

# What are Chinese students' Perspectives on Their Employability Construction Through One-year Postgraduate Study in A UK University?

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**Abstract:** This research conducts an in-depth semi-structured interview with Chinese students who study at a UK university. Even while more students are choosing to study abroad, it is clear that these degrees are no longer as regarded as they once were, and returning students still face the same obstacles in finding employment after graduation. This research is employed to better understand how contemporary graduates define employability and what value they are looking for while studying in the UK in light of the devaluation of an international degree. It starts with employability which consists of 'hard' and 'soft' currencies proposed by Brown and Hesketh (2004) to explore Chinese students' perceptions of employability construction during their one-year master's studies in the UK. It is revealed that overseas qualification does not provide any more 'hard' currencies compared with an equivalent degree in China, as most participants positioned themselves as a 'player' who would like to use 'strategies' to win a competitive advantage during the job-seeking process, students accumulate 'soft' currencies from their UK experience to enhance potential employability. Nevertheless, Chinese students feel that the UK does not provide tailored employment assistance since international students are neglected in the job market. Additionally, graduates are unwilling to participate in workshops that could improve their soft skills since they feel culturally marginalised. It is suggested that students should overcome lethargy and a lack of work awareness, actively engage and utilise the resources offered by the university to improve their soft skills in order to be more competitive for jobs after graduation at a time when international qualifications are no longer a guarantee of employment.

**Keywords:** Employability, Higher education, Chinese student, Overseas study, UK master.

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## 1. Introduction

The transition of graduates from university to employment is the focus of discussions on the dynamic relationship between higher education and the labour market. Higher education institutions are now increasingly seen as a direct contributor to the competitiveness of a country's workforce. However, graduates are having a hard time finding jobs in the talent-oversupply era, especially after the expansion of higher education in China (Mok & Wu, 2015; Zhao & Cox, 2022). Even if more students are opting to study abroad, it is apparent that international degrees are no longer as valued as they once were, and returning students also have the same career challenges (Huang, Turner & Chen, 2014; Tran, Blackmore & Rahimi, 2021). Given the tremendous increase in the number of students who chose to study abroad and the over-supply of talents and unemployed returnees, a research gap has shown his uneven phenomenon. At a time when higher education does not guarantee employment and overseas qualifications are losing their value, the purpose of this research is to investigate how Chinese students perceive their UK studies in their employability enhancement, including how they define contemporary employability, how they position themselves in a job-seeking process and what they like about the UK that will improve their employability.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter is going to review the developing debates on the definition of employability in the changing social context, how graduates perceive the role of overseas experience in building up their employability, and the support of British University to students' future career development.

### 2.1. Conceptual Framing of Employability

Different arguments on the concept of employability will be explored since the goal of this research is to determine whether the overabundance of talent has produced an alternative definition of employability in the eye of Chinese students who study in the UK, and how students perceive and react to facing with this changing concept.

The meaning of employability has been developed and contested over time and is subject to many conceptualizations, significantly illustrating the changing nature of employment (Harvey, 2001), the composition of the labour market (Brown, 2003), and its connection to higher education (Nedeva, 2010). The original impression of being employable was commonly defined as the ability to obtain employment, maintain employment, and acquire alternative employment if necessary (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Three components of employability were suggested by Holmes (2013): possessive, positional, and processual. Possessive dominates the discourse on practice and policy and is founded on ideas of abilities and traits. According to Harvey (2001), a strong priority is placed on graduates' employability, it is also acknowledged that graduates with a higher education credential are expected to contribute to regional and national economic growth. This viewpoint contends that school experiences emphasising characteristics and skill development can increase employability. Since neoliberalism which refers to the preservation of a capitalist system of free competition has taken hold, becoming a resurgent form of economic liberalism, thus British policy discourse has prioritised higher education's economic function and emphasised 'market individualism' above the employment

roles of organisations like trade unions and businesses that offer lifetime employment (Brown & Lauder, 2006). In accordance with Becker (1964), who takes a different angle on the human capital theory, education and access to employment, as well as personal economic growth, have a linearly positive connection. Higher education was placed in the central role of boosting human capital as the knowledge and skills obtained are positively correlated with greater rewards in the labour market. According to this perspective, human capital theory links education to a higher propensity for employability (Schultz, 1961).

The skill model is critiqued, nevertheless, for assuming a straightforward linear link between education and employment (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Many academics contend that the human capital hypothesis ignores other elements that may affect employability but are unrelated to personal aptitudes, such as economic position and labour market competition (Brown et al., 2002). Treating employability as a singular measure ignores the influence of sociocultural elements like gender, race, and socioeconomic class on employability and its development, which obscures the interaction between these sociocultural elements and employability throughout the job search process (Gracia, 2009), making issues of inequalities invisible (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Besides, higher education graduates are placed in an exclusive 'utilitarian manner' (Tomlinson, 2011) and 'possessive instrumentalism' (Holmes, 2001). The outcome of focusing just on supply-side employability has raised concerns since it poses challenges to academic freedom. The skills agenda out of political and business thinking to underpin national competitiveness has come under fire for reflecting a limited understanding of educational objectives and posing a danger to academic freedom (Morley, 2001; Gracia, 2009).

An alternative definition of being employable may be necessary for light of the rising problem of underemployment and unemployment (Li, Morgan, & Ding, 2008), which shows that a greater degree that education does not automatically guarantee a better job. Later, through the research of UK graduates in the study of Brown and Hesketh (2004), they first introduced the idea of employability, which they think should be founded on a surplus of talent. Furthermore, it is pointed out that employability is constructed from two aspects: 'hard currencies' and 'soft currencies', where 'hard' ones refer to the qualification and 'soft' ones that come with foreign experience. It is increasingly accepted that employment is not a sole procedure of supply-side or demand-side, Tomlinson (2007) has stressed the importance of comprehending how internal and external factors interact to determine a person's capacity to function successfully in the job market. The second approach suggested by Holmes (2013) is the positional approach, which emphasized that graduate skills are significantly linked to social positioning issues. This is also consistent with the findings of Brown and Hesketh (2004), who challenged the notion that employability is solely a 'supply-side' issue defined in the absolute term of skills consisting of individual skills and characteristics. Their research focused on how the UK's young generation competes in the job-seeking process in a highly competitive labour market. Instead, they proposed 'positional conflict theory', which recasts employability as the 'relative likelihood of obtaining and retaining certain types of work' (2004, p. 25). For professional and management positions, there were particularly fewer openings than applicants due to the

massification of higher education. A person's employability also depends on where they stand in a hierarchy of job seekers, claimed Brown and Hesketh (2004).

Holmes (2001) underlines the processual perspective of employability, which put a strong emphasis on the curriculum and other types of intervention to improve graduates' employability. Graduates' employability goes beyond their resume and credentials to include their attitudes and effective job-market strategies (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Tomlinson, 2007). When it comes to how people position themselves in the labour market, Brown and Hesketh (2004) identify two ideal sorts of job-seekers: 'players' and 'purists'. 'Purists' contend that only applicants' knowledge and academic achievements should be taken into consideration. For purists, the hiring process meant seeking the best fit between their qualifications and the requirements listed by a company. However, because they view employability as a 'positional game', 'players' choose self-promotion in order to develop an employable persona (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). To increase their chances of success, they approach the hiring process as more than a 'meritocratic' competition by learning the game's rules and criteria from prospective employers. They also construct their employability with the help of university career services, employer websites, and social contacts.

Employability was regarded by international students as the main motivation for receiving overseas education (Gribble, Blackmore & Rahimi, 2015). Particularly those who choose to study abroad frequently accept that someone who graduates from a well-regarded university will have the best chance of finding employment. However, Brown (2003) also emphasises that today's graduates should anticipate lower-quality and less secure returns from their higher education qualifications. The credential is no longer a guarantee as there is an over-supply of degree holders caused by mass higher education. In China, the 'hard currencies' that come with an international qualification are losing value in the labour market, while the 'soft currencies' that come with foreign experiences are becoming increasingly valuable (Li, 2013). It is suggested that the term 'personal capital' more accurately describes how people develop their social self-identities throughout the job-seeking process, it is also contextualized by Li (2013) as a Chinese concept 'SuZhi' in relation to Chinese students and society. Hence, echoed with Holmes (2001), employability should be viewed as a relational identity that may be significantly changed by graduates' actual experiences with the job market. Therefore, whether employability is relational in the eyes of Chinese students and whether it still focuses solely on skills development as in the past will be investigated. I wonder if students still believe in the skilled approach which indicates that if they improve their employability in rising skills, sought to understand how contemporary students define employability in the context of the devaluation of foreign degrees after the contest between skills or processual employability to discover whether their definitions have changed, as a consequence, they will be able to obtain better employment.

## 2.2. Relationship between international experience and employability

Brown and Hesketh acknowledge the widespread usage of Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' to describe how the middle classes can capitalise on their cultural assets through the educational system. Later, it evolved into a means for

especially middle class to buy advantages for their offspring in the job market—or, as it is sometimes called in China, to ‘gild’ them (Xiang & Shen, 2009). This is affirmed by King, Findlay, and Ahrens (2010), which showed that students who enrol in prestigious colleges while studying abroad build up social capital (access to networks) and cultural capital, which eventually translate into economic capital. The findings of Li (2013) also reverberate with this argument, indicating that it is a foreign experience that serves as a ‘soft’ skill and is valued by international students. The notion of foreign experience has received a lot of attention, this session will review academics' perspectives on how having overseas experience might benefit employment.

The dynamics of internationalisation and globalisation have had a growing impact on mobility in institutions during the past 20 years. In the research by Crossman and Clarke (2010), ‘foreign experience’ refers to a variety of activities, including personal travel integrated with short-term contracts, international student exchange, study abroad, international volunteer work, and overseas internships. Students get the opportunity to learn about other countries and nations through the international experience, which is seen as enriching and helps students with their individual development (Kneale, 2008). It is acknowledged that having foreign experience affects one's employability (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). Marcotte, Desroches, and Poupart (2007) reported a link between international mobility and career advancement in their research, they demonstrate that taking part in international mobility programs can be reasonably helpful in landing a job or an overseas appointment, which resulted in career advancement and professional success, it was unclear from the data whether graduates with foreign experience outperformed other graduates who lacked international experience in all employment-related metrics (Crossman & Clarke, 2010). Nonetheless, this argument is reaffirmed by Li's (2013) research, in which students recognized that international experience will reportedly provide them with more opportunities and advantages in job-hunting and ensuing professional development. Additionally, Rizvi (2000) emphasizes that studying abroad may expose students to a variety of people and cultures, as well as new ideas and ways of thinking. The capacity to adapt to different cultural situations has been referred to as ‘cultural intelligence’ by Earley et al. (2006), they also claim that having international experience is a significant way to increase cultural intelligence. This argument is supported by Tharenou (2015), whose research noted that conquering the difficulties of living and working abroad can help people become more adaptable and culturally sensitive, which can improve employability. Employers, according to Crossman and Clarke (2010), view graduates with foreign experience as possessing the ability to establish relationships inter-culturally while exhibiting cultural sensitivity. Other scholars believe that students realize the significance of the ‘soft skills’ they gain from studying abroad, such as consciousness and problem-solving abilities (Jones, 2013), and this experiential learning results in transferrable skills and abilities for their future job path (Li, 2013). This supports the findings of King, Findlay, and Ahrens (2010), who hypothesised that students who enrol in prestigious universities while studying abroad build up social and cultural capital, which eventually develops into economic capital.

However, it was found that UK students had a different viewpoint on why they choose to study abroad compared to

foreign students, who are looking to increase their employability or get experience from various cultures (Waters & Brooks, 2010). In addition to suggesting that UK students take advantage of this chance to postpone the start of a profession and extend a relatively carefree student lifestyle, it is also discovered that UK students are looking for ‘excitement’ and ‘adventure’ from studying abroad. Additionally, they contend that UK students' abroad experiences simply serve as a means of maintaining their highly privileged status and facilitating its reproduction (Waters & Brooks, 2010). However, their later research also reaffirmed their argument, unlike the research which has been conducted on Asian students who show more indication of the deliberate pursuit of a domestic labour market advantage through international schooling (Brooks, Waters, & Pimlott - Wilson, 2012). Receiving a top-notch education outside of Britain did not guarantee success in the British labour market as the employer has limited knowledge of the worth of foreign degrees in general and of their comparability to UK degrees in particular (Brooks, Waters, & Pimlott - Wilson, 2012).

The Chinese labour market has long acknowledged overseas learning as an employability-enhancing process and provides a competitive advantage for Chinese students (Li, 2013; Huang & Turner, 2018). Students from the mainland travel abroad to get international experience in order to increase their employment prospects and better understand the western culture (Huang, 2013). International experience seems to assist the development of cultural sensitivity and flexibility, as well as the attractiveness of the graduate; these are essential factors in deciding an individual's employability and bestowing advantages upon their return to China (Huang, 2013). Also, Xiang and Shen (2009) perceive those returning to China as having higher competence and differentiation in the labour market. However, as higher education becomes more accessible and the number of graduates proliferates, the quality of international students needs to be considered (Zhao & Cox, 2022). It is reported that Chinese graduates returning from international study lose their previously valued competitive advantage (Li, 2013; Huang & Turner, 2018). It has been reported that China is the largest source of students studying abroad due to mass tertiary education (OECD, 2011). There are concerns about whether the experience will increase graduates' employability because there is a perception that institutions are only interested in foreign students as a source of revenue at the expense of the quality of teaching and the tailored employability support for these students (Byon, Chan & Thomas, 1999; Brooks, Waters, & Pimlott-Wilson 2012; Li, Morgan & Ding, 2008). Therefore, the nature of international experience may become increasingly important, whether students are engaged and gaining from their study experience is worth re-considering. I thus question if having international experience is still as beneficial as it once was and whether Chinese students' perceptions of the importance of overseas experience have changed how they view their framework for employability.

### **2.3. University support and construction of employability**

Universities in the UK are now primarily focused on employability issues, and there are rising expectations for institutions to produce graduates with the necessary skills (Pegg et al., 2012), universities are being urged to acquaint students with the employment environment and put emphasis

on such experiences. The transition to high-quality and status teaching and learning in higher education in the UK use other proxy indicators, such as graduate employability, to evaluate 'teaching excellence' (Hubble, 2016; Neary & Winn, 2017). This inclusion of employability has brought increased attention to the significance of employability construction and assistance that universities are obliged to offer. Universities seek to acquire the essential abilities and include them in the pedagogical design of their courses in order to increase graduate employability (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). Together with centralised career services, work placements, and professional development planning, integrated employability services help people find jobs (Pegg et al., 2012).

This 'teach-to-test' phenomenon is frequently criticised for limiting the goals of higher education, concentrating only on preparing students for employment after graduation (by emphasising the skills needed to obtain employment), and generally being framed by a skill discourse even though these interventions attempted to increase students' employability (Fakunle, 2020). Besides, Cole and Tibby (2013) suggested that for a long-term effect, employability should be seen in substantially broader dimensions. In addition to the pedagogical design of courses, universities have increasingly realised the importance of extracurricular activities. As these often involve collaboration with a Student Union and work through involvement with various societies, communities organisations, or volunteering activities (Stuart et al., 2011), extra-curricular activities are seen to focus more on retroactive experience demonstration than on inspiring students to create a more long-term or prospective grasp of employability. Nevertheless, indicated by the model of Russell Group Careers Services, they highlight what students' preparation possessed rather than attitudes or perceptions on leaving university.

Mobility of international should be regarded as the process of knowledge formation rather than the flow of people through postcolonial analysis (Madge, Raghuram, & Noxolo, 2009), yet, whether graduates with international experience outperformed other graduates who lacked international experience in all employment-related measures could not be determined from the data (Crossman & Clarke, 2010). Employability has to be constructed at the individual level, according to Soares and Mosquera (2020), to stand out from peers. But Fakunle (2020) believes that organisations also need to work on introducing accessible employability development opportunities to improve employability. While students should be aware of the nature of their international experience and take a more active role in building employability, notwithstanding, as an intertwined experience during the year students study abroad, rather than international students alone, institutions also have a duty to take into account the mobility of students in a mobile career context (Fakunle, 2020). Huang and Turner's conclusion illustrates that around half of Chinese students demonstrated awareness of employability development opportunities, but the students gave these activities a relatively low rating for usefulness since Chinese students are lacking cultural understanding and there is no additional and specific support from institutions (Haigh, 2014). Most institutions have employability support for all students, Teichler (2007) counters that schools provide studies that are based on general without country-specific consumption. However, it appears that employability is a top focus for national policy-making in country contexts that do not include overseas students

(Römgens et al., 2019), this tendency affirms the 'outsider' position of overseas students in a world that is constrained by national boundaries (Marginson, 2012). Further, although international students are not prohibited from taking part in these activities by British higher institutions, employability is approached from a UK viewpoint and tailored to the needs of the UK labour market (Minocha, Hristov, & Reynolds, 2017). Without adequate job support for overseas students, this might result in students returning to their home markets unemployed or underemployed. Henderson (2011) highlighted this issue in the research of Chinese graduates returning home with Australian degrees as their skills and knowledge were shaped by Australian employer demands. Graduates are dealing with the potential delay in the domestic labour market to reshape and contextualise their learning experience following home employers. Consequently, in a system of domestically focused employability policy that disregards institutional efforts to recruit foreign students, this status places international students in a policy gap. Considering that institutions are actively recruiting students from a global pool, universities should be concerned about the options available to overseas students in terms of employability.

### 3. Methodology

In this study, an intensive, small-scale investigation is used. Participants are taught postgraduate students who were chosen through a prestigious British university since they are more likely than undergraduates to be immediately concerned with job searching. Despite the fact that a small-scale qualitative study has acknowledged that the context of one institution cannot be presented or extrapolated to another institution due to their contextual variations, it was determined for this study to limit to one university for practical reasons.

Determining whether there is an alternative definition of employability for students who choose to study abroad is the first of the research's particular goals. Second, if they believe that having foreign experience and receiving British help has improved their employability. Last but not least, Chinese international students studying abroad may need to adjust their expectations for the employment opportunities and job security that a UK master's degree will provide. Five male and four female candidates were recruited following academic fields: business, biological engineering, economics, education, art, and law. With the exception of one woman in her 30s with previous work experience, all volunteers ranged in age from 23 to 25.

Each applicant underwent an in-depth, individual semi-structured interview that began with questions about their personal backgrounds and progressed to inquiries about their reasons for choosing to study in the UK and at that particular university, their goals for employment, their knowledge of the labour market, and their methods for getting ready for the job market. The second part of the conversation focuses on overseas experience and how the UK Masters programme's career support has improved the employability of postgraduates. Exploring the origins and effects of each person's thoughts was a consistent theme throughout this study. In addition to direct inquiries about these topics, interviewees were also commended to contextualise all of their responses within the larger context of their life.

The interviews were conducted online and I shared a common first language, cultural background and experience

of studying in the UK with them. To prevent misinformation owing to linguistic limitations, interviews were conducted in Chinese, our primary language. At the start of the study, I came to an understanding with each participant and reinforced it to them individually that the study could use any and all information from the formal interviews as supporting documentation, but identity and confidentiality would be scrupulously maintained. All interviews were taped and written down. To prevent meaning from being lost or damaged during translation, analysis was conducted using untranslated transcripts. In order to become more familiar with the material before the responses were properly examined, the transcripts were read in their entirety. I employed thematic coding, and the analysis was built using both coding categories found in the literature and those that spontaneously appeared in the data. The former was influenced by Brown and Hesketh's fundamental ideas about how to make oneself employable, especially their ideas about 'soft' and 'hard' skills and 'strategies' for promoting oneself to potential employers. The flexibility in coding is important for testing the applicability of previously identified concepts and for attempting to situate the formation of employability in a different social and cultural context from that in which they emerge.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Reasons for studying abroad

Nine participants in this study explained why they wanted to study abroad, and they all agreed that improving their employability during a year of study in the UK was the key driving force. It would be worthwhile to look into how Chinese students view their time studying in the UK in terms of building their employability.

In contrast to Holmes (2013), improving one's employability is no longer as possessive as it once was, a lifetime job cannot be guaranteed by earning a higher education degree in China due to the massification of higher education. Participants in the survey generally recognised and acknowledged the problem of credential inflation in China, which led people to believe that getting a Master's degree was practically necessary in order to find quality employment. It was prompted by the belief that it was nearly necessary in order to find the kind of work that they thought was desirable.

*(Credential inflation) belongs to a deadweight lost. After every row of people in the cinema has stood up, there is no need for everyone to stand up. (7)*

A master's degree is a requirement for landing a job, four out of nine respondents spoke a UK degree is equivalent to a domestic degree in value. Beyond this, however, one of the main attractions was the time and financial cost saved by obtaining a UK Master's degree. A one-year master's degree in the UK is thought to shorten the time required to complete a postgraduate degree as opposed to longer degrees in China. Also, it has lowered their financial cost compared to destination nations like the USA or Canada.

And even more (almost half) emphasised the UK's standing as a leader in academic achievement in their field. Chinese students who opt to study abroad usually value the distinctive educational system of the UK. In China, where students usually lack initiative in their learning and depend on outside forces to maintain them in a condition of learning, test-based

education has historically been the standard. The educational system in the UK is regarded to be more transparent, pushing students to exercise self-control and promote active learning. Participants thought that a year of study abroad can assist fill the knowledge gap left by a domestic education, despite the fact that most domestic graduates lack the ability to continue learning.

### 4.2. Role of UK degree in the construction of employability

When asked to define employability, the interviewees unanimously agreed with Brown and Hesketh (2014) that it is a definition that combines both hard and soft abilities, the focus on skill development alone is no longer enough to improve employability. Similar to Holmes (2013), volunteers concluded that improving employability is a positional process that takes into account both internal and external influences. Although they have shown different opinion on the importance of credential, most of them reach an agreement that qualifications is still dominant and have inherent value, however, showing a devaluation over time. This finding resounds with Zhao and Cox (2022), due to the rising number of graduates from the top domestic universities and the growing number of overseas returnees in a fiercely competitive job market, the advantage gained from education, including study abroad, has decreased and is now fairly uncertain. Unlike Xiang and Shen (2009), who provide context for international studies to increase Chinese students' employability, arguing that a decade ago, studying abroad became a means for somewhat affluent families to buy advantages for their children in the job market, or to 'gild' them, as it is commonly called in China. Instead, graduates only see qualifications as only the first gateway to the labour market. Academic qualifications do not provide an advantage in the workplace, but rather help candidates to cross the threshold when it comes to securing a position, so ensuring that academic qualifications are the first element. One participant clearly illustrated that:

*I think that a degree is just a door knocker, as a mandatory requirement to get an interview, higher qualifications can only provide a higher employment platform. (4)*

Besides, there are different views as to whether a UK master's degree offers an advantage over the Chinese equivalent one in the Chinese labour market. Most participants disagreed on the extent to which the UK degree itself gives them more 'hard currency' than the Chinese equivalent. Some respondents claimed that roles are split into two groups based on the type of business, one for state-owned positions and the other for international or multinational firms. The respondents do not see any significant advantages of an abroad degree when hiring for state-owned jobs since they define talent in terms of training time and think that one year of study is insufficient to complete postgraduate courses. Employers prefer persons with a study background, nonetheless, since they have had appropriate exposure to other cultures in the case of private or foreign businesses. These days, this gap is being steadily filled by the growth of domestic higher education as they also take talent development and teaching methods from Western nations.

*The dominance of international students is declining as its one-year programme is not well recognised in China,*

*especially in state-owned sectors. (4)*

*Private sectors like foreign companies may like international students a little bit more. As those companies have built bridges between the domestic and overseas markets, employing overseas students to act as a bridge is a key point for their progress and transformation. (1)*

There is a common perception that the number of international students is proliferating year after year. Although overseas degrees didn't provide any extra hard currencies, however, different from domestic students, most participants agreed that the overseas experience and different education experiences gave them skills that would help them to be competitive in employment in addition to their qualifications. Based on British education which puts a strong emphasis on independent research and collaborative coursework, many respondents believed that in addition to subject knowledge, learning skills - such as consciousness, searching and analyzing information, planning and conducting research, communicating skills and teamwork, etc. are valuable in enhancing their employability while studying in a context of UK studies. Also, they believe the experience has broadened their horizons and improved their confidence and problem-solving skills, which they believe will improve their employment opportunities.

*Soft skills I have gained from coursework such as leadership are more helpful, and they will be the first in the consideration for later promotion. (5)*

*Independent research in the UK has brought about two sides of thinking. The ability to criticize and the breadth of thinking have filled my future work with more possibilities. Given the equal competition, my experience of living abroad will give HR the impression that I am more capable of dealing with problems independently. (3)*

Some of them agreed that more important to their employability than the degree itself was the 'soft currency' gained from the experience of living overseas. This coincides with Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, believing that international experience would accumulate cultural capital, therefore realizing the upward movement in the future career. Many spoke of the benefits they benefited from 'cultural differences' by communicating with people from different parts of the world. This in turn helps them 'think differently', and helps them increase cultural intelligence. Resonated with Crossman and Clarke (2010), it would seem that having foreign experience improves learning, competency acquisition, the emergence of crucial soft skills, and potentially, overall employability.

*Multiculturalism has created a tolerance for differences and a more comfortable and respectful approach in the workplace when faced with different views. (7)*

Nevertheless, most of the participants said that even when they studied abroad, they stayed in Chinese circles. The level of cultural competence acquired depends on the students themselves. Furthermore, when asked about their disadvantages compared to domestic students, they were concerned about their familiarity with the domestic market. Secondly, international experience can also be gained through

other channels to strengthen their cultural intelligence. Therefore, the soft skills that come from international experience included in UK study abroad are available, but not as good as they used to be, and cannot be seen as the main tool to improve employability, and cannot guarantee employment.

In short, a master's degree is seen by students as a qualification only. International degrees are no longer able to offer differentiation in the job market as usual, nor do they make it easier to get a job, as the competitive advantage has been weakened by the increase in overseas students in the era of mass higher education. Such a qualification is often seen as a 'QiaoMenZhuan', which can be translated as a door knocker, meaning that only a master's degree can open the door to a job interview. Although students believe that their 'overseas degree' will not give them more 'hard currencies' than a comparable course in China. Nevertheless, they believe that the skills and competencies gained from UK experience are generic and job-independent, even those that are focused on later career development and promotion. This competency is locally referred to as 'SuZhi' by Li (2013). It can be broadly translated as 'human qualities'. Experience in the UK is often seen as contributing to overall 'quality', a concept that is closely linked to personal achievement and development.

### **4.3. How do graduates position themselves?**

One participant clearly illustrates that 'Strategies in the job search may probably improve my competitiveness and my chances of getting the job, but they can also sow some bad seeds later on. If I'm too perfect in the interview through those strategies, but I'm not in that position when I start, there's a big contrast. So I choose to be true to myself.'(6), which showed the purist's characteristics. However, others did, feel that though employers were targeted by the machines of career aspirations, skills, qualifications, and experience, they are looking for some extra job hunting tips to help them increase the possibility of getting the position they want. Chinese students in the UK see themselves more as players in the job-seeking process since they are facing growing overseas credential inflation. As many external factors influence access to jobs, a few Chinese students now believe that continuous self-development will improve their employability, which is contrary to Brown and Hesketh's 'take me as who I am'. The majority of students in this study exhibited the characteristics of 'players' in their understanding and approach to the labour market both in the UK and the Chinese labour market. 'Players' prefer self-promotion to become an employable persona (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). They treat the recruitment process as more than a 'meritocratic' competition instead of a right match between themselves and an employer's stated requirements, they learn the rules of the game, including the requirements of potential employers to maximize their chances of success. By using university careers services, employer websites, and social contacts to help them. Participants find a series of self-development strategies necessary in the contemporary context of a short supply in the position provided, for the sake of obtaining comparative competitive advantages by following positional conflict theory.

Social networking is one of the aspects of social transactions in Chinese society that has attracted a lot of attention and commentary. 5 out of 9 respondents indicated that social networking plays an important role in the Chinese labour market. The majority of respondents reported that

networking would bring benefits in terms of access to more timely and complete position information, larger possibilities of employment, and better mentor selection. One respondent reported that the family has helped him to find a very authoritative person in the industry as his referee, who will lead him to a better position and a better footing and development in the industry. The commodification of social networking gives him a competitive advantage in the job market. In addition to this, most students were aware of the impact that social networking could have in seeking employment in the Chinese labour market, but to varying degrees based on their own experiences and reflection on the industry. Resonated to Li (2013), social networking does not play a role in the ideal job market proposed by economists but functions well in a market based on social rules and norms. In other words, in the private and public sectors, social networking plays a significantly different role, social networking is of greater importance in terms of access to public sector jobs. This argument is clearly illustrated by one student as follows:

*If the industry you go to is looking at resources, then your starting line is completely different between those who come into the group with capital and those who don't. (7)*

More than just social networking, players will use any strategy that will expand the possibilities of being employed. The preponderance of people interviewed in my interviews stated that they were willing to use the career centre's services, including CV editing, sharing of job information, and courses on interview techniques. Fakunle and Pierre (2020) claim that it was easy to see the students' reflective thinking on employability from the way they expressed their prior experiences. 8 out of 9 respondents reported that they had either done an internship or gained relevant experience through extra-curricular activities before entering postgraduate studies. All respondents felt that their involvement in informal education such as internships and students' associations had helped them to improve their employability. Students perceived the usefulness of the internship in enhancing workplace skills, helping them self-positioning, and creating opportunities for future retention, moreover, they believe that employers would prefer employees with internship experience, as this reduces their training costs for graduates. Volunteering and club involvement are examples of extracurricular activities that are viewed as vital ways to develop the skills needed for employability enhancement. Students may prepare for society's functioning in advance thanks to the specialised activities, and by taking part in the activities, students can develop skills like planning, organisation, and communication.

*The internship experience allows you to match your own abilities with the requirements of the industry, I believe that having a clear understanding of the industry you want to work in through internship can help guide you in your priority during your students years. (2)*

*The internship has increased my learning ability and I, therefore, become more proficient and learn faster when I was given a task. (8)*

To sum up, graduates aim to accomplish a high degree of

distinctiveness in the job market by utilizing networking, aid with the job hunt, interview techniques, and internship or club experience. This supports the 'positional conflict theory', which holds that hiring success depends more on retaining a relative than an absolute competitive advantage in the labour market. One interviewee summarised the phenomenon as followed:

*Your competitors determine your position in the job market and the effort you need to put in. (8)*

#### **4.4. Career support offered in the British institution and student satisfaction**

Being aware of the 'player' position during a job-seeking process, I wonder if participants are looking for strategies that British institution would offer and how they perceive them as well, besides, whether British institution has offered students with specific career support is a contested question compared with a domestic degree. In the following interview, respondents were interviewed to identify their reflection on enhancing their employability, and the services available in the university to help them improve their employability. Afterwards, they were asked to report their desire to utilise them and their perceived value to them.

Having acknowledged that in an era where international degrees do not bring any growth in 'hard currency', they indicated that actively engaged in activities that strengthen their soft currency make them more competitive in the job market as a whole while ensuring that they were able to obtain a master's degree. Interviews with participants about their past experiences revealed that they had all been involved in soft skills activities, which reinforced the idea that they had positioned themselves as players in the job search process. The majority of respondents believe that employment is a process that is intertwined between the students themselves and the school's help. Participants have shown an urgent need for pedagogy design and activities for employability enhancement, which echoed Boden and Nedeva (2010), who argues that the inclusion of essential ability into the pedagogical design would boost employability gaining, indicating that institution should equip and prepare students in case they enter into a decent job market once they graduate.

*There is a two-way reciprocal relationship between student satisfaction and school reputation. (5)*

Respondents were aware of the university's help such as internship-embedded courses, open recruitment for on-campus positions, career recruitment fairs, and CV revision and employability training workshops. However, employment help is directional, there are differences in different specialities, showing a resource tilt. Two interviewees from the Business School showed a positive attitude towards the school's career support, describing that the faculty provides enough information on job opportunities sharing. In terms of curriculum, the Business School intersperses theory sessions with guest lectures, corporate executives were invited as guests to share information about the industry for the sake of building first impressions of the industry for students. In addition, in terms of assessment design, some simulated company operations are used, requiring students to simulate real business operations and

make decisions for the company as if they were executives.

*The Business School has created a job search information sharing group on social media used by Chinese students, which is regularly updated with job information and sends access to interview training appointments. In addition to this, the faculty has a dedicated webpage to consolidate job information and when I need to, I go directly to that website to find the right job for me. (3)*

*We have two options for assessment: a dissertation or a practical course, which is optional depending on the student's future development plans. Students who want to pursue academic research could choose a dissertation. I chose the practical course to get used to the general workplace environment in advance, including building awareness of leadership decisions and inter-departmental cooperation. (8)*

But, participants who come from other faculties show distinctive attitudes toward career support. They argue that institution provides a wide range of majors, however just a few mainstream ones are more likely to be beneficial to employment support, most of the job shares are offered in the broader context of business, thus neglecting the employment of students in disciplines such as education and arts.

Besides, in response to the UK higher education's aim of 'teach excellence', it is revealed that British university focuses more on the domestic market and sees international students as a source of revenue. According to participants, most of them reported that positions offered by the institution were not aligned with the respondents' desired career plans, ignoring the future workplace considerations of international students, and as a result, such employment assistance was deemed to be poorly tailored and of little or no value. Echoed Wong and Liu (2010), Chinese students showing a great desire to work back in their home country might be particularly difficult for career services to engage since, traditionally, family influence has an impact on Asian students' career choices. Agreed by Zhao and Cox (2022), whose research revealed challenges included reverse language shock and a mismatch between the schedule of recruitment rounds and studies in the UK, which had previously gone unnoticed or unemphasised. Hence, Chinese students were disregarded during this career support process.

*I hope to return to my home country after graduation, but the school's job offer is dominated by the UK or European market, and there is a lack of diversity in the geographical setting of jobs. I gradually lost interest and expectation in career support. (1)*

Three respondents also mentioned the fact that the cost of searching for information on employment help in schools was too high when it came to the marketing of job information. Information about positions was usually provided by e-mail, which is not a common communicative tool for Chinese students. Position information is also not categorized in accordance with the corresponding major, Take the above two factors into consideration, Chinese graduates are more likely to miss information about positions they actually need. In addition, a few participants who already engaged in the labour market reported that the timeline for graduation in the UK does not coincide with that of China, and UK students are often still busy writing their dissertations during the peak

recruitment period in China and therefore cannot participate in recruitment in time. In addition, the UK Master's degree is usually awarded in January of the following year, yet some positions in China require and this is something that the UK does not give graduates extra support for. Students are trained with British education and take time to adapt to the Chinese labour market upon graduation, frictional costs are created. Hence, this leaves job-seekers in a powerless position to afford the cost on their own.

The respondents were also aware of extracurricular competitions, societies, and clubs, and they understanding to the relevance to future career development. Nonetheless, these activities' perceived utility was only given a poor rating as well. For two key reasons, on the one hand, the emphasis on autonomous learning in the UK, which caused Chinese students to feel uneasy, was blamed by half of the students for their lethargy and lack of work awareness. Other participants thought that this may potentially be a sign of linguistic or cultural problems, which were seen to hinder the capacity of international students to interact with and integrate with their peers. Resonated to Byon, Chan and Thomas (1999) and Campbell (2010), due to varying cultural norms, people are not willing to participate in job programmes and activities which share different cultures and values with them. Finally, this cultural disparity could be a factor in some international students' reluctance to use career assistance. Therefore, the necessity for schools to clearly explain to Chinese students how these activities will help them develop and enhance their communication skills and cultural capital before introducing them should be highly emphasized (Huang, Turner, & Chen, 2014).

## 5. Conclusion

More and more students in need of higher education are choosing to study abroad as a result of globalisation and the growth of massified higher education in China. As a result, a certificate is no longer a guarantee of employment, the degree advantage has been reduced by the rise in abroad graduates, and the emphasis on recognising foreign credentials has turned to soft skills. Therefore, getting a degree from abroad does not guarantee employment, and cultural capital scarcity is dwindling, this positioning advantage of foreign experience can also be distinguished by family, so gaining international experience does not always improve employability; both benefits are diminished by the rise in the number of people living abroad. International students should adjust their expectations to social development and the fierce competition for jobs caused by the fact that the number of international students is no longer uncommon, perceptions of having a degree and experience from abroad will give them a competitive advantage in the job market cannot be assumed. In order to increase their employability, the finding recommends that students become acclimated to the local culture, actively participate in workshops, and gain employment savvy, thus, improving their soft abilities while ensuring the qualifications are obtainable during studying in the UK. From the perspective of a British university, when hiring graduates from around the world, how to offer customised employment support assistance to international students should be taken into account. This experiment's scope was constrained by practical considerations to a single UK university, but it will be encouraged to be conducted in more institutions to make the conclusions more convincing and generalizable in future research.

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