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Perceived Employability among Students in Chinese Transnational Higher Education Institutions

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Research Domains

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Abstract

This study explored students' perception of career prospects in a Chinese transnational higher education (TNHE) institution. An increasing number of TNHE graduates entered the domestic labour market, but little is known about how those institutions prepare students for employability. The study deployed Holmes (2013)'s three approaches to employability as conceptual frameworks guiding this study. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 29 students from a Sino-foreign cooperative university to discuss their career plans and preparation. The findings show that TNHE students articulate the human capital offered by TNHE programmes while also recognising the limitations of programmes and the reputation of internationalised universities in Chinese labour market. The possessional and positional gaps drive students to enact agency in mobilising capital for employability. This study provides implications for policymakers and administrators inTNHE to increase students' competitiveness in employment and support their career transition.

Full paper

Transnational higher education (TNHE) in many countries has achieved rapid development over the past decades. The Chinese case is a unique type of TNHE because the central government welcomes foreign partner universities, only with the condition that they collaborate with local institutions (Hu et al., 2019). These conditions created the Sino-foreign cooperative university (SFCU) and shaped their unique position in operating the TNHE in China. As the previous studies pointed out, promoting TNHE has achieved many positive outcomes, such as meeting the increasing demands for higher education and providing new skills in the labour force (Lane, 2011). In particular, labour market and industry conditions are vital factors in determining the success of TNHE (Wilkins, 2016). For example, the supply and demand of the labour market in the home country influences the TNHE's strategic decisions in deciding majors, study modes, curriculum, and teaching and assessment styles. Graduates from TNHE universities are likely to seek employment in their home country, and they expect to learn knowledge and skills to help their smooth transition to the labour market. Although some existing TNHE studies have described the motivations to study at TNHE universities (Wilkins et al., 2012) and students' learning experiences during the programme (Dai et al., 2019), few scholars have been concerned about the graduates' employment prospects or outcomes. Very little is known about how TNHE universities and resources prepare students for their employability.

This article attempts to redress this knowledge gap by proposing a research question: How do students from TNHE universities understand and prepare their employability? Holmes (2013)'s three approaches to employability, including possessive, positional, and processual perspective, guide this study as conceptual frameworks. A possessive perspective emphasises that students need to possess various skills, knowledge and capacities. Higher education has, therefore, focused on training students with academic contents and professional skills. Positional perspective of employability emphasises that employability is not determined by human capital but "socioeconomic or cultural status, or a social positioning of graduates' skills and achievements relative to and in competition with others" (Holmes, 2013, p. 548). The processual perspective argues that employability is a long process requiring resources that students articulate both during and after higher education.

In this research, 29 participants from one Sino-US cooperative university were interviewed for around one hour via online platform (Zoom and Tencent Meeting).Through this exploratory approach, the students' voices were privileged, allowing for the insights into authentic perceptions. After that, the authors adopted a thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021) to process all interview data. The analysis began with inductive coding for broader themes in the observation, followed by the deductive approach to address the research question through existing theories.

The findings show that TNHE students focused on enriching their content knowledge and enhancing their professional skills. This is because Chinese and TNHE universities continue disseminating the human capital doxa and embed assumptions that higher education leads to improved employment outcomes (Mok et al., 2018). Students and their parents internalise the policy doxa about the importance of qualifications, degrees, and university-based resources promoted by universities.

In addition, many participants noticed the need to equip themselves with resources beyond human capital. They agreed that qualifications depended on other factors, including the reputation of TNHE universities, their programme structure, relevant work experience, and an understanding of workplace culture and social networks. However, evidence has been found that students struggle to use their expertise and integrate into the labour market (Author, 2021). Recently, local employers have become more interested in "legitimate" capital because mass higher education has led to a large number of students obtaining higher education (Blackmore et al., 2017). Therefore, many students engaged in self-reflection and used a reflexive agency to accumulate self-knowledge. The students who learned how to enact agency could reflect on resources and the influences of external factors when working out their actions in relation to external factors affecting their interests.

The findings of this research imply a gap between how universities have prepared students for employability and what the labour market expects. Although graduate employment outcomes partly depend on labour market conditions, institutions can strive to cultivate students' abilities and provide greater resources to facilitate employment opportunities. Embracing the internationalism into higher education does not mean devaluing the support for students' transition to workforces in the regional or national scale. The balance between institutional goal of producing 'global-minded graduates' and students' actual needs for local employment must be better recognised and addressed.

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