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Demystifying International Graduate Experiences and Career Destinations: The Experiences of Chinese Overseas Returnees

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

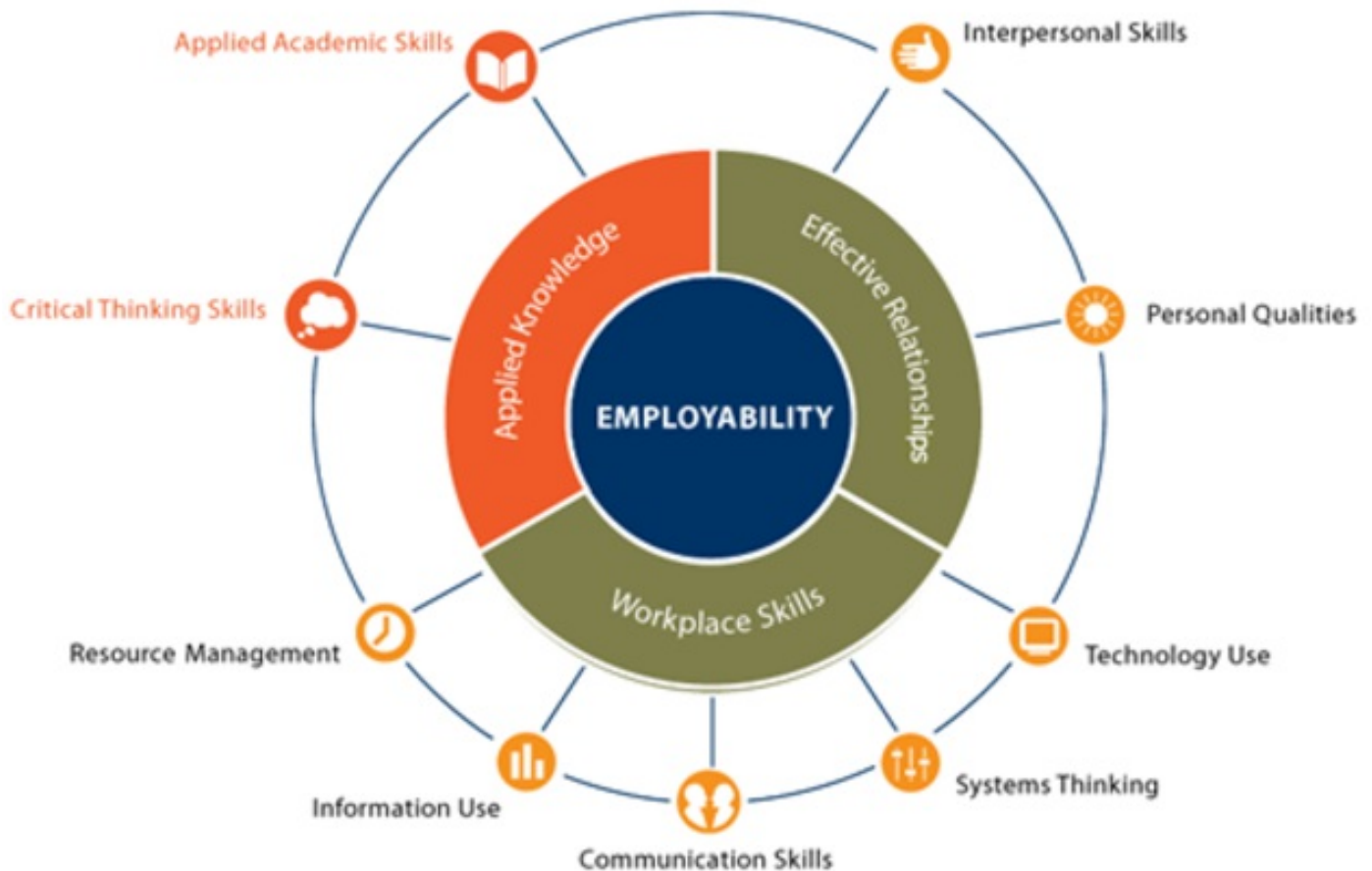
The importance of graduate employability has been recognised by universities throughout the world. In the context of an increasingly internationalised agenda, enhancing employability has become a key driver for international students to study abroad. Several studies have been carried out to explore the experiences of international graduates in the labour market of their host countries. However, there is relatively little research into the experiences of international students who return to their home countries after graduation. Based on the Employability Skills Framework, this paper aims to explore the perspectives of Chinese overseas returnees. An online survey was conducted with current Chinese students and alumni from three British universities. The preliminary results of this survey highlight the importance of personal attributes on the employability of international students. The results also indicate a gap in our knowledge concerning the overseas job markets and a disconnect between Chinese recruitment seasons and British educational timetables.

Full paper

Introduction

While student employability has received considerable attention in the literature, a consistent definition of this term remains lacking. Yorke and Knight (2006), define employability as “a set of achievements – skills, understandings, and personal attributes – that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy” (p. 8). While this is not the only way of looking at employability, it is important to consider how the skills, knowledge, and attitudes developed through study abroad contribute directly to a student’s ability to establish a sustainable career. One of the influential frameworks for doing so is the Employability Skills Framework (ESF), which identifies three broad categories of employability: applied knowledge, workplace skills, and effective relationship skills (incorporating interpersonal skills and personal qualities) (Figure 1). The ESF provides useful guidance for educational researchers and educators to enhance student employability.

Figure 1: Employability Skills Framework (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)



In the context of an increasingly internationalised agenda, enhancing employability has become a key motivation for students to study abroad (Matherly & Tillman, 2019). According to HESA (2022), over one-fifth of the student body in the UK is comprised of international students, 32% of which are from China. Research shows that most of these Chinese international students seek employment in their home country (Zhao & Cox; 2022; Zweig & Ge, 2018), making it imperative for universities to support students' transitions back to their home countries (Tran et al., 2021). However, literature on international student employability typically focuses on transitioning to the labour market in the student's host country (Pham, 2021a; Tran et al., 2021). Thus, little is known about the way study abroad benefits international students when they return to their home countries (Pham, 2021b).

Based on the aforementioned ESF, this paper draws on the relevant

literature to compile a list of 32 employability skills and aims to understand the impact of study abroad on the employability of Chinese students who seek graduate jobs in China (British Council, 2018; Crawford et al., 2011; Hernández-March et al., 2009; Oliver et al., 2014; Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015; Su & Zhang, 2015). This paper is focused on answering the following research questions:

1. What are the essential employability skills in the Chinese job market from the perspective of Chinese overseas returnees?
2. Have the perceived essential skills of these students been enhanced by their study abroad experiences?
3. What challenges do students face when seeking employment in China after obtaining a degree in the UK?

Methodology

To answer these research questions, an online survey was conducted among Chinese alumni and current students of three British universities who prefer to work in China after graduation. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions. The first part of the questionnaire contained demographic information, such as age, gender, degree level, length of study, and subject of study. The main body of the questionnaire asked respondents to categorise the level of importance of 32 different skills/attributes that were derived from the literature. These skills included a mix of applied knowledge, workplace skills, and effective relationships skills based on the ESF. Furthermore, the students were asked about how essential these skills were to their employability in the Chinese labour market and how their study abroad experience in the UK strengthened them. The final section of the survey contained open-ended questions related to concerns about seeking jobs in China after graduation (for current students) and challenges faced while working in China (for alumni).

The survey was distributed to current Chinese students and alumni via careers services in three Russell Group universities located in the UK. A total of 324 questionnaires were collected, of which 98 were considered valid (full response). These included current students (n=53) and alumni (n=55). Descriptive statistics and cross tabulation analyses were used to analyse quantitative data derived from closed questions in questionnaires using IBM SPSS 26. Qualitative data from

open questions were manually translated and analysed using the six-step approach to thematic analysis, established by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results

The results of this study have yet to be fully analysed. The preliminary results highlight the importance of personal attributes on international student employability and indicate the existence of a gap in our knowledge regarding overseas job markets as well as a disconnect between Chinese recruitment seasons and British educational timetables. The research findings will enhance our understanding of the employability of overseas returnees and provide recommendations on how to better support international student employability.

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