Post-Graduation Transitions of International Students in Taiwan: Barriers to Labour Market Integration

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Abstract

Taiwan has emerged as a regional education hub, drawing international students particularly from Southeast and South Asiathrough proactive recruitment and policy tools, such as the New Southbound Policy. After graduation, many of these students face substantial barriers to integrating into Taiwan's labor market. This study particularly targets barriers to employment that international graduates face after completing their degrees, focusing on the prevailing work governance structures and systemic frameworks. This qualitative study, based on 20 in-depth interviews and policy analysis. Findings reveal that entrenched bureaucratic hurdles, racialized labor hierarchies, and structural discrimination inhibit international graduates' access to meaningful employment. The study calls for policy realignments that reframe international graduates as long-term socio-economic assets, not transient learners.

INTRODUCTION

Taiwan has slowly turned into an international education hub in Asia, augmented by policies crafted for the purposes of attracting foreign students and cultivating globalized skills within its domestic learners (Wang, 2024). One of the main aims of this policy is the New Southbound Policy, which seeks to foster educational and human capital relations with Southeast and South Asian countries. This policy also attempts to boost Taiwan's attractiveness as an international education destination and try to mitigate the problem of dwindling enrollment in PhD programs (H.-M. Lin et al., 2020). The NSP promotes talent exchange programs, particularly in vocational training, benefiting both students and industries. For example, Indonesian students participating in internships and lectures in Taiwan gain proficiency in Chinese and practical skills relevant to their fields (Ying et al., 2018). Taiwan has successfully attracted students from Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia. Factors influencing their decision include the availability of courses in English and Chinese, scholarships, job opportunities post-graduation, and political stability (Nguyen et al., 2020). The NSP policy has led to an increase in the number of students, making Taiwan a more desirable destination for higher education thanks to its academic offerings (H. M. Lin & Sung, 2020). The growth of international students in Taiwan has been steadily increasing (see figure 1), especially in the areas of STEM and business (Cheng et al., 2023). These learners have been prominently labeled as important contributors to the economic growth of Taiwan and part of the solution to the low birth rate, aging population, and labor force shortages (Fang-Yu & Jung-Cheng, 2020; W. Lin & Chan, 2024).
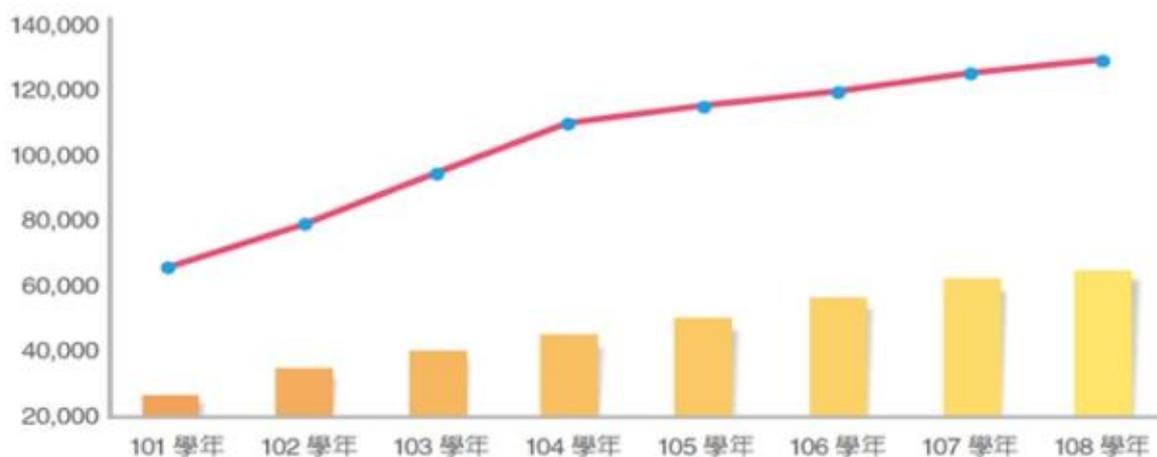
Figure 1. The Growth Trend of the Population of Overseas Students at Colleges or Universities in Taiwan (2021)
Source: The Ministry of Education (https://english.moe.gov.tw/cp-117-25416-d8868-1.html)

The process of studying in Taiwan and subsequently getting a job as an international student is not easy or implicit in any way. This change suffers from numerous obstacles like linguistic abilities, cultural assimilation, skills matching, and employer stereotypes (Muthuswamy & Varshika, 2023). However, students who possess strong intercultural networks tend to have a more positive global outlook, thus making it easier to traverse this obstacle (M. Y.-P. Peng, 2019). The phase of post-graduation employment eligibility and immigration bureaucracy is surrounded by a fog of uncertainty even when foreign talent is being actively recruited for their apparent efforts toward internationalization (R.-T. Huang, 2023). The increasing foreign graduate population has escalated competition within the labor market (Lai, 2019). Even after obtaining a Taiwanese degree and frequently possessing a high level of Mandarin, international alumni still encounter a multitude of barriers, both legal and institutional, which restrict the ability to fully participate in the labor market, or the process is obstructed by bureaucratic red tape (Tsai et al., 2022). These barriers include hostile immigration policies, guarded employers, and restricted access to essential professional social capital (Rich et al., 2022).

The discrepancy between inclusive policies for education and exclusive practices for the labor market raises some critically concerning issues about the fairness and effectiveness of Taiwan's internationalization strategy (Gosling & Yang, 2022). This also reflects a broader sociological phenomenon whereby international students, especially those hailing from the Global South, are accepted with open arms as fee-paying learners but systematically sidelined when it comes to employment opportunities (de Lange, 2020; Joshi & Ziguras, 2024). Socioeconomic features like place, caste, and gender have been observed to significantly determine employability, especially in sectors such as manufacturing, where personal and demographic attributes alone can dictate who gets jobs or not (Bairwa & Sharma, 2019). These shifts in Taiwan's strategically significant geopolitical location, demographic changes, and new migration policies provide important contexts for these phenomena (W.-C. Huang, 2021; Kwak & Wang, 2022). With the naturalization of an increasing number of migrant citizens and their active political participation, these changes are expected to transform the sociopolitical context of Taiwan (C.-H. Li, 2020). However, there are still some barriers that need to be highlighted; for instance, the children of immigrants, particularly those from Southeast Asian countries, experience stark inequities in education due to their socioeconomic status and community context (Tsou, 2023).

It is crucial to emphasize the shift from education to employment as a process with multiple layers as opposed to a singular event (Y. Peng, 2020). The constraints sociolinguistic and cultural bar the employment opportunities and the integration of Mainland Chinese graduates into Hong Kong's workforce (Chan & Chen, 2024). International graduates stand to benefit substantially in

terms of their economic participation and longitudinal impact because of policies that seek to simplify employment opportunities for them (Song & Yunus, 2024). This transition is facilitated with additional support, such as career assistance and culture-specific training (Battaglia et al., 2024). The professional trajectories of these learners can be comprehended more fully through the lens of migration systems and policies (Shrestha, 2024). Difficulties like insufficient English proficiency and integration into the new culture continue to restrict access to work regarded as meaningful (Lu & Everson Härkälä, 2024).

This study Previous studies have consistently shown that international students face multifaceted challenges in various global destinations, including cultural adaptation difficulties, institutional barriers, discrimination in the labor market, and job availability gaps. Jackson et al. (2025) emphasize the crucial role of career resources in shaping graduate employment outcomes, while Tran et al. (2020) highlight the importance of policy frameworks in determining whether international education leads to sustainable career paths. Evidence from Europe and North America also shows that structural restrictions in post-study migration policies significantly affect access to the labor market (Dai & Pham, 2024; Singh & Fan, 2021). In East Asia, researchers have identified racial hierarchies and employer biases that disadvantage graduates from the Global South (Ellis, 2022; Kwak & Wang, 2022). Studies focusing on Taiwan further explore internationalization and educational mobility (W. Lin & Chan, 2024), but tend to overlook how these processes intersect with restrictive labor governance and migration structures.

The main contribution and uniqueness of this study lie in its comprehensive and systemic-social analysis of the transition from international student to migrant worker within the landscape of Taiwan's labor policies and market. While most existing studies focus on single components of the transition such as job skills, cultural adjustment, labor discrimination, or visa policy restrictions, this research offers an integrated analytical lens that captures how these dimensions interact simultaneously in shaping the actual outcomes of graduates. This study enriches the field by demonstrating that the challenges faced by international graduates cannot be understood in isolation, but rather reflect a layered system of institutional, bureaucratic, and sociocultural mechanisms that collectively maintain unequal labor market positions. By highlighting the narratives of graduates from Southeast Asia and South Asia groups underrepresented in Taiwan-focused research this study introduces new empirical insights into how ethnonational hierarchies are experienced at the grassroots level.

The uniqueness of this study also lies in its argument that Taiwan's internationalization policy produces a structural paradox: while the country aggressively recruits international students to address demographic decline and enhance global competitiveness, its labor governance framework simultaneously limits the socio-economic integration opportunities of these same individuals. This study provides new theoretical contributions that go beyond previous research in Australia, Canada, and China (Blackmore & Rahimi, 2019; Li, 2022; Netz & Cordua, 2021). This study highlights how Taiwan's dual-track migration model, which separates elite foreign professionals from lower-class migrant workers, creates a liminal category of foreign graduates who are neither fully accepted as talent nor recognized as legitimate participants in the labor market. Therefore, this study offers a new analytical framework that positions international graduates not only as students in transition, but as migrant subjects shaped by systemic constraints, policy contradictions, and ethno-national categorizations a perspective largely absent in the existing literature. This expanded theoretical mobilization strengthens the academic significance of the study and reinforces its contribution to the global debate on the internationalization of higher education, post-study migration, and labor market justice. Building on this broader literature framework, this study addresses a clear research gap: the absence of a holistic and empirical narrative on comprehensive post-graduation transitions in the Taiwanese context.

While previous studies have documented aspects of cultural adjustment, job availability, or post-study work regulations, they have not synthesized these elements into an integrated understanding of how international graduates navigate complex and interrelated obstacles in their

daily lives. This study fills that gap by placing graduates' narratives within a broader socio-political structure, describing how immigration bureaucracy, institutional expectations, and ethno-national labor hierarchies interact to shape employment outcomes. As such, this research encourages theoretical and policy discussions on labor inclusion, international student retention, and sustainable talent mobility issues that are increasingly critical to Taiwan's demographic future and its internationalization agenda.

This study aims to examine international students' employability as graduates of Taiwan's institutions of higher learning through socio-systemic considerations and their frameworks postgraduate experiences' frameworks. It seeks to answer the following questions: 1) How do Taiwan's legal, bureaucratic, and immigration frameworks shape the post-graduation transition and employment trajectories of international graduates? and 2) How do international graduates experience and navigate labour market mismatches and social integration barriers during their transition from "student" to "foreign worker"? This research contributes to the discussion on migration and the phenomenon of employment vulnerability for students while broadening the discourse on the policies of foreign talent retention in Taiwan to make them more inclusive and sustainable.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative case study design to analyze the post-graduation transition of international students in Taiwan and the structural, institutional, and sociocultural conditions that shape their career paths. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of life experiences, subjective meanings, and social processes that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures (Frain, 2025). Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure maximum variation in gender, nationality, field of study, institutional type, and post-graduation outcomes. The study included 20 international graduates who met the following criteria: a) Individuals who entered Taiwan on a student visa, b) Completed a degree program at a Taiwanese university, and c) Attempted to or successfully entered the Taiwanese labor market post-graduation. A total of 20 participants (see table 1) were interviewed, representing diverse national backgrounds, academic disciplines, and employment sectors. Efforts were made to ensure gender balance and variation in employment outcomes (e.g., formal employment, underemployment, entrepreneurship, return migration).

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews to generate detailed accounts of each participant's educational background, post-graduation job search, workplace experiences, identity negotiations, and future career aspirations. Interviews were conducted in English or the participant's preferred language. Each interview lasted 45 - 90 minutes and was conducted either in person or through secure online platform (zoom meeting).

Table 1. Participant Data

Participant	Gender	Country of Origin	Field of Study	Current Employment Status	Years in Taiwan
P1	Male	Vietnam	Engineering	Employed	4
P2	Female	Indonesia	Business	Unemployed	3
P3	Female	Thailand	Computer science	Employed	5
P4	Male	Thailand	Medicine	Employed	2
P5	Male	Malaysia	Law	Unemployed	4
P6	Female	Philipines	Education	Employed	3
P7	Male	Nepal	Social sciences	Unemployed	5
P8	Female	Bangladesh	Arts	Employed	2
P9	Male	Pakistan	Science	Employed	4

Participant	Gender	Country of Origin	Field of Study	Current Employment Status	Years in Taiwan
P10	Female	Sri Lanka	Economics	Unemployed	3
P11	Male	Myanmar	Engineering	Employed	5
P12	Female	Cambodia	Business	Unemployed	2
P13	Male	Laos	Computer science	Employed	4
P14	Female	Brunei	Medicine	Employed	3
P15	Male	Singapore	Law	Unemployed	5
P16	Female	Thailand	Education	Employed	3
P17	Male	Vietnam	Social sciences	Unemployed	4
P18	Female	India	Arts	Employed	3
P19	Male	Pakistan	Sciences	Employed	5
P20	Female	Indonesia	Economics	Unemployed	3

All interviews were first transcribed verbatim and underwent a comprehensive familiarization process. Each transcript was read repeatedly to ensure a deep understanding of the data, accompanied by reflective memos to record analytical insights and methodological reflections. An inductive open coding process is then conducted to divide the data into separate units of meaning. Line-by-line coding facilitates the identification of recurring patterns related to barriers, labor market mismatches, language challenges, experiences of discrimination, and diverse adjustment strategies. The next step was coding with the aim of organizing the initial codes into broader conceptual categories, enabling the research team to analyze how the sub-themes were interconnected. Categories that emerged at this stage included bureaucratic uncertainty, institutional constraints, racial hierarchies, labor market segmentation, and adaptive strategies. To reinforce methodological rigour, several strategies were employed to enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Triangulation of interviews, policy documents, and institutional guidelines enabled cross-verification of findings. Member verification was used to confirm that key interpretations accurately reflected participants' intended meanings. Reflexive and analytical memos served as an audit trail, documenting coding decisions and analytical reflections to minimize researcher bias. Thick description of Taiwan's socio-policy context enhanced transferability, enabling readers to assess the relevance of findings to other settings. Comparative analysis between participants allowed for the identification of shared experiences and differences, strengthening the explanatory power of the categories. The final stage involved thematic synthesis, in which the axial categories were integrated into a cohesive interpretive framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Transitionof International Graduates into Taiwan's Labor Market

Transitioning from being an international student to a participant in the labor market is a complicated and often uncertain process for foreign graduates in Taiwan. However, despite government efforts to attract and retain global talent, these students' experiences reveal the existence of a multifaceted landscape shaped by different constraints, institutional ambivalence, and exclusion through sociocultural means. One major issue here is related to the legal and bureaucratic frameworks that determine their staying either renewing an Alien Resident Certificate (ARC). Taiwan has implemented post-study work policies to facilitate streamlined transitions for newcomers; these policies have not gone far enough to meet the needs of international students.

Mismatches in the job market complicate the transition to post-graduation. International graduates often find themselves working in sectors unrelated to their field of study or in positions that are far below their qualifications, even after acquiring a local degree and Mandarin language skills. The process may be characterized by identity shifts, which are both bewildering and isolating. In universities, international students might feel that they belong; however, outside

academic circles, they are designated as "foreign workers." They have language and cultural issues at work.

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                    ┌──────────────────────┐
                    │ International Students│
                    │ (Graduates from Taiwan)│
                    └──────────────────────┘
                              │
                    ┌──────────────────────┐
                    │   Transition Phase:   │
                    │ Post-graduation Job Search│
                    └──────────────────────┘
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| Structural & Legal Barriers
• ARC renewal challenges
• Unclear or restrictive post-study work visa policies
• Employer reluctance to sponsor foreign graduates | Labor Market Mismatch
(Working outside field of study) | Social Exclusion & Identity Negotiation
• From "student" to "foreign worker" label
• Language and cultural barriers in workplaces
• Racialized perceptions and marginalization | Coping Strategies of Graduates
• Enrolling in further study to extend legal stay
• Starting small businesses or freelance work
• Relying on community and ethnic networks |

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                    ┌──────────────────────┐
                    │   Future Aspirations  │
                    │ • Desire to stay long-term│
                    │ • Limited eligibility for │
                    │   Employment Gold Card │
                    │ • Returning to home country as│
                    │   a last reason       │
                    └──────────────────────┘
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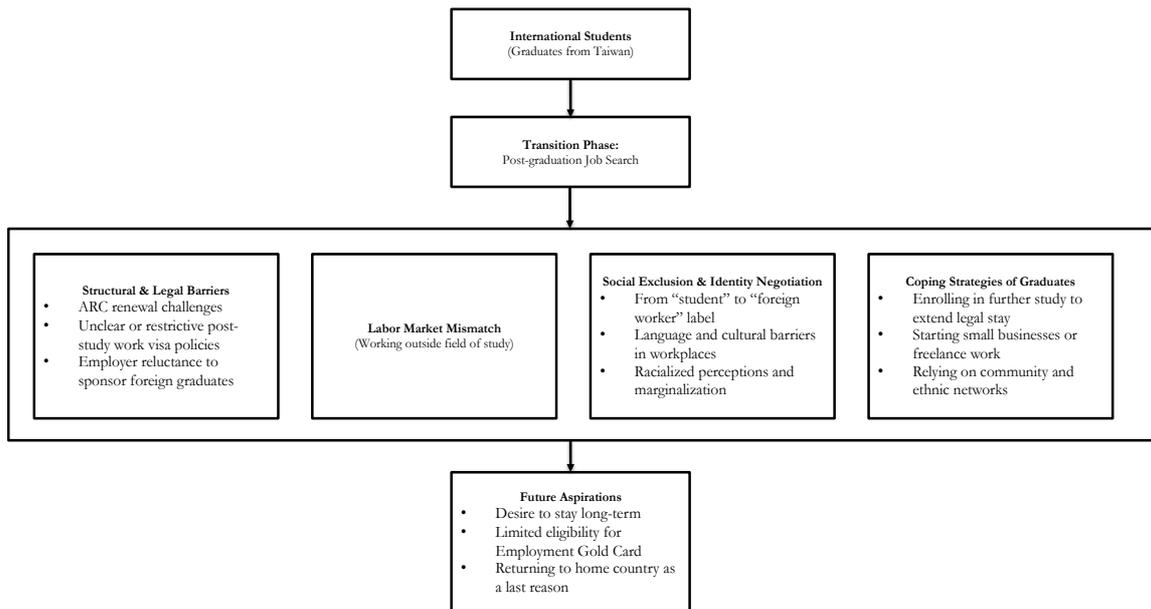
Figure 2.Transition of International Graduates into Taiwan's Labor Market

The figure 2 illustrates how international graduates in Taiwan transition from being students to participating in the labor market through a multi-stage process. They start with job searching after their graduation, which is a critical and often confusing stage where there is little institutional guidance, and there is a lot of uncertainty surrounding various issues. For instance, graduates encounter problems such as renewing ARCs, post-study work visa policies, and lack of employer sponsorship for work permits because they are still finding it difficult to manage the administrative burden. Even on having relevant qualifications and Chinese language proficiency, labour market mismatches still occur, leading them to find jobs either unrelated to their field of study or below their level of qualification. This discrepancy also continues within systemic hierarchies as well as ethno-national hierarchies where Southeast Asian/South Asian graduates consider themselves less advantageous compared to Western-educated or local ones. Graduates experience numerous difficulties when integrating into the workforce. While they could feel included in the university atmosphere, many will be "foreign workers" encountering marginalization, racial stereotypes, and cultural alienation once out in the wider society. In addition, these challenges are exacerbated by language barriers and limited access to professional networks.

Graduates take up a range of coping mechanisms in response to this. Some pursue further education to prolong their legal stay, while others engage in informal labor, freelancing, or running small-scale businesses. Many depend on ethnic or national networks for assistance and employment opportunities, which is an adaptive but limited reaction to a rigid and exclusive labor market. Quite a few graduates express their strong desire to remain in Taiwan and contribute professionally; nevertheless, they face challenges from elite immigration pathways such as the Employment Gold Card, which often gives priority to high-income or highly specialized applicants. For those who do not meet these benchmarks, returning to their home country is an unintended outcome, but it is a choice to make.

Legal and Bureaucratic Barriers

Every learner the researchers spoke with pointed to Taiwan's immigration and labor rules as the single most significant barrier to steady work. Graduates commonly struggle to extend their Alien Resident Certificate because the allotted grace period vanishes long before a job offer arrives.

Several participants described the lack of clarity and consistency in post-study work regulations, with some employers unwilling to sponsor work permits due to perceived administrative burdens or unfamiliarity with the process. The P7 said, *"I received a job offer, but the company backed out when they realized they had to apply for a work permit. They said it was too complicated"*

Participants also cited employer unfamiliarity with the foreign hiring process as a structural disincentive. Companies especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were often reluctant to hire international graduates due to the administrative burden of applying for work permits and the fear of non-compliance with complex labor laws. P2 said *"I received a job offer, but the company withdrew after realizing that they had to apply for a work permit. They said, 'Sorry, we've never done this before"*.

Several respondents also encountered language-based administrative hurdles, as forms, online portals, and eligibility criteria were only accessible in Mandarin despite being intended for foreign-educated individuals. This further entrenched systemic exclusion, especially for students from countries without prior Chinese language training. Low-income or less specialized graduates were disproportionately affected by Taiwan's legal categorization of "foreign professionals," which often equates talent with income level or elite technical credentials. P 16 said, *"The Gold Card sounds great, but it's not for people like us. That card is for CEOs or people in the field of artificial intelligence, not for someone with a Master's degree in Education."*

Employment Outcomes and Labor Market Mismatch

Despite holding Taiwanese degrees and, in many cases, Mandarin proficiency, participants reported underemployment and occupational mismatch. Graduates from technical and professional fields such as engineering, healthcare, and business often found themselves working in unrelated sectors, such as retail or hospitality, due to limited access to professional networks and employer biases. P3 said, *"I studied computer science, but I work at a call center. They said my Mandarin wasn't good enough for a tech job."*

This mismatch was particularly pronounced among participants from Southeast Asia, who felt that ethno-national hierarchies influenced hiring decisions, with employers favoring local or Western-educated candidates. Despite the legal and structural constraints that shape the transition experiences of international graduates in Taiwan, many are nonetheless able to secure employment and demonstrate considerable resilience and adaptability in navigating the job market. A notable proportion of these graduates succeed in gaining work opportunities in diverse sectors, particularly in industries such as information technology, digital marketing, e-commerce, language education, and international trade fields that value multicultural competencies, bilingualism, and transnational perspectives.

The employment outcomes of graduates who possess strong Mandarin proficiency, relevant local internships, and degrees in high-demand disciplines are generally more favorable. People often utilize their linguistic skills and educational credentials to integrate effectively into Taiwanese workplaces. Those who participate actively in career development activities at universities, such as alum networks, university-industry linkage programs, and career fairs, regularly attribute their first job acquisition after graduation to these experiences. Labor market mismatches continue to loom over recent graduates, yet a sizable cohort has opted for lateral or emerging disciplines that barely resemble their degrees. Humanitarian and social science alums arriving from abroad, for example, frequently gravitate toward marketing, business development, or cross-border communications, trades where honed intercultural insight rapidly converts to commercial advantage. A different faction has chosen the entrepreneurial route, spinning up micro-firms or freelancing in translation, graphic design, and digital content production, and thus asserting practical agency when formal employers have hesitated.

Employers are beginning to see the importance of hiring international talent, especially in Taiwan-based multi-national companies and start-ups that have a global focus. Such firms usually look for graduates who can fit into different cultures, promote overseas expansion, and add value to

branding globally. These changes hint at an easing process, although it is not happening uniformly across all sectors. Despite encountering systemic and legal challenges, many international graduates in Taiwan exhibit adaptability and resourcefulness in securing employment. For some, their multilingual abilities and cross-cultural competencies provide a competitive edge in sectors that value global engagement. Fields such as digital marketing, technology, international trade, and education have been identified as more open to hiring foreign talent. P7 said, *"I got a job at an e-commerce company. They were looking for someone who understood the Southeast Asian market and could speak Mandarin and English. That was a big advantage for me."*

Systemic challenges undoubtedly exist. The employment experiences of international graduates in Taiwan are not uniformly negative. Instead, they reveal a dynamic process of negotiation, adaptation, and opportunity-seeking, where success often depends on individual initiative, strategic skill acquisition, and the ability to build professional networks within and beyond the university context. These findings point to the importance of targeted support mechanisms that can further enhance positive employment outcomes for international talent in Taiwan's evolving labor market.

Social Integration and Identity Negotiation

Participants described a complex process of identity negotiation as they transitioned from being "students" to "foreign workers." While they felt relatively welcomed within university settings, many experienced social exclusions in the workplace and broader society. Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and racialized perceptions contributed to feelings of marginalization. P12 said, *"As a student, I felt like part of the community. But after graduating, I became just another foreign worker."*

Social integration and identity negotiation are critical dimensions of the post-graduation experience for international students in Taiwan. While many face initial cultural and linguistic barriers in transitioning from academic environments to professional settings, a significant number report a gradual sense of belonging and increased cultural fluency over time. These positive developments are often rooted in meaningful interpersonal relationships, participation in local communities, and active engagement in multicultural spaces. Some graduates, the workplace serves as an important site of integration. Although the transition from being a "student" to a "foreign worker" can be disorienting, especially given shifting social expectations and legal status, it also offers opportunities for self-redefinition and growth. P5 said, *"At first, I felt like an outsider, but over time, I built friendships with my colleagues. Now, they do not just see me as a 'foreigner' they see me as part of the team."*

Language learning continues to play a central role in the negotiation of identity. Graduates who commit to improving their Mandarin after graduation often report stronger social ties and a more profound sense of connection to Taiwanese society. P10 said, *"Even though I can already speak Mandarin, working at a Taiwanese company encourages me to continue improving my language skills. I feel proud when I can speak fluently, it helps me feel more comfortable in the work environment."*

Beyond the workplace, many international graduates actively participate in volunteer work, cultural exchange events, or local NGOs. These engagements foster cross-cultural understanding and allow graduates to contribute meaningfully to their host communities. Several noted that involvement in such activities helped them gain recognition not only as skilled professionals but also as community members. P8 said, *"I volunteer at the local youth center. It's a way to give back and also show people that international students are part of Taiwan's future."*

Language proficiency emerged as a key factor in shaping both employment outcomes and social integration. Figure 2 shows the distribution of language proficiency among participants.
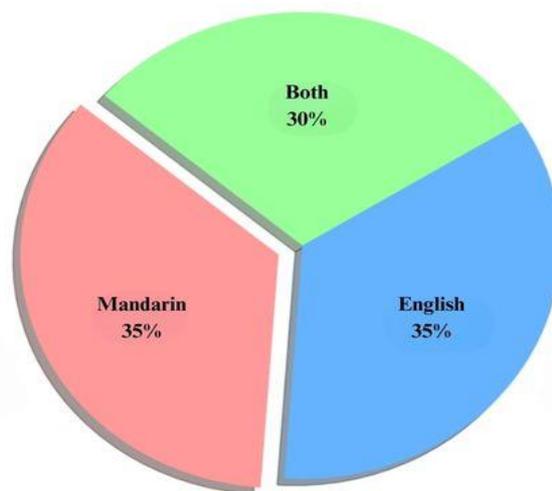
Figure2. Language proficiency among participants

Coping Strategies and Future Aspirations

The challenges of post-graduation transition, international graduates in Taiwan demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resourcefulness. Many adopted pragmatic and forward-looking coping strategies that not only addressed immediate legal or employment concerns but also contributed to their personal and professional development. One common approach involved enrolling in further studies such as a second master's degree, a diploma program, or language certificationnot only to deepen their expertise but also to legally extend their stay and maintain career options. This decision, initially driven by practical concerns, was often reframed as a valuable investment in personal growth. P19 said, *"I decided to pursue a second degree because I realized that I wanted to become more specialized. It's not just about staying longer; it gives me a clearer understanding of my future"*. *"I started a small online business because I couldn't find a job in my field. It's not what I planned, but it gives me some freedom"*. P16 said, *"I started a small online business because I couldn't find a job in my field. It wasn't my plan, but it gave me freedom."*

Entrepreneurship and freelance work emerged as empowering alternatives for those who struggled to find formal employment. While initially pursued out of necessity, these avenues allowed graduates to explore their interests, apply their skills, and build independent careers. In response to these challenges, participants adopted a range of coping strategies. Some pursued further education to extend their legal stay, while others turned to entrepreneurship or informal work. A few participants expressed interest in applying for Taiwan's Employment Gold Card, though most found the eligibility criteria too restrictive.

The findings of this study reveal a complex and often contradictory landscape for international graduates in Taiwan. While Taiwan's higher education system actively recruits students from across Asia under the banner of internationalization and regional cooperation, the transition from student to laborer remains structurally constrained and socially fraught. This part analyzes the results of the study in relation to the pertinent theories alongside the existing scholarship concerning migration, work, and education. Regarding education mobility, migration is a stage often framed as pre-immigrant settlement and employment (de Lange, 2020). However, the participants lived experiences in this research are indicative of the thinner edge of this pathway framework in Taiwan. Even after attaining local degrees and, in many cases, developing Mandarin language skills (Tsai et al., 2022), graduates tend to face legal and bureaucratic barriers that obstruct their pathways into employment (R.-T. Huang, 2023). These findings resonate with patterns where international students are embraced as paying academic participants but rendered invisible as prospective employees (Chen et al., 2022; Gosling & Yang, 2022; Joshi & Ziguras, 2024).

Taiwan has actively pursued the internationalization of its higher education system most notably through initiatives like the New Southbound Policy aimed at recruiting students from across Southeast Asia (Jamil, 2023). However, substantial structural barriers impede their transition into the local labor market. Southeast Asian graduates in Taiwan showed that self-efficacy significantly predicted job-search intentions (Hou et al., 2022), while perceived discrimination continued to undermine these intentions during post-graduation employment pursuits. Post-pandemic employability strategies such as culturally responsive career services and work-integrated learning are being implemented (Lo & Hou, 2020), they often fall short of addressing underlying social and cultural constraints facing international alumni (Xu et al., 2025). This diversification brings new opportunities; however, government interventions to ease work permit access only partially uplift graduates, meaning many are underemployed or funneled into positions unrelated to their qualifications (R.-T. Huang, 2023). Collectively, these findings underscore that Taiwan's internationalization policies rely heavily on higher education mobility, yet the structural and social frameworks for post-graduation labor inclusion remain underdeveloped and socially contested.

The labor market has distinct segments, which can be seen from the employment outcomes of participants. Precarious or unrelated work is where international graduates often end up. This is particularly the case for IT and law, where structural barriers such as licensing filters, language requirements, and employer bias function as barriers to entry (Chan & Chen, 2024; Muthuswamy & Varshika, 2023). Ethnonational hierarchies such as the perception of Southeast Asian graduates as less astringent than their Western or East Asian counterparts expose more profound dynamics of labor hierarchies (Fang-Yu & Jung-Cheng, 2020). Such evidence supports existing literature on racialized labor markets and Taiwan's dual-track migration regime (Kwak & Wang, 2022).

The stories shared by participants indicate a clear change of self as they transition from being 'international students' to 'foreign workers. While it has been noted that universities tend to act as nurturing and welcoming environments (Y. Peng, 2020), the greater socioeconomic and workforce context imposes new restrictive boundaries (Svistunov et al., 2022). This transition is often accompanied by experiences of discrimination, invisibility, and cultural dissonance particularly among students from the Global South (Tsou, 2023). Postcolonial theory helps unpack how these encounters are shaped not only by migration policies but also by deeper historical and racialized hierarchies embedded in Taiwanese society (de Lange, 2020; Gosling & Yang, 2022).

Although policies such as the Employment Gold Card and post-study work permit aim to attract and retain international talent, the findings suggest a disconnect between policy design and the lived realities of graduates (W. Lin & Chan, 2024). These schemes often prioritize high-income earners or those with elite credentials, excluding many well-integrated students who fall outside such metrics (Mohammed, 2024; Rich et al., 2022). A more inclusive approach would involve reducing bureaucratic complexity, educating employers about international talent, and recognizing diverse forms of capital linguistic, cultural, and educational that international graduates bring (Jackson et al., 2025; Mossop & Lymn, 2021).

This research calls for a rethinking of the migration-education nexus in Taiwan. International students should not be viewed solely through an economic or temporary lens. graduates who participate in international education programs improve their cultural intelligence, global competence, and ability to appreciate diversity (Chinchanachokchai et al., 2025). It is necessary for both policymakers and educational institutions to consider them as future assets to Taiwan's society and economy. As noted by H. Li & Horta (2024), such changes will necessitate considerable legal restructuring, as well as alterations in the appreciation of the placing of foreign-educated persons within the employment market.

CONCLUSION

The findings also highlight how the socioeconomic structure of ethnonational strata and peripheral colonization affects socio-labor relations, further disadvantaging Southeast Asian and South Asian students. Therefore, Taiwan should redefine its policies on education and migration to

accommodate international talents more inclusively and sustainably. The changes include enhancing the post-study work scheme, increasing stakeholder engagement, and encouraging social attitudes that see graduates as critical assets who bring international diversity. Consequently, future research may examine longitudinal tracking of graduates and policy evaluation from various countries as well as across stakeholders such as employers and policy leaders. In this sense, addressing these structural problems is crucial for realizing Taiwan's internationalization agenda as it positions itself as an international educational hub in the region.

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