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International Student Mobility and Temporal Stability

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Abstract

International student mobility has gained significant attention in higher education research. Most studies focus on migration outcomes and aspirations, while other studies start to recognize the open-ended nature of students' futures, particularly when faced with uncertainty. This study rethinks international student mobility through future imaginaries. Drawing on narrative interviews with four postgraduate Chinese international students from one university in the UK, this article presents students' meaning-making about their imagined futures in response to the uncertainties and changing policies. Within these four participants' narratives, the findings demonstrate that students were less concerned with mobility itself and more concerned with achieving a stable and predictable future trajectory. This article conceptualizes such a future orientation as temporal stability to capture the phenomenon that students were not simply concerned about future aspirations as their stories involved issues of predictivity, planning, continuity and future direction. When students start to only pursue temporal stability, this article calls for future research into what other futures students no longer imagine and why.

Keywords: international student mobility, Chinese international students, studying abroad, temporal stability, student future

1. Introduction

International student mobility is an important aspect of global higher education and has attracted significant attention in higher education research (Eulatth Vidal & Kamp, 2025). The number of international students increased from 2.1 million in 2020 to 6.9 million in 2022 (UNESCO, 2025). Many scholars have examined the relationship between international student mobility and migration trajectories and outcomes. One of the reasons motivating Chinese international students to pursue a degree abroad is to increase their employment opportunities (Hattersley & Nicholson, 2024; Consoli, 2024). However, through exploring a group of Chinese international students at UK universities, Yu et al. (2023) notice that there is a decline of British universities' reputation. Taylor (2022) points out that contemporary university students need to confront precarious futures shaped by uncertain, insecure and vulnerable labor markets. Recent studies further show that international student mobility is shaped by economic pressures, changing migration policies, and post-pandemic uncertainties (Brooks et al., 2024; Brooks & Waters, 2026; OECD, 2025).

In terms of transitioning from school to work, recent studies have highlighted the complexity of career decision-making following overseas study for international students (Jackson, 2024; Zhao et al., 2023). Dong et al.'s study (2025) of 30 Chinese international students in the Netherlands has focused on how students make career decisions about their future careers while studying abroad. Wang et al. (2025) conducted a systematic literature review (2014-2024) on employability of international postgraduate taught students in the UK and they have found that there is a limited number of available studies in this area. Although existing studies have thoroughly examined students' mobility trajectories under the changing social contexts, little attention has been paid to students' meaning-making process about their imagined future when uncertainty and disruptions interrupted their initial plans for their futures. In other words, existing studies mainly focus on international students' career decisions, employability and transition outcomes (e.g. Dong et al., 2025; Jackson, 2024).

Thus, this study addresses this gap by exploring how Chinese international students make sense of and reconstruct their imagined futures when uncertainty and disruptions interrupt their initial plans. Specifically, this study analyses

Chinese international students' narratives about their meaning-making processes when the COVID-19 pandemic and a new policy interrupted their initial plans. The study starts by reviewing the existing research into international student futures and scholarly discussions about uncertainty and disruptions and constant negotiations students experience. In doing so, this study introduces the concept of temporal stability to capture a future orientation centered on maintaining a feasible and predictable pathway under conditions of uncertainty.

2. Literature Review: International Student Futures, Uncertainty, Disruptions, and Constant Negotiations

Recently, scholars have increasingly recognized temporal dimensions of international student research. For example, through a comparative study of international students from Denmark, Germany and the United Kingdom, Spangler and Jayadeva (2026) argue that students live in intersecting temporal structures. Such structures consist of both their timetables, institutional expectations, national university policies, and students' agency to adjust to and reconfigure these temporalities (Spangler & Jayadeva, 2026). Liu et al. (2025) present how future imaginaries shape higher education internationalization. For students, Shahjahan et al. (2025) point out that international students' lives feature unique temporal complexities because of their transitory and migratory nature. Brooks and Waters (2011) further explain that the reason is that international students' pursuit of international education credentials urges them to act on their futures. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2025) show that international students are more likely to face the pressure to capitalize on their time due to the excessive cost of their degree and intense efforts to acculturate. Based on these understandings, this study specifically focuses on the future dimensions.

This study builds on scholarly interest about international student mobility, aspirations, and post-university destinations (see Dilek Fidler et al., 2025; Schäfer, 2026; Tran et al., 2025; Nada et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). Particularly, this study follows Khamisu et al. 's (2024) approach of shifting research attention from mobility to the futures imagined through educational mobility. As Tsao (2026) writes, "aspirations are multi-dimensional orientations spanning educational, occupational, spatial, and life-course domains simultaneously" (p. 2). Recent studies about international student mobility have started to pay attention to international student futures, such as students' migration aspirations, future career imaginations, mobility desires, etc. For example, Lee (2021) highlights that rather than only focusing on actual migration or employment outcome, it is critical to examine the field of possibilities that international students imagine after graduation. Islam's (2026) study of young Bangladeshi international students' future imaginations in an Australian university shows that students construct their imagined mobile futures through overseas education and global citizenship experiences. Such an approach shows how mobility itself becomes an aspirational future. Xu (2021) explores a group of Chinese international students' career imaginations in UK higher education and finds that students employ different career strategies (temporal destructuring and deferred gratification). Recent work in the sociology of imagined futures shows that imagined futures shape individuals' present actions and educational decisions (Marekovic & Närvänen, 2025). Among these studies, scholars highlight that aspirations are future orientations that shape how individuals navigate their opportunities or constraints in the present.

Existing research shows that international students increasingly need to negotiate uncertain futures and face uncertainty. Filippou et al. (2026) explore international students' experiences in Finland, and their study shows that broader social and political disruptions often reshape students' futures, which generates uncertainty about their educational and career planning. From studying German international students in medicine and the social sciences and humanities, Schäfer (2026) points out that structural uncertainty becomes a dominant and unavoidable aspect of international student mobility. Akkermans et al. (2020) particularly focus on how the COVID-19 pandemic acts as an unprecedented career shock, which disrupts students' educational mobility and requires them to rethink their aspirations. Tran et al. 's (2025) study of international students in Australia shows how student visa and immigration policies of host countries require students to continuously adjust their aspirations. Similarly, Zeltner and Van Mol (2026) present how students' career aspirations undergo constant negotiations in response to changing contexts. Tsao (2026) and Jemini-Gashi and Kadriu (2022) comment that such uncertainty reveals the dynamic nature of student future aspirations when they need to continuously reconsider their futures in response to disruptions. However, for many international students, particularly those who are from middle-class backgrounds, secure employment and stable income remain central aspirations (Ang, 2026).

In summary, existing studies about international student futures have focused on what futures they want or aspire to and the open-ended and dynamic nature of such aspirations. These groups of scholarship often associate international education with mobility, possibility, and self-expansion. However, little research has examined how they restructure their futures when uncertainty and disruptions interrupt students' initially imagined futures. This article addresses this gap by exploring how Chinese international students restructure and negotiate futures when uncertainty and

disruptions interrupted their original future plans and imaginaries.

3. Methodology

This study emerges from my four-year PhD study (2020-2024) on the Chinese international students' experiences at a UK university (ethical approval NO. 11149-20508). Participants read the Participant Information Sheet and signed consent form prior to data collection. The research involved narrative interviews with four postgraduate international students. Purposive sampling was used to recruit my participants. Narrative interviews in Mandarin Chinese language asked about students' experiences before they arrived in the UK, during their studies and what they planned to do after graduation. Each interview lasted approximately 1-2 hours. Pseudonyms were used for anonymity purposes. Below is an overview of participants' information.

Table 1. Participants Overview

Pseudonym	Nationality	Gender	Course	Working experience before MA studies
Xia	Chinese	Woman	International Education	one internship as an English teacher
Rui	Chinese	Woman	International Education	two internships (financial officer; English teacher)
Yi	Chinese	Woman	International Education	worked as an English teacher for several years
Hu	Chinese	Woman	International Education	two internships (hotel manager; English teacher)

Data analysis in this study involves inductive thematic analysis. The coding focused on students' original narratives in Mandarin Chinese language about their imagined futures, disruptions they experienced and their plans in response to those disruptions. Then I grouped the codes into themes and refined codes to consolidate themes by constantly comparing emerging themes. For the data presentation, I kept both students' original quotes and English translations. Below is an example of data analysis:

Table 2. Analytic process example

Student's narrative	Analytic process
我觉得比方说我考上了编制，我有了工作，那么其实我再想考博士也并不会有特别大的影响，因为现在有那种在职的博士。其实编制的话，如果我觉得不太合适，我可以辞掉编制以后我再去干别的。我觉得它并不会限制我，只是说可能给我两三年那么一个缓冲期。因为也要看自己的想法是什么，我想法可能随时都会改变，然后也要看国内是什么样的趋势，有自我的因素和外界因素，这么两个因素相互影响，可能会影响到考编或者考上以后，我是不是再要去干别的。（Xia) I feel like even if I secure a government job, it wouldn't really get in the way too much if I still wanted to do a PhD later on, since they have part-time PhD programs nowadays. And if I feel like the government job isn't a good fit, I can always just quit and do something else later. I don't really think it limits me; it just gives me a cushion for maybe two or three years. At the end of the day, it depends on what I'm thinking, because my mindset could change at any moment. Plus, it depends on what the trends are back at home. It's a mix of personal and external factors influencing each other, which might affect whether I stick with the government job path or do something else after getting in.	Coding 考上编制 (Passing the Teacher's Recruitment Examination) 有了工作 (securing a government-appointed position) 再读博 (studying a PhD afterwards) 可以辞掉编制 (or resign) 编制不会限制我 (A government-appointed teaching position will not limit me) 两三年的缓冲期 (2-3-year buffer time) 想法随时改变 (Ideas change) 国内的趋势 (domestic trends) 自我和外界因素 (Personal and external factors) Grouping codes 1）编制作为缓冲期 (a government-appointed teaching position as a buffer) 2） 可能读博 (may choose to study a PhD)

This study is a small-scale qualitative study based on a purposively selected group of four participants at a single university. Studying abroad experiences of students of different disciplines, degree levels, universities, national and cultural backgrounds, or socioeconomic positions may vary substantially. Thus, this study does not aim to produce generalisable findings about international students or Chinese international students. Furthermore, instead of claiming objectivity of the study, the trustworthiness was achieved through detailed and rich descriptions and presentation of students' narratives about their lived experiences. Below I present students' narratives about their meaning-making process related to their imagined futures.

4. Futures, Disruptions, Uncertainties

Students' narratives included multiple future imaginaries, for example, the type of careers they wanted to choose, cities they preferred to live in or styles of life they dreamed about leading. In this section, I present stories about students' meaning-making processes when their future imaginaries were disrupted and when they faced uncertainties. The following extract shares Xia's future imaginations about what she wanted to do after completing her MA studies. These imaginations were before Xia started her studying abroad journey.

刚开始准备留学的时候，我确实很想从外边直接闯荡一下。我甚至可能还会选择去北京上海这些城市生活一段时间，去开拓一下，我觉得趁年轻要多去锻炼一下。当时想法还是蛮猛的，我觉得很猛，什么都想尝试一下。我之前想的是我可以留学一年，我可以不用那么着急回国，我可以到处玩一玩，逛一逛，去其他国家看一看，然后回去慢慢悠悠的可以自己找一下工作。中介这种也好，培训机构也好，我可以干一干，我觉得也不会有特别大的压力。工作以后觉得不是特别好的话，我也许会考虑博士这种往上的发展。

Back when I first started preparing to study abroad, I really wanted to just go out there and make a name for myself. I was even thinking about living in cities like Beijing or Shanghai for a while to expand my horizons. I felt like I should challenge myself while I was still young. My mindset back then was pretty bold. I felt very fierce, and I wanted to try different things. My original plan was to study abroad for a year, and I wouldn't even rush back home. I could travel around, check out other countries and then take my time looking for a job after heading back. Whether it was working at an agency or a tutoring center, I figured I'd give it a shot, and it wouldn't be too stressful. If I felt like the job wasn't great, I may consider studying for a PhD degree.

Overall, Xia imagined a future filled with explorations and adventures, and experiencing different things. To pursue these open-ended and expansive dreams, she pictured living in Beijing or Shanghai (two of the biggest cities in China), which people often associate with opportunities and adventures. In terms of the lifestyle, she imagined that after graduating from her MA studies, she could live at a relatively slow pace by not rushing to find a job and travelling all over the world. She had considered finding a job, but she also embraced other possibilities (doing a PhD). Reflecting on these imaginaries, Xia felt her ideas were fierce. Her narrative reveals a future characterised by mobility, exploration, possibility and personal development. Below is an extract describing Rui's meaning-making when the external change disrupted her previously anticipated future.

国家新出台的双检政策打乱了我的职业规划。我之前想回到互联网教育，但是现在双检政策一出来之后断了我这条 plan，现在他们都已经纷纷倒闭或者不能开了。我只能去考编制进体制内… 我当时挺震惊的，我挺措手不及的。

The government's new policy of Double Reduction completely interrupted my career plans. I was actually planning on going into online education, but once that policy dropped, it totally ended that option for me. Now they've all shut down or can't operate anymore. Now I have to attend the Teachers Recruitment Examination and work a government job… At that time, I was really shocked and caught off guard by the whole thing.

Before Rui started her MA studies in the UK, she had an internship at an online education company in China. She enjoyed this experience, and thus she planned to continue working in the same industry after graduating. However, the new policy disrupted her previously anticipated future as the whole industry can no longer operate according to the policy. What had previously appeared to be a visible pathway suddenly became difficult to sustain. In this case, the Double-Reduction Policy did not simply change Rui's career preference, instead, it disrupted a future pathway that had previously appeared coherent and feasible. Yi's story also illustrates how the future could be filled with uncertainty.

我从 12 月份就开始投简历，最近稍微有了一点点反馈，但是也不是特别理想的工作。现在找工作挺难的，国内对教师这一块，更加想要双一流，或者是教育部直属的 8 所师范学院的学生。反正我们当地高中的话，现在老师都是要本硕双一流这样子，它不要海归。所以你是个海归，他不用你，我觉得可能国内现在舆论有一点在贬低海归的这种趋势。

Since December, I have been sending job applications from time to time. I have received some responses, but none of the positions were ideal for me. Finding a job was not a very easy process. Schools now only want to recruit graduates from Double First-Class universities or the eight normal (teacher training) universities under the Ministry of Education. For example, high schools in my hometown now only recruit graduates with both undergraduate's and master's degrees from Double First-class universities. They simply don't consider overseas returnees. I think there is a bit of a trend in domestic public opinion right now that tends to undervalue or look down on returning overseas students.

Yi's narrative highlights growing uncertainty surrounding studying abroad and its value in helping her to secure an ideal job. Yi noticed that in her hometown (a city located in the south of China), schools no longer favoured overseas degrees. Her previously taken-for-granted expectations no longer seemed reliable as her educational qualifications no longer guaranteed the opportunities students had anticipated. Thus, the future became more difficult to predict and studying abroad experience appeared to be less beneficial within an uncertain job market.

In summary, students' narratives show that future imaginaries were not fixed, but continuously reshaped by changing social, economic and policy contexts. These disruptions challenged students' previously imagined futures and required students to reconsider their future pathways. Such disrupted future plans were more than career planning or choice, but how a future that had previously seemed predictable and feasible became impossible. Put simply, students experienced uncertainty when their future imaginaries became disrupted.

5. Restructuring Future

This section presents students' narratives to show how students restructured their futures when previous imaginaries were interrupted and became impossible or uncertain. Students reflected on their thinking, meaning-making, and evaluations of different options. For example, Xia, who previously imagined an open-ended and explorative future, started to consider a more stable type of career. This occurred because of one experience she had during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, during the pandemic, she noticed that many people lost their jobs and incomes. Such precarious situations made Xia reconsider her future plans. She analysed what it meant if she found a stable job by securing a government-appointed teaching position in China.

我觉得比方说我考上了编制，我有了工作，那么其实我再想考博士也并不会有特别大的影响，因为现在有那种在职的博士。其实编制的话，如果我觉得不太合适，我可以辞掉编制以后我再去干别的。我觉得它并不会限制我，只是说可能给我两三年那么一个缓冲期。因为也要看自己的想法是什么，我想法可能随时都会改变，然后也要看国内是什么样的趋势，有自我的因素和外界因素，这么两个因素相互影响，可能会影响到考编或者考上以后，我是不是再要去干别的。

I feel like even if I secure a government job, it wouldn't really get in the way too much if I still wanted to do a PhD later on, since they have part-time PhD programs nowadays. And if I feel like the government job isn't a good fit, I can always just quit and do something else later. I don't really think it limits me; it just gives me a cushion for maybe two or three years. At the end of the day, it depends on what I'm thinking, because my mindset could change at any moment. Plus, it depends on what the trends are back at home. It's a mix of personal and external factors influencing each other, which might affect whether I stick with the government job path or do something else after getting in.

This narrative shows that she restructured her future aspirations to manage uncertainty. Specifically, she considered pursuing a more stable type of career. However, the government-appointed teaching position was not the end point of her imagined future career. Instead, she viewed working a stable job as a buffer time for her to further restructure her future. Thus, finding a job became a strategy for her transition to a further future. In other words, instead of pursuing a fixed future career plan, Xia highlighted the importance of creating room for adjustment and adaptation. Rui's story below further exemplifies how students assessed future possibilities when faced with uncertainty and disruption.

我很喜欢教育，然后就跟我妈妈商量了一下，她其实也在引导我，她说其实体制内也非常的开心，也没有你想的那么的恐怖。我最近也在做 dissertation 的 interview，我跟我妈妈的同事们沟通交流，在这个过程我觉得好像这些阿姨们很 enjoy，就是他们也在自己的工作岗位上做得很开心，那么我也要不要回去试一试？

I really like Education. I shared this with my mother, and she's actually been guiding me and mentioned that working with the system is actually quite fulfilling and not as terrifying as I might think. Recently, I've been conducting interviews for my dissertation and I got to talk with some of my mom's colleagues. During this process, I noticed that they genuinely enjoy their work and seem really happy in their positions. It made me wonder - should I also go back and try this?

Rui really enjoyed her internship at an online education company in China because she experienced pleasant interpersonal relationships with both her colleagues and students. She did not feel much hierarchy between

employees and the management team within that working environment. In comparison, she initially resisted the idea of working at a public school where she felt there were clear categories of levels of teachers. However, communicating with teachers from a public school made her reevaluate her options. She started to be more open about this previously unfavoured plan. Thus, Rui's narrative reflects an ongoing process of re-evaluating and re-formulating her future possibilities. Below, Hu described how she reorganised her studying abroad to benefit her future.

我来英国前，我就已经把国内十多所大学的必选修课，我全部列出来。然后我再把英国的课程全部列出来，我看哪个课程更和国内的课程匹配。 你做课程对比之后，你去参加面试，人家才知道你这个专业是为了培养英语教师…我一直在做助教的工作，这也是为了我以后找工作，因为有实习证明。包括我之前支教，它也是有证明的，这些可以加分的，考编是可以加十分的。其实我做的这些事情都是在为我以后工作做铺垫。

Before coming to the UK, I had already looked up the compulsory courses of over ten universities in China. I listed them all. Then, I listed all the UK courses to see which ones matched best. Once you have that comparison ready for interviews, employers will understand that your degree was designed to train English teachers… I've been working as a teaching assistant all this time, mostly to prepare for my future job, since it gives me proof of internship. Even my previous volunteer teaching gives me official proof. These things can really boost my score. They can add like 10 points to my Teachers Recruitment Examination total. Everything I'm doing right now is just laying the groundwork for my future career.

Hu paid attention to her MA courses before she arrived in the UK. Although her MA subject was for teacher training, it was named differently from Chinese universities. Thus, she compared different courses between Chinese and UK universities in order to choose the most matching courses. In other words, she actively reorganised her educational journey to ensure the alignment between studying abroad and future job opportunities in China. During her MA studies in the UK, she actively engaged in different activities and events. She viewed all these activities as preparations for her future. Thus, in response to uncertainty, Hu engaged in strategic efforts to maintain continuity between her present course choices and her imagined future pathways.

Taken together, students' narratives demonstrate that they did not simply replace one plan with another. Instead, they engaged in an ongoing process of restructuring their future pathways in response to uncertainty and changing situations. In this sense, their futures became more flexible, and open to change and adaptation. In summary, students actively restructured their future imaginaries in ways that allowed future possibilities to remain open and most importantly, achievable.

6. Seeking Stability

When faced with uncertainty and disruptions, students re-evaluated different options and possibilities. This section details the type of future that became desirable for students. Students narrated the type of career they wanted to choose in the future along with their rationale for choosing them. Although they all favoured a more stable and predictable career path such as working a government-appointed teaching position at a public school in China, their meaning-making showed how their pursuits of securing a stable job varied. For example, in the following extract, Xia explained how securing a stable job was her approach to managing the uncertainty.

因为疫情很多教培行业好像一下裁员裁了很多。其实我之前有想过回国不考编，就去新东方这种培训机构干教培老师。我觉得疫情真的改变了我特别多的想法，然后我现在就求一个稳定。真的，如果疫情还这样的话，我估计稳定是今后对我影响最大的一个因素。比较固定的局面，不会面临那种比方说因为经济不稳定被裁员，然后找不着工作这个样子的情况。我觉得可以这么去形容稳定，也就是比较稳定的生活情况，不会有太大的波澜，也就是我不会因为经济因素影响而失去工作，没有经济收入。

Because COVID caused massive layoffs in the educational industry out of nowhere. I used to think about not going for a government job and just working as a teacher at a training company like New Oriental. I feel like the pandemic truly changed so much of how I think, and now I'm just looking for stability. Honestly, if the pandemic keeps going like this, I think stability is going to be the biggest factor shaping my life. By stability, I mean a pretty steady situation where I won't face stuff like getting laid off or being unable to find a job because the economy is shaky. I guess you could describe it as a stable life with no major crazy twists. Basically, I won't lose my job or end up with zero income just because of economic issues.

This extract shows Xia's meaning-making about what she wanted to do in the future. Having witnessed a precarious job market during a crisis (the pandemic), Xia realised the importance of a secure and stable job. As Xia highlighted, what she wanted was stability. She viewed stability as a desirable future condition to help her manage uncertainty. She preferred to pursue stability so that she could lead a stable life with stable income. However, as previously

mentioned, such a state of stability could provide her space for further future planning (such as studying for a PhD). Thus, for Xia, stability became the overarching theme and condition that guided her future imaginaries. Stability was also imagined as a temporal resource as it could provide her more time to plan further self-development paths. For Hu, what a stable job could offer was a sense of predictability.

国内编制比较稳定，你又有暑假，又不用担心其他的一些事情，所以你有大量的时间。这个稳定是跟其他比如说私立学校或是国际学校进行一个对比的。因为你在私立学校，或是你去做那种代课老师，他们都是跟你签合同的，比如说两年，三年，四年，这样子。那你只有这几年的合同，到时候人家不去续，或是你如果表现不好的话，那可能人家就不用你了，你又得重新找工作。但是编制的话，你只要不犯那种大的错误，那基本上你就不会被开除。

In China, a government job is relatively stable. You have summer breaks, and you don’t have to worry about other things, so you have a lot of free time. This kind of stability is compared to things like private schools or international schools. If you are at a private school or working as a substitute teacher, they just sign contracts with you, for example, two years, three years, four years. You only have the job those few years, and if they decide not to renew it or if your performance is not good, they might just let you go, and then you’re stuck looking for a job all over again. But with a secure government job, as long as you don't make big mistakes, you basically won't be fired.

Hu planned to become an English teacher, and thus she compared working conditions for teachers in different types of organisations. She found working at a public school with a permanent contract more stable. She reached such a conclusion when compared with teachers on temporary contracts, who often risked losing their jobs once the contract was finished. Thus, she considered pursuing a government-appointed teaching position. In this case, Hu was not only seeking job security, but also a future that seemed more predictable. Working at a public school would reduce the risk of losing her job and re-starting to look for a new job. In addition to the predictability, Hu also favoured free time she could get as a teacher. Before she started her MA studies, Hu interned as a hotel manager. During her internship, she had to undertake night shifts from time to time, which required her to constantly adjust to a different work and rest schedule. She found it very exhausting and hoped to find a job that was less physically demanding and could provide her a regular work and rest schedule. Interpersonal relationships also mattered. She also found it difficult to make friends when working at a hotel as most of the time she only communicated with customers. Within the hotel, all her colleagues were responsible for different aspects of the hotel work (answering the phone, kitchen and bar, cleaning, etc.), and most of the interactions with her colleagues were about work. Thus, Hu valued the teaching position not only for its stability and predictability, but also for a more harmonious work and rest schedule and opportunities to communicate with her colleagues. For Yi, her story revealed how she pursued certainty and the actions she took to make it possible to pursue a more certain future.

我希望早点把工作定下来，然后我好确定回国的时间。因为如果你不是找公立学校的工作的话，也就是不用考虑 9 月份入职的话，我其实随时回去都可以 ，我也可以晚点回去。但是如果你要确定去公立学校的工作的话，你就必须早点回去。

I really want to get my job situation sorted out early so I can lock in the date for heading back home. Because if you aren’t looking for a job at a public school, you don’t have to worry about starting in September. You then can head back whenever, or even delay it a bit. But if you’re set on getting into a public school, you absolutely have to go back early.

Before Yi started her MA studies, she worked as an English teacher for several years in China. She initially planned to study abroad when she completed her undergraduate studies in China. She had to find a job once that plan was delayed. Thus, she viewed studying abroad as an opportunity to both fulfill her previous dream and help her with her teaching profession. With such a clear intention, she started to plan her returning time shortly after she started her MA studies. She did so by searching for and applying for jobs in China. In this case, she lived a future that could be planned for. For different types of teaching positions, she could start the job at different times. Public schools were stricter, while private schools provided more flexible timelines. Thus, she chose to adjust the length of her staying in the UK based on her future planning.

Across students' narratives, stability emerged as a central feature of their imagined futures. Students sought both employment security and a more predictable and manageable future. However, the pursuit of stability was less about the preference for the jobs themselves than about certainty, predictability and security they seemed to offer. Stability thus became a strategy for students to reduce and manage uncertainty, and also as a platform or a steppingstone for further future planning and self-development.

7. Discussion

Above I presented students' narratives about their future imaginaries and meaning-making processes about deciding what to do in the future. Extending recent temporal approaches to international studentship (Spangler & Jayadeva, 2026), this study shifts attention from students' experiences of time to their meaning-making about the future time. Rather than focusing on how students navigate institutional temporalities, the findings show how the participants in this study actively seek stability. Exploring student experience through their future imaginaries reveals complex meaning-making processes students were engaged with. The findings demonstrated that disruptions and uncertainty often made previously planned futures less feasible. In response, students actively assessed and evaluated different options to restructure their futures. While Lee (2021) presents how institutional contexts shape the area of possibilities available to international students, this study shows that students actively restructure these possibilities in response to uncertainty. Rather than pursuing endless possibilities, when restructuring their futures, students did so by setting feasible and attainable goals under changing social and policy contexts. Across these four participants' narratives, stability increasingly became an important consideration in guiding their futures, which differs from existing research which often associates international education with the imagination of mobile futures (Islam, 2026). Although stability was exemplified through a stable job with stable income and work and rest schedule, students valued it for various reasons. Specifically, stability meant a predictable and manageable future, and it could create a platform for further future planning and self-development. In other words, government-appointed teaching positions were attractive not only because of their professional characteristics, but because they were imagined as providing predictability, continuity, and space for further future planning. In summary, students imagined futures through predictability, manageability and stability and stability functioned as a strategy through which students reduced a sense of uncertainty to manage and predict their futures. Lee (2022) describes international students as imagining a future of endless possibilities such as "the world is your oyster", but this study finds that students often narrate futures shaped by uncertainty, disruption and the search for stability. Thus, this article provides empirical insights into how uncertainty shapes not only future plans, but also the type of futures that students consider feasible and favourable. The findings highlight how future imaginaries are continuously restructured in response to changing social conditions.

Based on these insights, this article conceptualises student pursuit of future imaginaries as temporal stability. I use the concept of temporal stability to refer to students' subjective pursuit of continuity between present actions and imagined futures through a feasible and predictable path. Temporal stability represents a particular way of imagining futures. Specifically, temporal stability contains students' strong and intense preference for a future that remains continuous, attainable and directional. Temporal stability indicates a predictable and stable transition to the next life page with minimum interruptions. Within temporal stability, there is hope for continuity and for knowing what to do and how to do it. Temporal stability indicates students' hope to reduce interruptions and uncertainty, while simultaneously actively taking actions in order to make the imagined future feasible. It thus explains how individuals interpret and evaluate future possibilities under conditions of uncertainty and disruption. Examples of such actions are 1) considering, assessing and evaluating different options within the social, political and economic contexts they live in; 2) choosing the most feasible and attainable pathway based on their own past experiences (working experiences or past aspirations); 3) viewing the achievement of the future as a stepping stone or a buffer time to continue planning a further future for self-development. In this sense, temporal stability is analytically distinct from the strategies used to pursue it. The reason is that strategies highlight the actions while temporal stability focuses on a subjective temporal orientation. Structural conditions such as labor-market uncertainty, policy changes and economic disruption may shape the pursuit of temporal stability, but they are not themselves forms of temporal stability.

Temporal stability does not imply pursuing certainty or permanence, or an immediate answer. Instead, it reflects students' agency and autonomy to build futures they want while also anticipating and imagining despite uncertainty and disruptions. In Marekovic and Närvänen's study (2025), they distinguish between certain and uncertain futures. This study suggests that beyond this distinction, students actively seek temporal stability. Students' temporal stability is more than simply seeking secure employment as it is also about reducing the chance of being impacted by disruption and the whole process of making efforts to restructure imagined futures. Temporal stability thus incorporates a sense of temporal progression, and a sense of certainty for continuously moving forward, entering the new chapter. Thus, temporal stability can be a standard for students to measure if they are on the right track, that is, whether their current activities are paving the way for their imagined futures. When Rui's plan to study in the UK was interrupted because she had to take a gap year due to the pandemic, she experienced intense anxiety and worries of 'being left behind'. When her initial career plan became impossible because of a new policy, she constantly

questioned “where is my way out”? When Yi’s first plan to study in Germany became impossible because of her family's opposition, she felt that she lost control of her life and could only do what was being arranged for her. In this sense, pursuing temporal stability may also become a source of anxiety. The more students try to make sure their futures are stable and predictable, the more anxiety it may produce. The reason is that pursuing temporal stability may unintentionally intensify self-monitoring and future-oriented anxiety. To clarify the concept of temporal stability (a future-oriented way of imagining and organising one’s future), I use the table below to distinguish it from several related terms used in this article.

Table 3. Distinguishing temporal stability from other terms

Term	How the term is used in this study	Difference from temporal stability
Certainty	Certain and uncertain futures (Marekovic & Närvänen, 2025)	Temporal stability means maintaining a feasible sense of direction despite uncertainty instead of requiring the future to be certain
Continuity	a multidimensional phenomenon (Ladds et al., 2023)	Continuity is one element of temporal stability; temporal stability also involves planning and future direction.
Temporal security	a sense of continuity through collective memory and historical self-understanding (Bachleitner, 2022)	Temporal stability is directed towards imagined futures and maintaining a feasible pathway towards them.

Existing studies often investigate international student experience through aspirations, opportunities, mobility and migration trajectories (Tsao, 2026; Schäfer, 2026; Wu & Hou, 2023; Kondakci et al., 2026; Liu et al., 2025; Nada et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2025). However, this study shows that students were not simply concerned about future aspirations, and their stories involved issues of predictivity, planning, continuity and future direction. Students’ pursuit of temporal stability is closely associated with secure jobs, which resonates with Ang’s (2026) study about the centrality of stable work in middle-class identity formation. As middle-class students’ educational mobility is often supported by substantial family investment, students frequently associate futures with secure employment (Ang, 2026). However, temporal stability extends beyond employment alone and also involves maintaining a predictable and continuous life journey. Unlike temporal security, which focuses on continuity through collective memory and historical self-understanding (Bachleitner, 2022), this study shows that temporal stability involves continuity through pursuing imagined futures. Students' narratives demonstrated their intense concerns about disrupted plans, uncertain pathways and changing opportunities. In response, they sought stability that enabled futures to remain feasible and coherent. In this sense, the pursuit of temporal stability involves practical responses to uncertainty and disruptions, expressed through strategies of planning, evaluation and adjustment. Rather than guaranteeing certainty, stability provided students with a pathway through which future possibilities could remain open and meaningful. Temporal stability allowed students to reconnect their present meaning-making and decisions with imagined futures and to maintain a sense of direction and purposefulness despite changing situations. Therefore, students were also seeking continuity. Similar to Ladds et al. (2023) who conceptualise continuity as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, this study shows that students pursued temporal stability through multiple pathways, such as maintaining job security, future planning and further developmental possibilities. Unlike studies about student aspirations which focus on what individuals hope to become (Tsao, 2026; Ploner & Nada, 2020; Dilek et al., 2025), temporal stability addresses whether students’ imagined futures remain feasible, directional, manageable and open to planning. It is not fixed, but continuously restructured. Students’ search for temporal stability was not simply an individual preference but emerged within broader contexts of uncertainty, such as changing labour markets, educational reforms and shifting values of international education (Lomer, 2018; Consoli, 2024).

Practically, universities should recognise future uncertainty and disruptions of students’ future plans in today’s precarious job market and crisis such as environmental and political changes. Specifically, universities should recognise students’ anxiety is not about the present, but about their futures. Universities often support employability. However, this study shows that uncertainty extends beyond employment, as it is also about securing futures. Thus, universities can provide both career and self-development support to help students identify not only what they want to do (specific job or industry), but also a space for enabling future planning and restructuring temporal stability. While ensuring students’ pursuit of temporal stability, universities could also provide ethical guidance on how to deal with uncertainty and disruptions. Students may also benefit from opportunities to engage critically and reflectively with uncertain futures.

8. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that when faced with uncertainty and disruptions, students imagined futures through temporal stability. Specifically, they were seeking futures that appeared predictable, manageable and stable. Temporal stability indicates students' intense preference for a future that remains continuous, attainable and directional. Exploring students' temporal stability helps to uncover students' meaning-making processes about their imagined futures and to provide insights into how students exercise their agency in imagining and creating futures. The study's first limitation is due to its small sample size (predominantly from a single university and with a focus on Chinese international students). Thus, this study cannot determine the extent to which the pursuit of temporal stability characterises students' experiences across different institutional, disciplinary, gender, national or cultural contexts. Rather, the concept is introduced here as an interpretive idea emerging from a close analysis of these four participants' narratives. Second, data collection took place at a specific moment soon after the pandemic and during significant changes in the Chinese education sector. Future research could extend the explorations to other student groups in comparative social, economic and political contexts. While students seek temporal stability as a way to manage uncertainty, this study shows that the pursuit of stability may itself cause pressure and anxiety. Such pressures may be intensified by broader productivity cultures in higher education (Shahjahan, 2025), where students are encouraged to continually optimise themselves and strategically prepare for future success. Therefore, future research could further explore the relationship between temporal stability and contemporary productivity cultures. Students did not pursue the most ambitious futures; instead, their imagined futures were shaped by considerations of feasibility, attainability and stability. This study does not criticise the pursuit of temporal stability, but rather highlights that when more students start to only imagine a stable future, we need to focus on what other futures students no longer imagine and why. Understanding these areas could generate more insights about the changing conditions of international education.

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Author Contributions

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Consent for Publication

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Participants read the Participants information sheet and signed consent form prior to data collection.

Ethics Approval

Ethics approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Manchester (Approval No. 11149-20508).

Data Availability Statement

Restricted: The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical, restrictions but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with permission from data owner, where applicable.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

No generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the conception, design, analysis, interpretation, or writing of this manuscript.

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