Return Migration of the Highly-Skilled in Higher Education Institutions: A Chinese University Case

Qingfang Wang
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huiping li
Return Migration of the Highly Skilled in Higher Education Institutions: a Chinese University Case

Qingfang Wang¹*, Li Tang² and Huiping Li²
¹Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, USA
²School of Public Economics and Administration, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Shanghai, China

ABSTRACT

The war for ‘global talents’ becomes increasingly fierce worldwide with the thriving of knowledge-based new economy. Many countries are implementing new initiatives to encourage their citizens trained overseas to return with their globalised work competencies. Although previous studies have identified various factors related to return migration, very few studies have focused on the return migration of academics, and more specifically, the role of the higher education institution (HEI) in the return migration process. Using both statistical analyses of micro-data and in-depth interviews, this study examines the HEI recruitment process through an extensive case study in a research university in China. We find that, for successful recruitment of overseas top talents, it is extremely important as to how university presents itself in the international stage of the global higher education markets. Meanwhile, we cannot underestimate the role of economic incentives. We also find that the role of networking is more subtle than what traditional migration theories would have predicted. Our findings provide important policy implications for practices regarding talent recruitment at the institutional level, particularly for those universities at the lower end of the global higher education hierarchy. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

The global war for ‘top talent’ has become increasingly fierce worldwide (Koser and Salt, 1997; Iredale et al., 2002; Labrianidis and Vogiatzis, 2013). China, perhaps above all other places, is recruiting highly educated and valuable workers with great speed and magnitude. Embracing calls from the central Chinese government, regional and local governments joined by Chinese universities have aggressively cultivated plans and concrete mechanisms to attract top-notch scientists (Simon and Cao, 2009; Tang and Hu, 2013). One major strategy is to encourage return migration from Chinese natives who have received advanced degrees overseas.

According to Wang and Guo (2012), a total of 818,400 overseas-trained Chinese returned to China between 1978 and 2011. The overall rate of return migration has now reached 36.5%, with a particularly dramatic increase after 2008. At least one-third of returnees work in higher education institutions (HEIs) in China. If only doctoral degree holders are considered, the percentage of overseas-trained returnees in HEIs is much higher. For example, on the basis of 2010 data, 880 of 1143 recipients (77%) of the ‘Thousand Talents Program’, one of the most prominent national-level recruitment plans of China’s central government, work in HEIs (Hao, 2011). In addition to their roles as important ‘custodians of knowledge’, HEIs have de facto acted as extremely important instruments used to attract and retain highly skilled knowledge workers from around the globe (Metcalf, 2010). Therefore, it becomes increasingly urgent to examine the process of highly skilled migration in the sector of tertiary education.
The extant studies have identified various factors that are related to return or transnational migration of the highly skilled, such as individual and household characteristics, as well as social and economic development in the home country, as pull factors; and unfavourable immigration policies and economic recessions in host countries as push factors (Iredale et al., 2002; Zweig et al., 2006; Harvey, 2009; van Riemsdijk, 2012, 2013). Although these studies have provided valuable insights, very few studies have focused on the return migration of academics, and more specifically, what the role of the HEI is in the return migration process, as well as how returnees react to the HEI’s role. Using both statistical analyses of confidential micro-data and in-depth interviews with the higher education (HE) faculty members who have returned to China, we will specifically address the following questions:

- What are the HEIs looking for when hiring overseas-trained job candidates?
- What are the factors contributing to the overseas returnees’ job market decisions?

This study will significantly contribute to the body of migration literature in several ways. In spite of the accumulation of literature on transnational immigration, most empirical investigations are confined to individual decisions, that is, the supply side, with very few notable exceptions, on the employer’s perspectives, that is, the demand side (Cantwell and Taylor, 2013a; Scott, 2013). In the very few existing studies focused on the employer side, most are about either unskilled or low-skilled labour force sectors such as agribusiness, food industry, or hospitality (e.g., Forde, 2001; Findlay et al., 2013), or in a particular industry, such as health care (Bach, 2010). Furthermore, employers in these studies are mainly in immigrant receiving countries.

Our study emphasises the role of the employer in an immigrant sending country. We particularly examine the employer’s role through a ‘relational’ perspective, providing both individual (the supply side) and institutional (the demand side) experiences of the recruitment and return process. In the globally competitive higher education job markets, universities are constrained by the limited resources as well as the limited availability of high-quality job candidates to meet their specific institutional goals. Likewise, the job candidates have to carefully calculate the costs and benefits of a return move to their home countries, leveraging between perceived differences in the quality of life, career progression, and marketability. Therefore, a relational perspective allows us to examine the interaction between individual and institution, and between both the supply and demand sides.

Additionally, HEIs are different from employers in private sectors, for most of whom profit-maximisation is the primary goal. Particularly in China, overseas recruitment programmes for top talents are often closely related to the state’s role in national and regional development strategies. Therefore, the role of the state and related labour market institutions is crucial in shaping the process of migration among HE academics (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). At the same time, with the rise of competition regimes in the distribution of public funds for academic research and the spread of global capitalism, higher education as academic production is ‘increasingly rooted in market logic, entrepreneurialism, and competition’ (Cantwell, 2011a, 101; Marginson and Condaline, 2000). Further, at the global scale, although heavily backed up by the state, HEIs in China are not in a privileged position in attracting ‘top talents’ globally because of China’s peripheral position in the uneven global hierarchy of knowledge production. Our extensive case study examines the process of return migration with respect to academic labour, taking into account a process that has been shaped by global, regional, and local dynamics, along with individual and institutional circumstances and experiences. We thus broaden the overall discussion and fill previous knowledge gaps.

Literature Review

Traditional theories on international migration have offered different perspectives as to why people move, especially across the borders of countries. For example, focusing on the costs of migration and differentials in wages between countries, neoclassical economics conceives of migration as an individual decision for income maximisation (Lewis, 1954; Borjas, 1990, Dodani and LaPorte, 2005). In contrast, the new economics of migration views migration as a collective decision made in a family, household, or even a community, to minimise risk to income or to maximise...
resource-taking within an embedded hierarchy (Stark and Bloom, 1985).

Different from either of these perspectives, the social capital approach argues that social networks connect people in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and other shared community identity. Through networking, migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants are connected with each other and subsequently gain more access to foreign opportunities, with lowered costs and risks of movement, as well as higher expected returns to migration (Boyd et al., 1989). Further, a historical-structural approach, such as the world systems theory, posits that international migration occurs in response to the disparities between developed core countries and less developed peripheral countries, which were fuelled by economic globalisation and market penetration across national boundaries (Wallerstein, 1974; Massey et al., 1993). Relevant to all the different perspectives, international migration is believed to sustain itself in many other ways by a continuous process that Myrdal (1957) and Massey (1990) have named as ‘cumulative causation’. In the words of Massey et al. (1993: 451), ‘Causation is cumulative in that each act of migration alters the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, typically in ways that make additional movement more likely.’

The reverse migration phenomenon, including return migration, challenges traditional theories of international migration in that it contradicts the assumption that migratory patterns are linear and unidirectional. Rather, movement is continuous, multi-directional (not only away from and back to one’s home country but also potentially including other countries), fluid, and temporary (Ley and Kobayashi, 2005; Chen and Koyama, 2012). There is a rising literature on factors related to return migration. Empirical studies have found that both personal and family-level variables affect the ultimate decision making on whether or not to return to a home country. Characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, education level, longing to come back home, and a certain type of lifestyle are all significantly related to a return migration decision (Zweig, 1997; Cao, 2008; Jeffery and Murison, 2011; Teo, 2011). Work-related factors, such as unemployment or under-employment, career path progression prospects, discriminatory experiences in the host countries, especially those experiencing economic recession, are also important considerations (Chacko, 2007; Chand, 2009). At the national level, immigration policies in the host country and social-political environment in the home country, in addition to economic conditions, are often related to return migration (Wadhwa et al., 2009). At the same time, the rise of home countries as emerging economic powers has a tremendous effect on reverse migration (Simon and Cao, 2009). China and India are often cited as emergent economies that attract return migration by citizens who had moved to western nations as students and young professionals, but who now see career and entrepreneurial opportunities in their countries of birth (Iredale et al., 2002).

On the basis of these different perspectives and empirical studies, we expect that academic migration is best understood as multi-faceted and situated in multi-scaled spaces: personal human capital, household characteristics, social networking, and the national contexts in both immigrant sending and receiving countries are all important. At the same time, we particularly argue that academic migrants are different from many other highly skilled migrants because of the special features of academic labour and the process of global academic production.

At the individual level, although many aspects of employment and quality of life factors motivate transnational migration (e.g. career advancement opportunities and wage differentials), life course stages play significant roles in the migration decision-making processes of male and female scientists, particularly when there are partnering and dual academic career situations in a family (Ackers, 2005; Kofman, 2000; Kim, 2010). In addition, individual motivation and professional networks, rather than the corporate-driven recruitment and structured organisational support and relocation policies present in large multinational companies, uniquely define academic migration (Williams, 2009).

At the institutional level, previous studies have examined the role of employer and recruiting agencies (see Scott, 2013 for a review). For example, Findlay and McCollum (2013) have demonstrated that practices of employers and recruiters have significantly shaped how migrant labour is sourced and used in the UK’s rural agribusiness sector. While most studies in this area are focused on unskilled or low-skilled sectors, Bach’s studies (2004, 2010) examine the healthcare sector by
examining the role of state and employers in stimulating recruitment that fosters large-scale international migration of nurses to the UK. Different from these sectors and employers, academic settings are fundamental components of academic migration because of their professional norms, geographic flexibility, and spatial variation. Working effectively in academia differs from working in some other sectors of the labour force, largely because it involves access to high-quality infrastructure, facilities, funding, and human capital, as well as some informal institutional factors, such as the value systems of scientists, research autonomy, and other components of an environment that is more freely defined by its individual workers. These kinds of resources are increasingly clustered in resource-rich, often highly specialised, centres or institutes (Ackers, 2001). Thus, elite universities or academic centres of excellence often have skewed power in attracting the top talents because of their clusters of resources and human capital (Mayer, 2003; Cantwell, 2011a, 2011b). It is not surprising that the hierarchical nature of the professional and institutional forces has significantly structured the boundaries and direction of academic transnational migration across place (Cantwell and Taylor, 2013b).

At the national and global scale, it has been argued that, under the global asymmetric higher education system (Altbach, 2005), transnational mobile academics are under the imperatives of ‘academic capitalism’ most of which are the extension or transformation of the academic centres in the Global North (Kim, 2010). Academic centres located in larger and wealthier countries in Western Europe and North America provide leadership in most aspects of science and scholarship for the world, while enjoying a full array of resources. Yet to assert that transnationally mobile academics are entirely dependent upon the world’s core of higher education hierarchy belies the substantial power of institutions in the peripheral and academic individuals themselves. States and institutions in other countries, especially those with rising economic power, have also shaped the global, uneven higher education market and policy discourse (Cantwell, 2011a). For instance, the June 2013 issue of Nature Publishing Index 2012 Global reported that China ranked sixth in the world in research paper output, with nine of its institutions in the Top 200. This is a significant increase from only three such institutions only a year earlier, and China’s rank is expected to continue to rise. Accompanied by the continuous large-scale recruiting worldwide carried out by the Chinese government, it is not surprising that China becomes increasingly attractive for global top-notch scholars.

All together, transnational academic migration is shaped as much by the institutions and states that seek academic migrants in a global higher education market and competition arena as it is shaped by the individuals who physically move from place to place, or institution to institution. The process of academic migration needs to be understood by looking at the interactions among individual migrants (and their families), academic institutional and professional settings, national systems of higher education, and global networks of knowledge production. Analysing all of these factors together provides a much richer and more meaningful picture of what is occurring with HEIs and highly educated academic returnees. Through a case in a highly ranked research university in China, the current study focuses on two aspects: what characteristics of an academic labour force are sought by an HEI (as an employer) and the characteristics of an HEI itself (as an organisation of academic production) as seen through the lens of academic labour (the supply side). The perspective of employer is thus scrutinised through triangulation of both demand and supply sides as well as an assembly of factors at multiple scales.

Data and Methods

Case study: about the university
We chose a college at HS University as our case study. HS University (HSU) is located in an urbanised area of China. HSU is a top-ranked research university specialising in applied social science-related disciplines, with a total of 22,000 students, 13,600 of whom are full time, and about 800 full-time faculty members. In recent years, HSU has drawn much national and global attention for its rapid growth in research productivity and pioneering practices in adopting a ‘dual-track’ faculty evaluation system.1 From 2005 to 2012, faculty members in HSU have published nearly 400 papers in globally top-ranked journals in economics, including American Economic Review, Econometrica, and Review of Economic Studies. According to the latest ranking from a globally
recognised indicator based on publications indexed in the ISI Web of Knowledge, HSU ranks as first in 2012 among all the universities in the Greater China Region, which include the Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan; ranks in seventh place in all of Asia and 87th worldwide. Unfortunately, because of confidentiality, we cannot release the exact name of the ranking index, nor the name of the particular field.

Since 2005, HSU has recruited overseas talents through unconventional means including high economic incentives, pioneering tenure-track evaluation systems, and active international academic exchange and cooperation programmes. From 2005 to 2012, HSU recruited 158 doctoral recipients from abroad, 70.1% of those from the US and Canada, 22.6% from Asia, and 7.3% from Europe. Most of these talents are young, with 105 of them (about three quarters) as newly awarded PhDs or those with work experience of no more than 1 year.

To avoid biases introduced by institutional and disciplinary diversity as well as being subject to constraints due to confidential nature of the data of job applicants, our study focused on one college within HSU. This college has five departments, representing a total of 1,700 students, nearly half of whom are undergraduate students and the others either masters or doctoral students. With a traditional focus on one particular field (again, the name of that field is omitted because of confidentiality), which is ranked as the nationally strongest, this college has developed multidisciplinary specialisations including public finance, economics, political science, public administration, and sociology. The college started recruiting high-calibre overseas returnees in 2008. To date, it has 80 faculty members in total, 21 faculty of whom are in the tenure-track system mostly in the junior stages of their careers.

METHODS

This study employs mixed research methods. First, we collected data for each individual job applicant from 2010 to 2012. Next, we ran a probit regression analysis on this pooled cross-sectional data to examine the personal characteristics associated with the probability of being on the final list of job candidates (the ‘short list’) eligible for further interview and those who were given job offers. Then, we conducted in-depth interviews with most of the job candidates who received and accepted offers to obtain information about their experiences in the job-searching process. Finally, we talked to an informant who was the assistant to the Dean. Both the Dean and the assistant were the key persons responsible for overseas recruitment. Overall, through different sources of data, we traced convergences and divergences among different responses by different actors. This mixed research design allowed for triangulation of the results to determine commonalities in narrative as well as differences in perspective and opinion, specifically, between both the supply and the demand sides of this particular job market (Saldana, 2009).

Curricula Vita (CV) data include richly chronicled information related to demographic, educational, and professional data, and are thus being recognised as an asset in human and social capital research (Cañibano & Bozeman, 2009; Youtie et al., 2013). For the quantitative analyses, we started with collecting all the names of applicants in the three consecutive years of 2010, 2011, and 2012. Then we retrieved these applicants’ CVs by using Google to search the websites of either the respective individuals or their organisations. All full CVs were collected in the period of May to June 2012. Seventy-one out of 74 vita were valid and then were read, coded, and cross-checked by two researchers independently. In this process, missing, outdated, or conflicting data of educational affiliations were supplemented by searching applicants’ current websites and other data sources as well.

The unit of analysis was the individual applicant. A probit regression was employed using the following formula:

$$ Y = \beta X + \varepsilon, Y \in \{0, 1\}, \varepsilon \sim N(0, \sigma^2) $$

where the dependent variable $Y$ was measured by two indicators: SHORTLIST, whether the applicant was successful in his or her telephone interview and then invited for a campus interview, and OFFER, whether a job offer was extended to the applicant and he or she accepted this position. A set of individual characteristics such as research productivity, potential of academic performance, independent teaching experience, history with obtaining grants or fellowships, and kind of degree (whether from an elite university at the graduate or...
undergraduate level) was represented by X. The detailed list and strategy of coding are provided in Table 1.

Research productivity was measured by the number of publications in English. To comprehensively measure the multi-dimensions of academic performance, we constructed a proxy indicator to gauge the ‘potential’ for each job applicant’s future academic performance. This index measure, known as PotScore, was based on an applicant’s research, teaching, and external funding experiences.2 A higher PotScore meant a higher potential in these three dimensions. The value of PotScore ranged from 0 to 8. For example, if an applicant served as an independent instructor, published one paper in an English journal, served as a teaching assistant and as a research assistant, and received an external grant and an award, his potential score would be 8. Considering the career trajectory of a new PhD as well as years of working experience, we further coded PotScore into a dummy variable, PotIndex, which was based on

Table 1. Variables and descriptive statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Variable name</th>
<th>Expected direction</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>SHORTLIST</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>Invited for campus interview</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>OFFER</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>Job offer extended and accepted</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Potential score</td>
<td>POTSCORE</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>Potential scores based on teaching, publication, and grants/awards capacities.</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Potentials index</td>
<td>POTINDEX</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>Standardised potential scores by research experiences after obtaining PhD degree</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent teaching</td>
<td>INTEACH</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>Independent teaching experience in English</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grant</td>
<td>GRANT</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>Received external research grants Yes 1, otherwise 0</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Award</td>
<td>AWARD</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>Received external awards</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elite 1st degree</td>
<td>ELITEUNDER</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>Undergraduate degree from elite universitiesa Yes 1, otherwise 0</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elite final degree</td>
<td>ELITEPHD</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>Final degree achieved from elite universitiesb Yes 1, otherwise 0</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interdisciplinary</td>
<td>DIFFMAJOR</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>Different majors in 1st and final degrees Yes 1, otherwise 0</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Productivity</td>
<td>PRDVTY</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>Number of research publication in English</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Fresh PhD</td>
<td>FRESHPHD</td>
<td>(+/-)</td>
<td>a fresh PHD/ABD Yes 1, otherwise 0</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Application year</td>
<td>YEAR</td>
<td>(+/-)</td>
<td>Year cohort</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Variable type: D = dependent variable; I = independent variable; C = control variable.

The dummy variable ELITEUNDER was coded on the basis of the Top 500 list of ‘Academic ranking of World Universities’ released by Shanghai Jiaotong University (http://www.arwu.org/ARWU/2010.jsp) accessed in July 2012.

Ibid.
the post-doctoral experiences. For example, if the applicant was a fresh PhD and had a PotScore > 4, then his or her PotIndex = 1; otherwise, the PotIndex = 0. If the applicant was not a fresh PhD and applied for a position at HSU 3 years after obtaining a final degree, then his or her PotScore had to be greater or equal to 7 to make the associated PotIndex equal to 1. The regression results using PotScore and PotIndex are rather consistent with each other, and thus, only PotIndex values were displayed in Table 2.

In addition to the quantitative analysis, we interviewed 14 of the 18 total overseas-trained faculty members who were recruited in the same period as that covered in the micro-data, and one key informant on the recruiting team. We asked the faculty members several open-ended questions that included the following: (1) their overall job-searching experiences, (2) factors related to their decisions to apply for their current jobs and accept the job offers, and (3) their perceptions of the competitive factors that helped them receive the offers. The discussion with the key informant was mainly about the recruitment processes and procedures, the challenges of recruiting overseas talents, and what were considered to be the most valued qualities of a successful candidate. The interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes each and were recorded with consent from the participants. All interviews were conducted in Chinese and then transcribed verbatim. During analyses of the interview responses, we looked for common themes such as motivations, qualifications, use of social networks, and academic environments – those elements of the recruitment and hiring process not reflected through the quantitative data but suggested by different perspectives as discussed earlier. In addition, we also had informal conversations with staff at the Human Resources Department and read their internal policy documents. Because of sensitivity and confidentiality, the information obtained through this channel was not valid for a formal analysis; however, it helped us understand the current dynamics and institutional contexts and thus significantly informed our interpretation of the data.

The findings are presented as follows: results from the regression, which focus on characteristics of individual candidates who received and accepted an offer, will be discussed first. These results reflect what the employer prefers under the constraints of global HE labour markets. This is facilitated through a series of regression analyses.

Table 2. Probit regressions on recruitment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>SHORTLIST</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>OFFER</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model (1)</td>
<td>Model (2)</td>
<td>Model (3)</td>
<td>Model (4)</td>
<td>Model (1)</td>
<td>Model (2)</td>
<td>Model (3)</td>
<td>Model (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELITEPHD</td>
<td>-0.693</td>
<td>-0.868</td>
<td>-0.943</td>
<td>-1.352</td>
<td>-0.452</td>
<td>-0.493</td>
<td>-0.475</td>
<td>-0.592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.68)</td>
<td>(1.94)</td>
<td>(1.91)</td>
<td>(2.24)*</td>
<td>(1.05)</td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
<td>(0.98)</td>
<td>(1.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELITEUNDER</td>
<td>0.347</td>
<td>0.441</td>
<td>0.425</td>
<td>0.310</td>
<td>-0.024</td>
<td>-0.022</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
<td>-0.157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.10)</td>
<td>(1.34)</td>
<td>(1.21)</td>
<td>(0.74)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRDVTY</td>
<td>-0.013</td>
<td>-0.043</td>
<td>-0.085</td>
<td>-0.102</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
<td>-0.065</td>
<td>-0.102</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.36)</td>
<td>(0.99)</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td>(0.96)</td>
<td>(0.55)</td>
<td>(0.98)</td>
<td>(0.96)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTEACH</td>
<td>-0.359</td>
<td>-0.628</td>
<td>-1.451</td>
<td>0.201</td>
<td>0.202</td>
<td>0.108</td>
<td>-0.201</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.97)</td>
<td>(1.54)</td>
<td>(2.71)**</td>
<td>(0.51)</td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
<td>(0.41)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRANT</td>
<td>0.804</td>
<td>0.600</td>
<td>1.191</td>
<td>1.092</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.11)*</td>
<td>(1.35)</td>
<td>(2.83)**</td>
<td>(2.45)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AWARDS</td>
<td>0.848</td>
<td>0.910</td>
<td>0.238</td>
<td>0.165</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.70)</td>
<td>(1.51)</td>
<td>(0.43)</td>
<td>(0.27)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIFFMAJOR</td>
<td>-0.223</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>-0.2218</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.60)</td>
<td>(0.27)</td>
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Absolute value of z statistics in parentheses.

*significant at 5%. **significant at 1%.
common themes that emerged from in-depth interviews are discussed. These themes reflect institutional practices and characteristics at the institutional level that have attracted return migrants. Together, these two analyses depict dynamics at the HE institutional level with experiences on both the supply and demand sides, while reflecting underlying forces at multiple scales.

RESULTS
What HEIs are looking for: results from regression analyses

The overall models were statistically significant with a corrected prediction rate of 83%. Three major findings arise from the quantitative analyses: First, the probability of an individual either being on the ‘short list’ or receiving a job offer is lower for an overseas applicant with a doctoral degree from an elite university, as opposed to an applicant with a degree from a non-elite university; second, the probability of an individual either being on the ‘short list’ or receiving a job offer is lower for an applicant who had independent teaching experience than for those an applicant who had not yet independently taught; and third, the higher the academic potential of an individual, as measured by the PotIndex, the higher the probability of that individual either being on the ‘short list’ or receiving a job offer.

(1) A doctoral degree from ‘elite’ universities

We had expected that having a PhD degree from an elite HEI was positively related to a better chance of being interviewed or of receiving a job offer. Many studies had noted the social and cultural capital that had been accumulated by attending elite schools (Waters, 2009; Hall, 2011). For those HEIs, in pursuit of ‘World-Class University’ status, collaboration with and recruiting from elite schools was one of the most preferred strategies for many highly ranked universities in China. The results from our ‘short list’ model, however, indicated the opposite – rather, that a candidate with a final degree from an elite university was less likely to get to the short list of final candidates for interview. Nor was it significant for receiving an offer.

We believe that this result had to do with the supply pool of job applicants. Candidates with overseas degrees who looked for jobs in China’s higher education market were a uniquely ‘self-selected’ group. In other words, only those with special interests, voluntary or involuntary, in returning to China looked into this job market and submitted applications. Thus, it is probable that in many cases, overseas doctoral students from elite schools never applied for these jobs. Even if they did apply, perhaps they were not as sincerely interested in returning to China. As the informant who participated in the recruiting process commented,

… to avoid fruitless efforts, the first thing we do is identify people who have the intention to go back to China. That is also the first question the Dean will ask during the phone interview, a screening stage before an invitation for campus interview. Once we are sure of your commitment to come to China, the rest of the question is whether you are good enough that we extend you an offer. (T4)

We also believe that this result was closely related to the disciplines in this study. In comparison to other disciplines of arts, humanities, and basic science research, the highly applied nature (such as economics, public finance, and some business-related disciplines) of the disciplines in the current university did not have much competitiveness in the global higher education job market. In other words, many overseas-trained China-born students, especially those from elite schools, may have already found jobs with higher salaries or better opportunities before they even looked at opportunities in the HEIs in China. It suggests that, with the given supply–demand situation in the global HE market, universities in developing countries, which are at the lower rank and peripheral position of the global HE system, do not have much leverage in this aspect. Such a disadvantage encourages these HEIs to creatively present themselves at the global stage so as to encourage widening the pool of applicants. As we will discuss later, proactive recruitment strategies from the leadership and long-term vision in programme building, in addition to lucrative recruitment packages, are very effective.

(2) Independent teaching experience

Having independent teaching experience in English was also less likely to be related to getting
onto the short list. We believe this is because research, not teaching, was most valued in recruiting overseas faculty members. Acknowledged, although sometimes challenged, by every interviewee, research productivity or the potential for research production carried the highest weight in the recruitment and evaluation system. The informant we talked to also confirmed with us that teaching experience (either working as a teaching assistant or independent instructor) was a plus, but not as critical as research. He commented that, ‘A good researcher can easily become a decent teacher in most cases, but a good teacher is not necessarily a good scholar.’ (T4)

Such an emphasis on research over teaching is rooted in the global competition among HEIs. As Cantwell and Taylor (2013a, 2013b) have argued, world-class universities are the prominent form of contemporary higher education organisation (Marginson and Considine, 2000). These universities compete globally for status, top talents, and resources. To attain world-class university status, universities have to compete along certain metrics or benchmarks, which emphasise research over and above other activities. Facilitated and fuelled by a number of global ranking systems, the consequences of competition have well become resource-allocative devices. Since the 1980s, China has continued to move towards a hierarchal and stratified higher education system, with the national universities/institutions at the top, ambitiously focusing on attaining ‘world-class’ status and promoting national competitiveness and prestige (Altbach, 2009; Fang, 2011). For example, the 211 Higher Education Project was launched in 1993 with 100 universities identified as research-intensive institutions. Then the 985 project was inaugurated in 1998 aimed at creating 40 ‘world-class’ universities in China (Liu, 2007). Large amounts of funding from both central and provincial governments have fuelled the development of these key research universities for global competitiveness, while reinforcing stratification both between and within HE institutions (Mok and Chan, 2008). Under this ranking system, research, in most cases measured by publication especially in high-impacted English journals, has become the most important measure of evaluation. Reinforced by the regression results and in-depth interviews to be discussed as follows, potential for higher research productivity is the most robust factor in recruitment.

(3) Academic development potential

Research productivity, measured by the number of publications in English, was not a significant factor for being recruited. The sign of its regression coefficient, in fact, was consistently negative from model 1 to model 4 (Table 2). This finding also held true with the model of those who finally received offers of employment (model 5 to model 8, Table 2). That is, candidates on the short list or those who received offers did not have high productivity as measured by the number of publications. This result more or less supported some earlier studies, which argued that China had failed to attract first-rate academics to return (Cao, 2008). This is not the entire picture, however. Our results also indicated that those candidates with a higher potential of academic performance in the future (measured by PotScore) were more likely to get onto the short list and accept the offer. When we compared the relative strength of each of the factors in the regression equation, PotIndex stood out and had the strongest effect on the probability of being recruited.

As we have discussed earlier, the job applicants were not a randomly selected group. Most of them were young and at the very early stages of their careers. They may not have been ‘the best’ research scholars at their current stage, if measured by the number of their publications. Yet, our regression suggested that the best of them with the highest potential for future development were interviewed and offered jobs. In this sense, the recruitment was very successful. Indeed, when asked about the factors used to evaluate a candidate, the informant answered that the first important factor was research ‘potential’ as reflected by the applicants’ dissertations, publications, and sometimes working papers, saying, ‘We read carefully writing samples that each applicant sends to us. We also see if the applicant has presented his research on the conference which is important in his field’. (T4)

When asked in what conditions she or he won the final offer, most interviewees expressed a similar idea. For example, one person said, “When I applied for the job, the process was like ‘selecting a general from dwarfs’. I’m a dwarf, but still taller than others in my cohort.” (L7) Such a comment, to a certain extent, reflected the self-selection nature of the applicants, while indicating the greater potential to grow for the finalist who was still ‘taller’ than the others. Another person

commented straightforwardly, ‘I think it could be my research potential. I have some projects and working papers which they may have confidence in my potential (to develop them).’ (L6)

**Economic incentives and ‘Tenure-Track’ evaluation system**

Almost all of the interviewees confirmed that high salary was one of the most important factors for them when considering the job offers. In particular, they compared HSU with other Chinese universities with even higher global and national rankings. Many of those interviewed commented that they would not have considered the HSU position were it not for the amount of salary that was offered. The person who was responsible for recruiting also told us that, in order to attract more applications, information on the job advertisements must be very detailed, especially with regard to the salary range.

Traditional theories on international migration have long argued that pull factors, especially higher wages, better working conditions, and a better quality of life in more developed countries, have drawn people to those places. For academic returnees, we should not underestimate the significance of ‘pull’ factors, such as salaries, working conditions, and the lure of scientific and scholarly centrality (Altbach, 2005). For both the general public and governments in China, it is believed that these overseas talents deserved generous financial rewards because they were more beneficial to the society than the domestically trained in certain aspects especially related to high technology, innovation, and transnational ties (Xiang, 2011). In return, China universities had to offer material benefits in order to attract them.

Like most other Chinese universities, publication in highly ranked, particularly English, journals was one of the most important evaluation criteria at HSU. Although challenged by many people, especially those who were trained domestically, it was assumed that overseas-trained doctoral recipients had a higher potential for research outputs. Our earlier quantitative analyses already confirmed that candidates with high academic development potential (not necessarily ‘real’ research productivity though) were more likely to be recruited and to receive job offers. Naturally, a higher salary and better economic package were believed to be necessary and reasonable, as well as expected, by the job candidates. For them, the aspiration to live in a middle- or even upper-class lifestyle in the instant city with its extremely high costs of living and the expectation to have access to the necessary tools of research and scholarship were best negotiated into salaries. In particular, for the current university, although highly ranked in the nation, it was nonetheless still not the top one, and therefore compensation through salary seemed a ‘default’ strategy to attract overseas trainees; otherwise, an immediate question from the job candidates normally was, ‘… then, why come here instead of XXX university in the same city but at a higher ranking?’

In our case study, the overseas returnees actually had an average annual salary of about three times that of domestically trained faculty members at the same professional rank, and sometimes even higher than that of the faculty members at higher ranks. At the same time, most of the overseas recruited faculty members were on a ‘tenure-track’ that was similar to those found at most western universities. Under this evaluation system, which in this university was especially designed for the overseas returnees, tenure-track faculty members had to publish in the highly ranked English journals and were evaluated differently than their domestically trained colleagues. How this system works, especially in the long term, would entail a completely different study and goes beyond the scope of this current one. However, from the recruitment perspective, in the short term, such a special evaluation system attracted many applicants. Most interviewees commented that the tenure-track evaluation system attracted many applicants. Most interviewees commented that the tenure-track evaluation system was the most valued and attractive to them. Some of them stated that they would not have come to this university if without this special evaluation system. One interviewee commented as follows:

The university defines ‘returnees’ clearly through such an evaluation system. I feel my knowledge obtained overseas is valued. … Some other universities were interested in me as well. However, they are not very clear about their work in this aspect. (In those universities), what the environment will be like after you come back, what you are expected [to do], and what the overall package [referring to salaries and economic incentives] looks like, … nothing is clear. They make you feel like you should appreciate them enough once you were given a job. (T1)
Leadership and ‘Agglomeration’ of Excellence

One of the key elements that successfully drew the overseas returnees back to the current university was the proactive recruiting strategies from its leadership. For example, one interviewee commented that the Dean flew to his city to interview him. Another interviewee described,

One of the key reasons is that the Dean XX and Dr YY impressed me a lot. I really believed that there would be a great future for me to come back. ... During the recruitment process, Dr. YY phone interviewed me first for more than one hour. Then the Dean XX interviewed me for another one hour. I feel that they are very serious. I feel it very unusual for a Dean to spend much time like this to know each job candidate even before on-campus interview. At that time, I started feeling very confident with the university. (T5)

Strong leadership was not only expressed by the recruiting activities, but also played a significant role in forming, or having a potential to form, a cluster of research excellence. In economic geography, agglomeration economies are often featured by specialised labour markets and supplier networks, as well as knowledge spillovers (Marshall, 1890; Scott, 1988). These clusters were often associated with the formation of a unique local milieu based on social-cultural similarity and interwoven social relations (Glaesera et al., 2010). In higher education, researchers have noted the ability of science clusters to attract ‘star scientists’ and the multiplier effect of this in terms of subsequent recruitment (Akers, 2005). In our case, the dean himself is a prominent scholar in his research domain and was recruited by HSU from overseas as well. His prestigious position in his field and reputation helped to recruit many research scholars from overseas.

For these young scholars, on the one hand, a place with the very best research facilities and good quality of life was very important; on the other hand, their passion for the future and for academic life that was met by a clear vision and strong leadership also mattered a great deal. One job candidate graduated from the world-top programme in his field and finally chose to work at HSU. He noted, ‘One of the most crucial factors for me to come back is because of the Dean XX.’ In his cohort, another interviewee originally from Taiwan also said that, ‘The Dean XX has drawn a very beautiful career picture for me. He told me that he would build the best (in his field) research team in China at our university. I was very excited about this!’

Although strong leadership had drawn a number of promising research scholars to join the programme, we have also noted the ‘authoritarian’ nature of the recruitment process. The search committee basically consisted of the dean and his assistant. It was almost always the dean himself who decided the finalists, although the finalists needed the School Professor Board’s approval. Every interviewee believed that it was ‘the Dean’ who made the final decision. There was very little involvement of other faculty members in the college. In fact, it was said that the university president ‘believed the Dean and granted him the largest discretion to make independent decisions’ (T4). Some returnees believed it entirely necessary in China’s situation, saying,

You know, if you go through faculty meetings and the so-called ‘democratic channels’, it may take forever to make one decision. The Dean wouldn’t have been able to recruit anyone in the end. (L2)

Although such a statement may be arguably true in the current case, we indeed find some long-term issues related to such practices. For instance, in a related research project where we also talked to domestically trained faculty members,8 some of them voiced their dissatisfaction that there was almost no discussion about the shared vision of future programmes in relation to new faculty recruitment. Some even complained about the weakening of the traditionally strong sub-fields because of the leader’s favouring some particular sub-fields. In our current case study, the dean of the college had just left the position when the interviews were conducted. His leave had caused tremendous concern and uncertainty among the returnees.

I came here because of Dr. XX. However, everything promised before has been challenged since he left. Information provided to us has been changing every second. Where will the changes lead to? I have no idea. (L3)
I started wondering whether we can keep those productive researchers; I also suspect whether we still can attract more excellent researchers. I feel very uncertain. (L4)

Previous studies had some similar findings. For example, Salt (1997) pointed out that the departure of a few top-level specialists in certain sectors of basic research ‘could lead to the collapse of national scientific schools’ (22). For our case, because of the lack of shared long-term development plans within the programmes and a highly centralised management system (and strategies), the change of the leadership of even one person could have very serious negative effects on talent recruitment and retention.

**Formal channels of recruitment and social networking**

To understand the entire process, we asked the interviewees to describe the procedures related to application and recruitment, including how they knew about the job opening and the role of any personal network in the recruitment process. Among the 14 interviewees, 11 of them mentioned that they knew about the job through online job banks. Previous studies had identified that institutional factors, such as research culture, politics, and Guanxi (interpersonal relationship and social networking), were among the major barriers for many academics in choosing to work in Chinese universities (Xiang, 2005; Cao, 2008). Interestingly, several people regarded the way in which the job was advertised as an indicator of the institutional environment.

One interviewee mentioned that he received an interview invitation from another university in the same city; however, he did not go to that interview because he did not think the interview process was formal, ‘which made me think that the research environment and pay might not be good’. Many of our interviewees commented that job advertising through the formal channels was very ‘professional’, ‘more westernised’, and ‘like the US’, which made them ‘feel confident and good’.

As for the role of personal connections, six out of the 14 interviewees admitted that a personal connection with the current university was important in their application process. In three instances, the candidates knew about the job through their former advisors who had connections with the group responsible for the recruitment. Four people mentioned that the personal connection was not directly related to the job opening. Instead, they knew people who were returnees and whom had already worked at the current university for several years. As we discussed earlier, concern over the political and cultural environment was one of the greatest barriers in making the decision to return (Zweig, 1997, Zweig et al., 2006, Cao, 2008, Wang and Guo, 2012). Connections with former returnees helped the potential migrants understand the university better, in the current case, in good ways. It was not kinship, not even friendship in most cases, that worked as significant social ties in this process.

For example, one interviewee talked about how important one former returnee, whom she did not know before considering the application, was in helping her prepare for the on-campus interview. When asked why this returnee helped her, the interviewee believed it was because ‘we both were overseas trained. That’s all.’ Explicitly, connections generated from the identity of ‘being returnees’ function as a type of social or cultural capital that is partially capitalised in the job-searching process (Kim, 2010). At the same time, for the HEI, such a connection indicates that the overall institutional environment especially related to overseas talent retention and development can be as important as the recruitment packages in attracting people back home. How the current returnees felt about their experiences and what information they imparted to the future job candidates and even the entire professional communities were critical for successful recruitments in the long run.

**Other factors**

Half of the interviewees mentioned that they looked, but not very successfully, for academic jobs in the US before coming back to China. Some interviewees specifically talked about coming back to their home country to avoid ‘being marginalised’ in the US. Particularly, a lack of social life and the isolation of university towns in the US were regarded as negative, contrasted to the current university in a cosmopolis that is ‘full of charm and vitality’ for a Chinese. In addition, different from former studies that had related academic return migration to cultural diasporas connected through Chinese identities and the desire to contribute to the development of the homeland (e.g. Yang and Welch, 2010), none of our interviewees linked their consideration with this particular aspect. We suspect this could have been
related to the age cohorts of these participants. Nevertheless, a majority of them believed that the booming economy and globalisation of China predicted a bright future, which was a significant pull factor. Many of the interviewee commented that, for social scientists or social science-related researchers in particular, China provided ‘the best natural laboratory’ for their research endeavours. A couple of other factors were also mentioned, such as the overall quality of life in the current city, the geographic location of the current city, and the responsibility to take care of parents as the only child in the family. These multidimensional factors beyond the institutional level are consistent with prediction by traditional migration theories that we have discussed earlier.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Traditional migration theories provide valuable insights into understanding the patterns, rationales, and consequences of population movement across the borders of countries in general. However, our knowledge of international migration from the demand side, especially for the highly skilled labour force in higher education institutional settings, still remains limited. It is even scarcer for return migration. Through a case study of return migration in the context of a Chinese HEI, this study focuses on the demand side of academic market through triangulation of results between job applicants and employer. Although most our findings are at the HE institutional level, they simultaneously reflect underlying factors and forces at multiple scales that have formed and sustained return migration in global academic labour markets. These findings to some degree are consistent with what traditional international migration theories and previous studies would predict, at the same time, reflecting the unique institutional setting in the HE sector and the unevenness of global academic production systems.

Our case study showed that job candidates who might not have had the strongest records of research productivity at the initial stages of their career, but who indeed showed higher academic development potential, were more likely to qualify for the shortlist and accepted job offers. Specific disciplines and university rankings in the current case study could have significantly shaped the self-selected pool of its job applicants and thus impacted the results. For successful recruitment of overseas top talents, how universities present themselves on the international stage of the global market of higher education is very important. Formal, professional, and internationalised practices of recruitment are highly valued. Such practices will naturally widen the ‘contact’ pool of overseas-trained doctoral recipients. In a country like China where Guanxi, or personal relationships, is very much valued, dealing with these ‘non-academic tasks’ oftentimes concerns job candidates who perceive the social environments through all possible channels. In many cases, these professional practices become important indicators of professionalism and even a barometer of academic environments.

We found leadership in the recruitment process to be extremely important. First, under the centralised management system in China, proactive recruitment activities from the ‘top-down’ indicated that university leaders have attached sufficient importance to and are committed to talent development plans. Most candidates regard the attitude from top leaders as a ‘guaranteed’ structure and indispensable component of a professional work environment upon return. Second, a strong leadership with a shared vision promotes the formation of research clusters. With the rising economic power of China and unprecedented opportunities opening up in more universities, such clusters sometimes are even more important than economic incentives and short-term financial compensation for many job candidates. However, as we have discussed, such clustering effect can easily turn into a negative factor for return migration when the leader leaves the current research programme. It is probably more severe under China’s higher education management system. As some have commented, these systems are not run by ‘standard rules’ but by ‘people.’ When people change, the rules could instantly discontinue.

Meanwhile, we cannot underestimate the role of economic incentives. For almost all the interviewees, a high salary was one of the most important factors in selecting this university. For the overseas applicants, salary level was a precondition of being able to work in this city with its soaring housing prices and high cost of living. It was also a kind of ‘compensation’ for their overseas training – as an individual investment of human capital. Such a salary was negotiated on a relative scale by comparing the current university with other Chinese universities of similar or higher
ranking. Implicitly, universities at the lower rank had to compensate their preferred job candidates through more economic benefits. This seemed not surprisingly a market rule; however, it raised the most difficulty for universities at the lower hierarchy of the higher education system in China. With the top universities having most of the resources, lower-ranked universities who had already struggled with capacity building and lack of resources had to still make extra efforts, including financial resources, to compete in the global markets. Disparity and even polarisation among HEIs could be further reinforced through this process. At the same time, it is no doubt that factors pulling people back to China will be increasingly diversified, much beyond just economic motivations. For most universities, this diversification could provide more opportunities to attract top talents. Those schools at the lower end of the rankings particularly need to proactively take advantage of these opportunities.

Closely related to higher financial compensation, the overseas returnees were evaluated differently through a ‘dual-track’ evaluation system in our case study. On the one hand, such a tenure-track system was regarded as symbolic to show the importance attached to overseas talent cultivation plans from the ‘top-down’; on the other hand, such a system was attractive to most returnees because it provided a favourable environment for them to concentrate on research activities. However, such an evaluation system had a significant stratifying effect within the institution itself, which deserves further in-depth studies. Related to such an evaluation system, many interviewees expressed their concerns over the fervent embrace of a ‘westernised’ evaluation system not only in the current university but also in the national higher education sector, in addition to the burden and the challenges that Chinese universities face in frenetically chasing publications in globally high-ranked English journals.

The role of networking was more subtle than what traditional migration theories would have predicted. Although connections through former advisers or other personal contacts still mattered, the ties were not necessarily strong. In many cases, the experiences of existing overseas-trained faculty members who were not even alumni or acquaintances weighed into the decision-making process. For each individual, having the identity of being a returnee could be a type of social or cultural capital. For HEIs, it indicated that talent recruiting was indeed a long-term project in which retention and development of existing faculty could produce multiplier effects.

Finally, we want to stress that return migration was not permanent; instead, it might be only that one episode of transnational migration with ‘brain circulation’ becomes more significant. In this sense, it was even problematic to label what was going on with HEI recruitment and hiring as ‘return’ migration. Indeed, during the interviews, we found that some people had already left HSU and moved to other universities in Hong Kong, Singapore, or other Chinese universities. This phenomenon has caused concerns and generated internal studies directed by the Human Resources department at the university. Some of our interviewees indeed expressed uncertainty about staying and raised the possibility of making additional moves.

This study has limitations. The specific disciplines and university ranking in the current case could have significantly shaped the pool of its job applicants and thus impacted our interpretations. With a large number of universities and returnees in China, it is impossible to generalise the current study to the entire country. Indeed, it is not our intention to do so. Nonetheless, more studies are warranted to expand the current scope of examination. In addition, more questions need to be answered: What are the experiences of returnees after returning to their home country? How has transnational academic migration impacted the migrants themselves and their relationships with surrounding people and places? Research on these topics will significantly improve our understanding of highly skilled transnational migration.

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Return Migration of the Highly Skilled in Higher Education Institutions

NOTES

(1) Under this system, faculty members trained in China are in the traditional faculty management system, whereas those overseas doctoral recipients on the faculty are managed and evaluated by a tenure-track system. The tenure-track system is very similar to that of the US. Of the total 800 full-time faculty members at HSU, about 20% are in the tenure-track system.

(2) The formula for PotScore is PotScore = 2* (1, if individual has independently taught) +2* (1, if individual has had at least one article published in or at the ‘revise and resubmit’ stage of an English journal) +1* (1, if the individual ever served as a teaching assistant) +1* (1, if the individual ever served as a teaching assistant) +1* (1, if ever awarded research grants) +1* (1 if ever received external awards).

(3) The criterion is PotIndex = 1 if PotScore > 4+ (job application year-PhD year). Please note that the current weights (for independent teaching and publications) and thresholds for PotIndex are intuitive and also a bit arbitrary. We conducted a sensitivity test but did not find significant change in our results.

(4) We contacted all 18 faculty members. However, four were not approachable because of either personal reasons or schedule conflicts.

(5) When asked about the most important component of the current evaluation system and key for career progression, all the interviewees answered, ‘paper’ (lituan), especially in ISI indexed journals. The university and colleges provide different amounts of financial awards for publications depending on a journal’s ranking. Such type of an evaluation system is very common in Chinese universities.

(6) The difference does not consider other financial sources, such as different types of allowances, benefits from extra classes and projects, and different types of rewards, which are very common in China. These can provide almost 50% of the total income of domestically trained faculty members.

(7) For instance, economic disparity between the returnees and the domestically trained faculty members is also accompanied by a social divide, which further reinforces the within-institution stratification.

(8) This related project not only looks at the current college but also covers all other colleges in HSU, both returnees and domestically trained faculty members. Many of them confirmed that it is a common practice that the Dean makes the final decision in the recruitment process. In some cases, there were no on-campus interviews. Even when there was one, very few faculty members, especially those domestically trained, were involved. In their words, ‘it is the leader’s business. We cannot say anything.’

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