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## **The Role of Unplanned Encounters and Complexity of Influences in Foreign Graduates' First Full-Time Job Search in Singapore**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Singapore is host to an increasing number of foreign tertiary students, who also intend to work there upon graduating to serve a bond and/or for better career prospects. According to Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC), an individual's career decision making and choices are not systematic, but are subject to change. Using twenty-six interviews with foreign graduates, this paper aimed to understand the role of unplanned events and complexity of influences accounted for in CTC in their first full-time job search in Singapore – an area that has hitherto lacked research attention. Findings indicated their job search decision-making and choices are not methodical, but are subject to change depending on how they perceive and respond to unplanned encounters and influences.*

**Keywords:** job search, foreign graduates, Chaos Theory of Careers, unplanned encounters, complexity of influences

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Today studying overseas, such as in Singapore, has increasingly become a popular option among many tertiary students for better education and career prospects. For instance, in Singapore, in 2012 it was estimated that out of an approximate total of 84,000 international students, 68% (57,120) were enrolled in tertiary institutions—an increase from the 48,623 students enrolled in 2010 (Lim, 2012, para. 4; UIS as cited in Min, Khoon, & Tan,

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2012, p. 122). Part of this attraction could be due to the pro-active stance taken by the Singapore Government to corporatize universities, namely the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) (see Collins, Sidhu, Lewis, & Yeoh, 2014). This move provided these universities greater flexibility to develop a unique educational experience, compete with the global education market, and collaborate with elite foreign universities (Collins et al., 2014; MOE, 2005). Since then they have also offered a wider range of educational options and have continuously maintained rigorous educational standards as evident through their growing rankings in the world university rankings lists (see Topuniversities, 2015).

Another significant reason that attracts foreign students to Singapore could be the Tuition Grant (TG) scheme introduced by the government to attract potential foreign talents to Singapore (see “Summary of FAQs,” n.d.). This covers approximately 75%–80% of full course fees (borne out by the government) which makes Singapore institutions highly attractive to foreign students; although they still pay higher fees than Singaporeans (see MOE, 2011; Waring, 2014, p. 878). In return, foreign recipients of the TG are obligated to work for a Singapore-based company for three years following their studies, thus assuming the contribution of manpower, knowledge and skills in the long-term for Singapore’s economy and society.

While host countries such as Singapore may openly welcome foreign students to stay on and eventually contribute to the workforce, it is crucial to understand how these students perceive and respond to factors affecting their full-time job search. This is because seeking a full-time job, especially for the first time, in the study destination country, in this case in Singapore, can increasingly become a complex situation with today’s unpredictable and fast changing realities in the working world (Pryor & Bright, 2011). For instance, globalization, labor market and reshaping of organizations as identified by Pryor and Bright (2011) as some of the “new realities” (p. 3) of the 21st century make our world less predictable and unstable than ever. Such changes could also result in continuous (employment) policy changes to remain relevant throughout uncertainty. Such policy changes could significantly affect foreign graduates’ decision-making, job search expectations and eventually their career paths (Collins et al., 2014; Sidhu, 2011).

Despite the need, not many studies have focused on foreign graduates’ full-time job search experiences. Scant research is available on the final stages of their studies and transition from student to work-role.

However, they are mainly focused on major players of the international education market such as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia (Arthur & Flynn, 2011, 2012; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014; Puntney, 2016; Shen & Herr, 2004). In particular, experiences of foreign graduates' transition to work life (Collins et al., 2014; Min et al., 2012; Sidhu, 2011), especially their full-time job search in Singapore are still largely unexplored. Hence, how they perceive and respond to factors affecting the job search, such as unplanned events and complexity of influences, are also unknown.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore the role of unplanned encounters and other influences on foreign graduates' *first, full-time* job search experiences in *Singapore*. Job search in this study refers to the period ranging from the start of the search to job commencement. To achieve this objective, the main research questions that guide this paper are: What are the unplanned encounters and influences that affect a foreign graduate's first full-time job search in Singapore? How do foreign graduates perceive and respond to these encounters? Although a career related theoretical framework is useful for this purpose (Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, & Earl, 2005b), in the prevailing literature, foreign graduates' study to work-role transition experiences have rarely been related to any such theory. This study attempts to use Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC), which places "interconnection, change, and chance at its heart" (Pryor & Bright, 2011, p. 12), to better understand foreign graduates' job search experience. The findings of this paper are significant mainly because it would contribute (a) to the dearth of research available on foreign graduates' first ever *full-time job search* experience in *Singapore's* context; and (b) to the lack of theoretical attention received in understanding how foreign graduates perceive and respond to unplanned encounters and complexity of influences affecting their job search. The study also provides useful recommendations for future research in the field.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Decision To Work in the Study Destination Country

Upon study completion, while some foreign graduates intend to immediately return home or migrate elsewhere, a significant proportion has also shown interest in remaining in the host country and entering the workforce as a full-time employee (Arthur & Flynn, 2011, 2012; Shen & Herr, 2004). However, the decision to remain and work in the study

destination country usually depends on factors such as, enhanced quality of life and work environment, better job prospects, safety, and influence of formal and informal relationships (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Dyer & Lu, 2010; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014; Punteney, 2016; Shen & Herr, 2004).

Regardless, tertiary foreign graduates in Singapore who have signed-up for the TG bond (mentioned earlier) are *obliged* to work in a Singapore-based company for 3 years upon graduation, unless they are able to defer the bond and pay “liquidated damages (LD)” (“Summary FAQs,” n.d., p. 13). If unpaid, bond defaulters face “serious adverse consequences” (CNA, 2016, para. 3) although it is unknown what could these be. Therefore, this could become an added challenge for TG-bonded foreign graduates seeking jobs in Singapore. This is because the bond restricts them from choosing to opt in to travel elsewhere if the job search is prolonged or if they are unable to secure a *relevant* job. Thus, there is a need for more research on this topic in Singapore’s context.

### **Unplanned Encounters and the Complexity of Influences**

In this study, to understand job search experiences of foreign graduates’ in Singapore, the CTC framework conceptualized by Pryor and Bright (2003, 2007) is used. CTC has been used as a modern approach to understanding career development, including decision-making and career related behavior of individuals (Pryor & Bright, 2003, 2011). It enables to adequately incorporate “complexity of influences, change [and] chance events” (Pryor & Bright, 2011, p. 67) especially in a world where we are always subject to various circumstances that are bound to change (Bright & Pryor, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2011). As opposed to traditional career theories that assume careers as “fit” and people’s career decision making as systematic and methodical (e.g. Holland, 1997; Parsons as cited in Pryor & Bright, 2011, p. 5) the CTC argues otherwise. According to CTC, decision-making and choices related to careers are subject to chance encounters and complexity of influences, and thus they are not systematic or fixed (Bright & Pryor, 2005; Hirschi, 2010; Pryor & Bright, 2011; Rice, 2014).

Chance events, also termed as “happenstance” (Miller, 1983) or “serendipitous” (Betsworth & Hansen, 1996) events are defined as unplanned or unpredictable encounters that could affect an individual’s career decision-making and choices to different degrees (Betsworth & Hansen, 1996, p. 92; Rice, 2014, p. 445; see also Bright et al., 2005b; Pryor & Bright, 2007). According to Betsworth and Hansen (1996) chance events (referred to as *unplanned encounters/events* in this paper) may require quick

decision making and sometimes quick shifts in the decision-making process. Examples of some unplanned encounters include career promotions, unexpected offers through relationships or prior work experiences, and obstacles in career paths (Betsworth & Hansen, 1996; Rice, 2014). Furthermore, unpredicted employment policy changes, supportive or otherwise, could also affect a graduate's job related decision-making, expectations and choices (Collins et al., 2014; Dyer & Lu, 2010; Waring, 2014; Yeoh & Lin, 2012).

According to CTC, career decision making and choices are also subject to complexity of influences (Bright et al., 2005b; Bright & Pryor, 2005; Lent et al., 2002). Pryor and Bright (2011, p. 71) state that these influences range from "personal environmental influences" such as relationships and unplanned encounters with friends, family, supervisors, and colleagues to "structural influences" such as, financial stability, educational factors, and support structures (see also Bright et al., 2005b; Lent et al., 2002; Patton & McMohan, 1999). For instance, for some foreign graduates, the influence of relationships with supervisors or mentors developed through the involvement in academic departments and/or internships, have "literally changed the course of their careers" (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014, p. 130). These people have provided help to foreign graduates in the areas of career choice advice, introductions to external networks, or permanent job offers (Arthur & Flynn, 2012; Dyer & Lu, 2010; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014). Moreover, Bright et al. (2005b) also found that relationship influences on career decision-making and choices have a dynamic and changing nature.

Despite significance, to date, scarce research is available on understanding how chance events and complexity of influences accounted for in CTC could affect a graduate's job search related decision-making and choices (e.g. Bright et al., 2005b). Existing research have mostly focused on whether chance events affect career decision-making (Betsworth & Hanesen, 1996; Bright, Pryor, & Harpham, 2005a; Hirschi, 2010). Additionally, Bright et al., (2005a) found that locus of control seems to influence how unplanned encounters are perceived during career decision making. According to them, individuals with external locus of control (i.e. attributing events to out of their control) perceive unplanned encounters to play a more influential role in career decision making than those with internal locus of control (i.e. attributing events to within their control). Nevertheless, Bright et al. (2005b, p. 32) suggest the need for more "closer research attention" using modern career-related theories to understand the impact of unplanned events and influences on graduates' job search related

decision making. Therefore, this paper intends to understand how *foreign* graduates perceive and respond to unplanned events and complexity of influences during their first full-time job search in Singapore.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

We adapted a qualitative research design to explore the aims of this study. According to Pflegerl (2003) a qualitative research method helps to keep “the ‘funnel of perception’ somewhat open in order to get unexpected and useful information” (p. 133). Moreover, the aforementioned method is appropriate given the “exploratory nature of the study” based on students’ personal “perspectives and interpretations” (Austin & Shen, 2016; p. 729). It also provides the ability to critically analyze ever changing social phenomena based on reality and circumstances (Pflegerl, 2003).

### **Participants’ Profile**

The population for this study involved Sri Lankan (SL) students who first came to Singapore in 2005 or afterwards for their full-time tertiary education ending in polytechnic diploma, university degree or masters. In this study, we included only one nationality to minimize complexities (e.g. country biases) that could arise from different nationality backgrounds. In total, thirteen males and thirteen females participated in this study. Study participation revealed their ages to range from 20–32. Among them, five were married, two were in relationships, and six were single. The relationship statuses of the remaining were unknown to us. Twenty-one participants entered Singapore as polytechnic students, although five of them continued to pursue their degree in a university *before* working full-time. Five more students entered Singapore as university students (i.e. two for degree, three for masters). Study programs of students ranged from engineering-related programs (15), IT (4), environmental science (1), communication (2), international relations (2), finance (1), to facility management (1). The Cumulative Grade Point Average of the latest educational qualification obtained prior to their first full-time job commencement in Singapore was revealed to be at least 3 out of 4 (polytechnic) or 3 out of 5 (university). Participants’ full-time work experience ranged from 1 to 6 years at the time of interviews conducted in 2015.

## **Recruitment Process**

Prior to the research recruitment process, we obtained ethical clearance from the Internal Review Board (IRB) in NTU, Singapore. Afterwards, we recruited participants based on a set of criteria (Dyer & Lu, 2010; Kwadzo, 2014) to ensure relevant sources of information (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) were obtained. The criteria were as follows: SL students who *initially* came to Singapore on a valid Student's Pass for *full-time studies*, and upon successful study completion gained at least *1 year* of consecutive *full-time* work experience in Singapore. All participants had to be currently living in Singapore too. We excluded Student's Pass holders from our study given that they do not have full-time work experience in Singapore.

Similar to other qualitative studies (Dyer & Lu, 2010; Kwadzo, 2014), we used the snowball sampling method (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141) to approach participants who met the selection criteria. The first author knew four participants, and each participant helped to identify and refer to subsequent participants until we obtained a desirable sample size. We also communicated the aim and rationale of the study and the expected commitment to prospective participants prior to their participation. It was also emphasized to them that their participation is voluntary and that their anonymity is guaranteed throughout the research. Overall, 26 out of 30 prospective participants agreed to participate. Prior to each interview the participants' consent was obtained.

## **Interview Procedure**

A thematic outline of semi-structured interview questions intended to explore graduates' job-search experience in Singapore was developed *as a guide* by reviewing the literature (Dyer & Lu, 2010, p. 25). Questions were supposed to elicit information about graduates' perspectives, "lived experiences" and "responses" (Li, 2016, p. 745) related to the study's focus. Some examples of 'job search' related questions inquired from participants are as follows: *What were your experiences seeking a full-time job in Singapore after completing studies? What were you looking for in your first job? What factors or influences did you consider when accepting your first job offer? What were the opportunities/challenges you perceive as central to your job search?* These questions "enable(d) the interviewed persons to give comprehensive answers" as opposed to close-ended questions that rarely demands "further explanations" (Pflegerl, 2003, p. 156).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

We conducted all interviews at a convenient time and location for both the participant and the first author. Each face-to-face interview, conducted in English, lasted approximately 60-90 min. Later, the first author transcribed all interviews in order to protect the privacy of interviewees. Subsequently, we sent each edited transcript to the respective participant for accuracy checks (Dyer & Lu, 2010).

To code and categorize data, and subsequently identify different themes and subthemes, we used frequency analysis and constant comparison methods elaborated by previous studies (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In doing so, we first read each transcript several times (Dyer & Lu, 2010) to code data and sort into categories (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Puntaney, 2016) while keeping the research questions in mind. To enhance accuracy and minimize coding and categorizing errors or misinterpretations, each data item was given “equal attention” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 18) by re-reading each line of the transcript at least twice. After separately coding each transcript, we conducted comparisons across all transcripts to find similarities, differences, overlapping categories and trends. Examples of some categories generated from the transcripts include “parental influence”, “visa-status”, “unplanned encounters”, “study qualification” and “financial barriers”.

After coding, the categories were analyzed and sorted into broader themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dyer & Lu, 2010) and were compared across all transcripts. During this process, we followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) suggestions for thematic analysis. Based on suggestions by Flick (2006) as well as Denzin and Lincoln (1994) for validation and credibility purposes the themes identified in the study were discussed with participants for clarifications. Subsequently, we also compared them with the existing literature for theoretical generalizations (Dyer & Lu, 2010). However, given that the study only included Sri Lankans, the findings may not be *completely* generalized to all foreign graduates. Nonetheless, validation and comparison of findings with the existing literature do provide *some* generalizations and valid insights into job search experiences of SL graduates in Singapore.

## RESULTS

### Unexpected Encounters Related to Employment Policies and Visas

In the sample group, eighteen graduates (69%) were successful in securing a job while still on their student visa in less than three months after completing their studies. Among them seven graduates, who completed studies in 2008/2009, received the Permanent Resident Invitation Letter (PRIL) from the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) in Singapore during their final semester. They secured a job within 1.5 months or less following study completion. The issuance of the PRIL was an unexpected encounter for all seven graduates who strongly believed that it facilitated their job search greatly, as remembered by one graduate:

*“I found a job I like within a month. I think the PR invitation eased my job search because it indicates to the employer I can apply for PR upon a job offer, unlike now. That letter gave me more options during my decision making.”*

With the same hope, another graduate who completed studies in 2013 had inquired about the PRIL from her educational institution: “They told me the ICA no longer issue it since late-2009 or so”. In fact, the letter seemed to have been issued to selected students “at ICA’s discretion and the reasons for non-issuance [to others are] not divulged” (NTU, 2007). This could also be a reason why the aforementioned student believed there was “no public statement about the termination of issuing the letter.”

The eight graduates who were unable to secure a job prior to expiration of their student visa were *diploma* holders, who graduated after 2010. All of them believed that tightened employment policies for foreigners in Singapore affected their job search unexpectedly. For instance, the Singapore government increased minimum salary requirements for foreign work-pass eligibility between 2011 and 2013 (MOM, 2011). As a result, for S-Pass the minimum salary requirement increased from SGD 1,800 to SGD 2,000 to SGD 2,200, and for E-Pass it increased from SGD 2,500 to SGD 2,800 to SGD 3,300 in 2011 and 2013, respectively (MOM, 2011; “Tightening employment,” 2013). From December 2011 onwards, the government also abolished issuing the Employment Pass Eligibility Certificate (EPEC), which was supposed to facilitate the job search of a foreigner (“Employment Pass,” n.d., para. 2; Sandbox, 2015, para. 2; Waring, 2014, p. 881). These eight graduates’ job search varied between 3 months to 1 year, with the two most recent graduates, who graduated in

2013 having the most difficult time in securing a job. One IT diploma holder graduated in 2013 remembered,

*“After my Student Pass expired, I had to apply for the Short-Term (3-months validity) and subsequently the Long-Term Visit Pass too (1-year validity). It became harder to find a job while holding on to a Visit Pass because firstly it does not differentiate between us and other foreigners [without Singapore educational background]. We were prohibited to do part-time work too. Secondly, the employment policies became stricter since we came to Singapore so unexpectedly, that we were not prepared for those changes. Therefore, it was very tough.”*

Four out of 26 graduates in this study had encountered unexpected Work Pass rejections, upon securing a full-time job offer, for unknown reasons. They expressed that this resulted in dismay as they had to either re-apply or repeat the whole job search process resulting in delayed job commencement. Among them, one graduate’s job offer had met the stipulated salary conditions in line with his visa, and yet he was rejected. Although the other three had received offers slightly below the stipulated salary, their friends with same salaries managed to obtain the work passes. Hence, they expressed confusion over work pass application rejections. One diploma graduate stated,

*“Although I was offered a job, my S-Pass was rejected the first time, and I did not know the reason. Then the company re-applied, but I had to stay at home for more than a month. I was very upset and stressed.”*

### **Unexpected Job Offers**

In this study sample, four graduates received unexpected full-time job offers in the same organization upon completion of their internship. Among them was a polytechnic graduate who completed her studies in 2011. She said her fellow SL graduates had difficulties in finding jobs during that period due to tightened employment and visa policies. Likewise, another polytechnic graduate from a mass communication background was elated with the job offer because, “It was difficult for foreign graduates to find relevant jobs in my study specialization. So, I immediately accepted the offer. I did not have to go through any interviews or job search hassle!” The unexpected job offers enabled both of the aforementioned graduates to

effectively bypass the usual job search process. However, the remaining two polytechnic graduates from engineering and IT backgrounds, who also possessed the PRIL, rejected their job offers because they did not like the job scope. Moreover, they were *confident* in securing better jobs because not only did they feel the PRIL would ease the job search, but they also believed there was less competition in their specific fields. In fact, according to MOE (2011) too, jobs in engineering and IT areas seem to be less popular among Singaporeans, resulting in less competition for foreign graduates.

Study related part-time work also influenced a few graduates' job search positively. One diploma holder graduated in 2013 recalled,

*“The full-time position offered by my part-time company was so unexpected! I did not think twice to accept it because I was already jobless for three months. It is not easy to find a relevant job with changing and tightening employment policies. Also, most employers look for PRs or citizens.”*

Another master's graduate from International Relations also managed to secure a full-time position at his part-time work place. Although he completed studies in 2012, he encountered challenges in searching for a *relevant* job, which he believed was due to a lack of opportunities and a tight competition with locals. Thus, he had decided to continue to work as a part-timer in the same organization until his student visa expires. He said, “Fortunately, before the Visa expired, I was offered a full-time position. That was totally unexpected and thankfully it was not difficult to get the Employment Pass approved!”

Additionally, unexpected encounters with lecturers or supervisors within the academic field, friends, or strangers also seem to have resulted in job offers. Six graduates managed to secure jobs through such relationship encounters. Among them four were polytechnic graduates who completed studies after 2011 and were jobless for 4 to 6 months. They believed unexpectedly tightened employment and visa policies (since 2011) coupled with most employers looking for Singaporeans and PRs resulted in an unfavorable job market for them. Thus, they expressed the quick decision made to accept any job offer without considering their interests or benefits. Although the remaining two (i.e., a diploma holder and a master's graduate) graduated with engineering qualifications in 2009, they too had difficulties in securing a job offer due to the financial crisis. The polytechnic graduate said “it was difficult to be too picky” and thus accepted the job offer.

## **Personal Environmental Influences Affecting Decision-Making and Choices**

Relationships seemed to have influenced ten graduates' job search related decision-making and choices to different extents. Among them two university and two polytechnic graduates felt responsible in financially helping their retired parents and/or siblings. Thus, they were more flexible with their job search expectations and accepted any job offer that materialized. However, one university graduate said, "I looked for a better paying job so I can support my parents and pay back my loan simultaneously." In addition, unlike university graduates, five *polytechnic* graduates sought opinions from parents, friends or partners, whenever they were unsure of their job preferences. Interestingly however, the longer the job search became the relationships became mentally exhausting for seven diploma holders. This led them to apply for any job regardless of relevance or interest. One diploma graduate, who was jobless for almost a year, explained,

*"I was very depressed. My parents kept asking how come I do not have a job when everyone else has. I felt so helpless. I did not answer their calls most of the time and avoided my friends too. I badly needed a job so I applied anyhow."*

## **Structural Influences Affecting Decision-Making and Choices**

Initially, almost all graduates in this study had expectations of securing a job that was of their interest and relevance, and therefore applied to jobs related to their study specializations in the field. Nevertheless, an "urgency" to secure a job was also common to all graduates, from structural influences such as TG obligations (mentioned earlier) and financial barriers (e.g. loan and rental payments). In addition, relationship influences also affected some graduates' decision to find a job as soon as possible. These reasons coupled with educational qualifications and specializations as well as Singapore's job market conditions resulted in varied job search expectations and choices across graduates in this study.

In this study, all the fifteen engineering graduates (eight university graduates; seven polytechnic graduates) secured jobs related to engineering, although not always in their specialized areas. For instance, one graduate mentioned, "Industry jobs in aerospace engineering were open for PRs and Singaporeans. I just applied and tried my luck although I was a foreigner. I did not get any offer." Out of the four graduates who specialized in

aerospace engineering, the three diploma holders applied to *related* industrial jobs, but were unsuccessful. Instead, they found engineering jobs in non-specialized areas. The degree holder, however, succeeded in acquiring a research job in aerospace engineering. Even if employment policies were tightened, all of the aforementioned (eight) university graduates only applied to engineering jobs; that also sought “degree or equivalent” qualifications. Overall, out of the 15 graduates mentioned above, 12 (i.e. eight university and four polytechnic graduates) secured engineering related jobs in less than three months. The remaining three diploma holders, who completed studies in 2010 or after, found engineering related jobs within 3 to 4 months.

A master’s graduate from international relations said: “I was okay with any job because it is difficult to be selective in my narrow specialization. I am a foreigner too. My main aim was to find an income in Singapore to overcome financial obstacles.” Thus, he accepted the first job offer that materialized, although it was irrelevant to his qualification. Nevertheless, all the university graduates, *irrespective* of the *study field*, were able to secure full-time jobs while their student visas were valid. A majority of them (seven out of 10) also considered interests, salaries and other benefits in their job search.

In comparison, the “diploma” qualification coupled with the “urgency” to find an income, obtain a visa. and consider employment policies, led *polytechnic* graduates to have lower job expectations. For instance, all of the sixteen diploma holders (this excludes the five polytechnic graduates who continued to pursue a higher degree prior to working full-time) *initially* applied for jobs in specialized areas in their fields. Eight of them (six engineering; one facility management; one finance) were determined to find a job in a *related* field, although they may not be in their specialization. However, with increased delay in securing a job, the remaining eight polytechnic graduates accepted the first job offer that materialized regardless of job relevance too. Moreover, unlike university graduates, all the diploma holders were not picky on their specializations, salaries and benefits. One graduate remembered:

*“Initially I applied only to a specific company. I did not care about the salary. After a few months I realized it is hard to get selected to a job of my preference. So I just started applying to any job, regardless of relevance because I had financial issues too.”*

Interestingly, a majority of these diploma holders (12 out of 16) also applied to jobs in their field seeking “degree” level qualifications. They

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believed that doing so might increase their chances of being selected because they were comparatively “less expensive” than a degree holder. Three out of twelve secured such jobs that asked for degree qualifications, but paid diploma level salaries. In addition, the longer the job search became, five (out of 16) diploma holders also widened their job searches to include jobs for which they were over-qualified (and sometimes irrelevant too). In doing so, they applied for jobs requiring only Ordinary Level (O/L) examination qualifications in the belief that employers might hire them for a salary “lower than a diploma holder” because they have more knowledge and skills than an O/L holder. Additionally, some also applied to unrelated (low-skilled) jobs believing it would increase their success rate of gaining *any* job. One polytechnic graduate mentioned that “out of a total of 1,528 job applications” she sent out, “50–60 and 20–30 applications were for jobs [she] was over- and under-qualified, respectively.” She had also applied for “administrative positions and even for jobs at movie theatres” although she graduated with an IT diploma. The collective responses of the graduates who encountered difficulties in acquiring a job raised similar concerns as this graduate:

*“The government should address this. If they are signing the (TG) bond with us then there should be a way to give us an opportunity to find a job, when we are willing to commit. But, they keep changing policies, and the employers look for PRs and locals, which makes it harder for us.”*

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Unplanned Encounters and the Complexity of Influences**

In congruence with the CTC framework and related studies (Betsworth & Hansen, 1996; Bright et al., 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2003, 2007; Rice, 2014), the findings of this study indicated that foreign graduates’ job search experiences such as decision-making, job search expectations and choices could be subject to unplanned encounters and influences. Similar to Bright et al.’s (2005a) findings, in this study too, *multiple* unplanned encounters coupled with a range of influences affected some graduates’ job search related decisions and choices. Unplanned encounters revealed in this study include unexpected employment and visa policy changes (e.g., termination of EPEC, issuance of PR Invitation Letters, tightened work-pass eligibility criteria) and unexpected job offers through part-time work, internships or random meet-ups with persons. Influences

ranged from structural influences such as financial stability, educational qualifications and specializations, visa statuses, and job market conditions to personal environmental influences such as relationships.

In this study, for almost all the *university* graduates from *engineering* backgrounds, structural influences such as educational qualifications and study specializations were more influential in decision-making and choices than unplanned encounters. All of them secured jobs in the engineering field within 3 months, even in 2013, unlike the polytechnic graduates with the exception of one, graduated during the financial crisis. The remaining seven university graduates from engineering showed more confidence in their “qualifications” and “study field” resulting in having higher expectations about their job search. Unlike diploma holders, these university graduates were more rational thinking in their job search related decisions. Therefore, unexpected encounters were less influential to university graduates from engineering fields. They did not change their job search expectations despite policy regulations and/or other unplanned circumstances. However, non-engineering graduates in this study, regardless of the study qualification, placed different levels of significance on multiple unplanned encounters and complexity of influences accounted for in CTC during decision making and choices.

In general, this study revealed that the perceived significance of unplanned events and complexity of influences had a changing nature in graduates’ decision-making and choices. For instance, similar to Bright et al.’s (2005b) findings, in this study too, influence of relationships accounted for in CTC had a dynamic and changing nature, and this affected graduates’ decision-making and choices. For instance, bachelor and master’s graduates, unlike diploma holders, did not seek family members’ opinions on their job search related matters. Likewise, the longer it took to secure a job, relationship influences exacerbated stress for some graduates in this study, thus resulting in quick shifts in decision-making and choices. Findings of this study are also in good congruence with Dyer and Lu’s (2010) findings that PR status facilitate a foreign graduate’s job search. In fact, most graduates perceived the PR status to be of significance in facilitating their job search in Singapore. Hence, all the seven graduates who received the unexpected PRIL responded to it positively. Furthermore, they were able to find relevant jobs within 1.5 months upon study completion. Likewise, similar to Arthur and Flynn’s (2012) findings, unexpected job offers were mostly welcomed by graduates in this study because they believed sudden policy changes and narrow specializations would otherwise further delay their job searches. Similarly, sudden and random encounters with people

(Bright et al., 2005a; Lent et al., 2002; Pryor & Bright, 2011) were positively welcomed had they resulted in unexpected job offers.

On the other hand, in this study, graduates who did not receive the PRIL and believed they came from narrow study specializations, exuded less confidence in their “qualifications” and “specializations”. Their “foreign” status and the urgency to find a job further exacerbated their confidence level. Uncertainties in Singapore’s job market, unexpected visa and employment policy changes (Collins et al., 2014; Sidhu, 2011), and unexpected Work Pass rejections were some unplanned encounters that affected the job search of some of these graduates. The more time it took for graduates to secure a job in this study, the more worry (e.g. stress) and difficulties (e.g. increased financial difficulties) they seemed to experience in their job search. Hence, the findings also support Rice’s (2014, p. 455) claim that unplanned events could lead to stress and sometimes depression. Some graduates (eight out of 26) also raised concerns about the TG bond in Singapore that restricted them from migrating to elsewhere for employment or returning to Sri Lanka, when the job hunt became harder than expected – thus emphasizing the research significance in Singapore’s context.

In general, similar to Betsworth and Hansen’s (1996) findings, in this study too, individual circumstances resulted in quick shifts in decision making related to unplanned encounters and complexity of influences. For instance, the longer it took to secure a job, the more tendency graduates showed to change their initial expectations and secure “any” job that materialized and with it, a suitable work pass. In doing so, they did not ruminate whether the job is relevant or commensurate with their qualifications or not, instead they preferred to “play safe”. Furthermore, in congruence with Bright et al.’s (2005a) findings, in this study too, graduates with external locus of control (unlike those with internal locus) perceived unplanned encounters and other challenges accounted for in CTC as more influential in their job search related decision making and choices.

Therefore, the above findings suggest that foreign graduates’ job search related decision making and choices are not systematic. In fact, these are bound to change, as claimed in CTC (Bright & Pryor, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2011), depending on how they perceive the significance and subsequently respond to multiple unplanned encounters and complexity of influences experienced during their job search. Thus, the findings contribute to the lack of research available (Bright et al., 2005b) on understanding the role of unplanned events and complexity influences in a foreign graduate’s job search related decision-making, expectations and choices.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study's findings, although not inclusive of all foreign graduates in Singapore, provide some generalizations and insights into policy implications and future research. Unlike in other country-specific studies (Arthur & Flynn, 2011, 2012; Shen & Herr, 2004) 24 (92%) graduates in this study did not have the option to migrate to another preferred country or return home upon study completion. This is because they had to work in a Singapore-based company and serve the 3-year TG bond upon study completion. The findings in particular revealed that this TG bond could become an obstacle for foreign graduates who find it difficult to find a Singapore-based job despite genuine efforts. Such graduates believed the bond restricted them from looking for other alternatives elsewhere, as they were unable to pay liquidated damages and/or feared the consequences of bond default. This, coupled with resorting to acquiring Short- or Long-Term Visit Pass upon student visa expirations increased their difficulties and worries, leading to accepting any job offer that materialized even if it was unrelated. Such cases, contrary to the objectives of the Singapore government could limit graduates' ability to contribute their acquired knowledge, skills and expertise to improve the knowledge-based economy of Singapore. Thus, similar to Arthur and Flynn (2012), the above findings also question the responsibility of the government to ensure that these graduates "receive a fair chance of obtaining sustainable employment" (p. 34). Thus, in line with the conditions of their TG and the government's objectives of retaining foreign talents, it may be necessary to review existing policies pertaining to international students, especially who are recipients of the TG. For instance, the government could take a leaf from the government of New Zealand and look into the introduction of special skilled work visas with fewer restrictions (e.g. allow part-time work until full-time job commencement). This would also differentiate foreign graduates with local qualifications and experiences from other foreigners not equipped with the same.

Although we cannot make direct conclusions based on this study alone, the findings do emphasize a significant need for more research in Singapore's context to better understand foreign graduate's transition to work-life experiences, including their job search, in line with the TG bond. Future research can have more inclusive participation involving students from different nationalities, backgrounds, qualifications and expertise. This allows comparisons that are useful to shed light on the topics being studied. Additionally, more longitudinal research should be conducted to obtain

fresh information about the experiences encountered at different phases and thereby minimize the need for memory recalling (Li, 2016). Future research can also provide voices of employers too, in order to gain a better understanding of problems from an added perspective.

Furthermore, based on this study's findings, CTC's claim that chance events and complexity of influences impact career related decisions and choices seems to be valid for foreign graduate's first full-time job search experience too. Hence, modern career related theoretical framework such as CTC could be incorporated into future research to better understand foreign graduates' job search as well as transition from campus to work-role experiences. This would help to incorporate chance factors and influences adequately in better understanding how graduates deal with multiple complexities and uncertainties in the working world. Findings would then help to better inform and develop career-counselling programs at educational institutions that cater to the unique needs of foreign graduates.

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