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International experience and graduate employability: Perceptions of Chinese international students in the UK



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ABSTRACT

A review of relevant literature regarding international students and also employability shows that there is a little research on international student mobility, careers intention and their approaches to manage employability. This research interviews Chinese students who are currently studying tourism related programmes in a post-1992 university in the UK. It attempts to understand their initial motivation for studying abroad, and the importance of future career developments in that decision. It also discusses the Chinese students' planning of future career and their approaches to enhance their future employability capabilities at one higher education institution in the United Kingdom.

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1. Introduction

In her review of literature, [Pelletier \(2003\)](#) argues that studies of international students are based on a particular student cohort and most often look at the experiences of international students from the researcher's own country of origin. Equally, [Huang \(2008a\)](#) argues that previous research in relation to international students either focuses on their country/region of origin, or specific aspects, for example, the academic or social experience. The stress is now more on the contribution international students make to the prestige and income of individual universities and the UK's GNP. [Leonard and Morley \(2003\)](#) note that it is surprising that there is little research on international students' progress and achievements, and the students' subsequent careers, despite some recognition that a major consequence of overseas study can be a 'brain drain' from their home countries. This 'brain drain' is because graduates from low income countries, who are often expensively trained in the west, regularly prefer to remain in the West to pursue their careers.

The employability of university graduates has dominated much educational and economic policy over the past decade, and also attracts increasing interests among researchers in the 'education-to-work' transition of new graduates, and the extent to which they are readily 'employable' (e.g., [Lindberg \(2007\)](#), [Mason, Williams, and Cranmer \(2009\)](#), [Shafie and Nayan \(2010\)](#)). However a review of literature on employability makes it apparent that there has been very little recent empirical work exploring the way in which students and graduates are beginning to understand and manage their employability in the context of recent higher education and labour market changes ([Tomlinson, 2007](#); [Tymon, 2011](#)). Furthermore, existing literature on employability has a strong 'national' focus in the UK or USA, and little reference is made to the increasingly international dimensions of Higher Education and graduate employability ([Waters, 2009](#); [King, Findlay, & Ahrens, 2010](#)).

If today's students are to become tomorrow's effective tourism practitioners, then it is fundamentally important to understand their perceptions of tourism employment. Without knowledge of the career intentions and attitudes

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of international students, then efforts at improving this aspect of the experience for this group of students may be unnecessarily disjointed. Thus the making sure that international students have a satisfactory experience abroad may be compromised. Therefore this research attempts to understand their initial motivation for studying abroad, and the importance of future career developments in that decision. It also discusses the future career planning of Chinese students at one higher education institution in the UK, and their approaches to managing employability.

2. Employability

Gracia (2009) argues that the global knowledge economy positions employability as a central driver of political and business thinking, underpinning national competitive advantage, catalysing demand for flexible, creative, life-long learners. However McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) point out that the historical antecedents of the current employability debate can be traced back at least a century. Gazier's (1998a, 1998b, 2001) work on employability provides a useful overview of the concept's development towards currently accepted definitions. Much debate has been stimulated surrounding notions of employability (Harvey, 2001; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005), and in particular the role of higher education in developing employability (Gibbs, 2000). However, employability remains a poorly defined concept that is often narrowly considered to mean the development of an individual's skills, such that "the rhetoric that shrouds the idea of employability has been subjected to little conceptual examination" (Brown, 2003; pp. 107).

Holmes (2013) examines three competing perspectives on employability, termed here as the 'possessive', 'positioning' and 'processual' approaches. The first of these, 'possessive', is based on notions of skills and attributes, and dominates policy and practice discourse. Harvey (2001) recognises that graduates' employability is high on the Government agenda, with expectations that higher education should contribute to national economic growth. Researchers (e.g., Hillage and Pollard (1998), Yorke (2004), Moreau and Leathwood (2006)) argue that employability is constructed as primarily a matter of an individual's skills. As a consequence, many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have attempted to embed skills in their curriculum (Atlay and Harris, 2000; Chapple and Tolley, 2000; Harvey, Locke, & Morey, 2002). Mason et al. (2009) summarise that the HEI's response to developing employability amongst their students has centred principally on the provision of opportunities to develop employability skills by embedding them within the curriculum, or bolting them on to the curriculum (Coopers and Lybrand, 1998). In the same vein, from the perspective of employers, 'employability' often seems to refer to 'work readiness'; i.e., the possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that, soon after commencing employment, will enable new graduates to make productive contributions to organisational objectives (Mason et al., 2009).

Within higher education, the skills agenda has been criticised as reflecting a narrow view of educational aims and a threat to academic freedom (Morley, 2001), and the definition and identification of the skills agenda has been problematised (Holmes, 2001). It has often resulted in purely supply-side 'employability' policies (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). Furthermore the success of such mechanisms is typically evaluated by sector benchmarks, for example the first employment destination of graduates that treat employability as a unique trait of the individual. Such simplistic measures ignore the influence of sociocultural factors such as gender, ethnicity and social class on employability and its development (Morley 2001; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2003; Gracia, 2009). Viewing employability in isolation from its context makes issues of inequality invisible (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006), shifting the burden of employment success away from institutions and onto the individual. Hence such approach of employability is deeply flawed in theoretical terms.

It is increasingly accepted that discussions of employability cannot be limited to the orthodoxies of solely supply-side and demand-side economic theory, and a growing number of researchers (e.g., Kleinman, West, and Sparkes (1998), Hillage and Pollard (1998), Evans, Nathan, and Simmons (1999), McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), Tomlinson (2007)) have emphasised the need to understand the interaction of individual and external factors affecting the individual's ability to operate effectively within the labour market. The second approach as suggested by Holmes (2013), the positional approach, seems to support the concept that graduate skills relate strongly to issues of social positioning. The graduate recruitment processes and practices could be analysed through positional conflict theory (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). However Holmes (2013; pp. 549) argues that this approach of employability, based on social positioning theory, is shown to be more in accord with the evidence of employment outcomes, but tends, arguably, to lead to a "counsel of despair".

The work of Holmes (2001) has been important in highlighting this issue and argues that employability should be conceptualised as a form of identity; it is relational, emergent and influenced largely by the graduates' actual experiences of the labour market. Tomlinson (2007) argues that the discourse into employability continually overlooks the subjective dimension of employability; in particular, how it relates to not only the way individuals come to perceive and understand the labour market they are entering, but also the types of dispositions, attitudes and identities they develop around their future work and employability. Hence the third approach as suggested by Holmes (2013), the processual perspective of employability, particularly focusing on the concept of graduate identity, is theoretically robust, is supported by empirical evidence, and provides a sound basis for curriculum and other forms of intervention to enhance graduate employability.

Tomlinson (2007) argues that the problem of employability and its management now appears to be informing students' understanding and approaches towards the labour market. He points out that this not only involves the students developing their individual graduate profiles and credentials, but also particular attitudes and appropriate labour market strategies (Tomlinson, 2007). In relation to this notion of personal responsibility, Brown and Hesketh (2004) identify two ideal-types of job seekers 'players' and 'purists'. Players understand employability as a 'positional game'. In contrast, purists view

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