputation for being hardworking, careful and dedicated.*
- Talking to people with a similar background helps me see a range of possibilities.

Use ethnic community as a target space for jobs.

Use ethnic community as a springboard for a transforming future

Use ethnic symbolic capital as an advantage

Use ethnic networks to find appropriate career paths

2.2 Knew how to navigate the system based on real-life and work experiences

*I found Australians like **formalizing things**. For example, when they [the college] wanted us to share our thoughts about redesigning the courses, they named it 'a curriculum day', so we got scared and had to search and learn about curriculum before the meeting. But it turned out a very casual chat only. Another example was when I organized an event for students, they told me **I need to go through many 'doors'**. I got **frightened** and gave up. But then, I learned from a colleague that there are always **'shortcuts' that were pretty easy, so I did it.***



Real-life experiences made people **more confident** and **aware of 'techniques'** to go about **structural barriers**.

2.3 Had a desire to transform oneself and others

- *It is **a shame** if my English is still poor after years in Australia.*



(This graduate forced himself to learn authentic language from TV, social media so that he can speak like a local).

- *It was a dream actually. I first just wanted to have a small firm to give myself a job and also **help a friend** because she couldn't find anything for almost 2 years.*

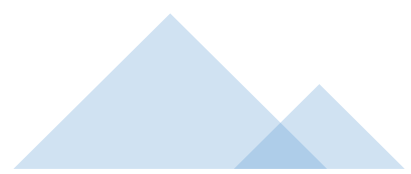
(Her company grew fast. After a few years it had many more staff and she could sponsor in't students for PR).

2.4 Deliberately looked for useful and supportive mentorship

- *I attended some events and I **connected with a couple of the speakers who I found inspiring**. I learned heaps and heaps from them.*

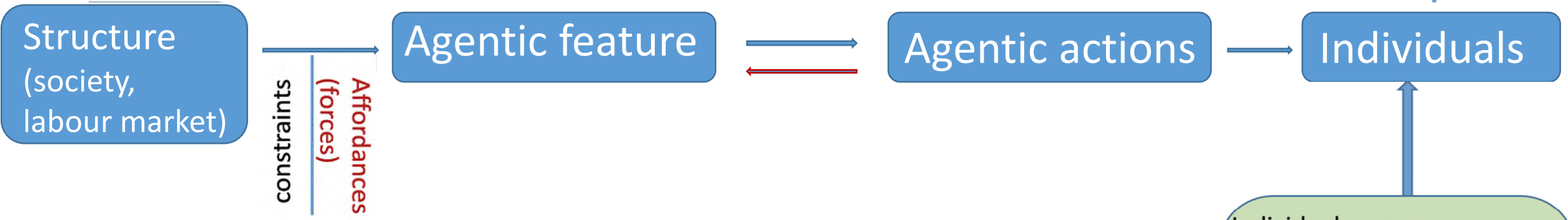


2.5 Resisted structural factors (e.g., expectations of organizations, job requirements)

- They had **other priorities** e.g., family, kids
 - They **didn't have insights** to see the value of the work.
 - They had insights/experiences and saw the **mismatch** between their insights/experiences and the work.
 - They had intentions but **didn't have enough structural resources** to support their initiatives.
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transform or resist

- Sen's capability & freedom (choices, value)
- Marginson's self-formation (diverse resources, choices, reflexive)
- Engeström (2015)'s expansive learning (contradictions)



Society

- Highly competitive
- Valid visa, PR, citizenship
- Discriminations

Workplace

- Employers' expectations
- Mentorship/supervision
- Material resources
- Working culture

Individual resources:

- Ethnic capitals
- Cultural capital
- Desire to transform oneself and others
- Useful mentorship
- Insights about different priorities, different experiences

Agentic capital = Agentic feature + Agentic actions



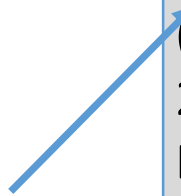
Employability outcomes

- Employment outcomes
- Job satisfaction
- Professional skills growth
- Wellbeing
- Sustainability

What is agency?

Agentic actions	Characteristics
<p>Actively engaging (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Tran & Vu, 2017; Pham & Jackson, 2020)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Past: Reflect on and evaluate the past to identify personal and contextual affordances and constraints• Future: Imagine alternative possibilities considering one's 'hopes, fears, and desires for the future'• Present: Work out possible trajectories based on past experiences and future possibilities <p>Without active engagement, people tend to follow habits. This then holds them back from engaging with the present possibilities.</p>
<p>Actively selecting (Billett, 2001, 2011; Shanahan & Elder, 2002; Pham & Soltali, 2021; Pham, 2021)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Decide how and the extent to which people would participate and what is 'judged worth of participation'• Find, evaluate and select actions and social settings that allow them to achieve their goals in the best way• Reflect about the abilities and preferences

Utilize ethnic capitals selectively



Key take-away messages

Agentic capital

- Some people can be more agentic than others but it is more about how people **engage in agentic actions** to build their agentic capital.
- Agentic capital is not fixed but **fluid/fluctuating**, depending on personal and contextual factors and the level of interactions between the individual and his context.

In't students:

- **Analyse** strengths, weaknesses and priorities by yourself and others (especially good mentors)
- Engage in **real-life practices** and **reflect**
- Be **selective** (sometimes need to be less ambitious)

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THANK YOU

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