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The employability of university graduates has dominated much educational and economic policy over the past decade (Pegg, et al., 2012). Interestingly, there has been little empirical work exploring the way in which students understand and manage their employability in the context of recent labour market changes (Tomlinson, 2007; Tymon, 2011). As Johnston (2003, 419) argues, one of the limitations of research on graduate employment is its tendency to focus on groups with the potential to influence the government, while 'the voices of other partners [i.e. international students] in the graduate recruitment process, are deafening in their silence'. Furthermore, existing literature on employability has a strong 'national' focus on the UK or USA and little reference is made to the increasingly international dimensions of HE and graduate employability (Huang et al., 2014). A review of relevant literature sources, Leonard and Morley (2003) note that there is limited research on the progression and achievement of international students following their graduation and their subsequent careers and motilities. This paper, therefore, examines their perceptions of employability and factors that shape these perceptions. In particular, we focus on their approaches to manage their employability.

Methodology

Previous employability research related to Chinese international students in the UK has tended to focus on specific subject areas, e.g MBA area reported by Walters (2009) or tourism and hospitality management area reported by Huang (2013) or at specific level (e.g. postgraduate level as reported by Li (2013). This research selected the interviewees from a range of backgrounds (e.g. different subject areas, different levels, different types of universities) to allow a comprehensive and comparative analysis across groups to be made. Thirty one-hour interviews with Chinese international students were organised from January to April 2013. We used existing definitions to categorise their understanding of employability (Holmes, 2010) and approaches taken to manage it (Tomlinson, 2007). Five-stage Framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) was adopted to analyse collected data.

Key findings

Understanding of employability

Holmes' (2010) definitions of employability (skills-based approach, positional approach and processual approach) were used to explore the understanding of employability. Eighteen respondents indicated that a 'skills-based' approach was most close to their definition of employability. They thought employability referred to graduates developing skills, knowledge and attributes which will make a contribution to the employer promote their chances of employment. Seven of them chose

'processual' approach, in which employability is conceptualised as a form of identity and it is relational, emergent and influenced largely by graduates' 'lived experience' of the labour market. Five respondents claimed the 'positional' approach was most close to their understanding. In their opinions, social position and societal stratification are of great significance in people's life.

Influential factors

As far as influential factors to the respondents' understanding of employability were concerned, it is apparent that a range of factors had different levels of influence on their understanding of employability. Eight respondents responded that their family was the only influence on their understanding. Similarly, there are seven respondents indicating they are only influenced by their study. Compared to family and study, the influence of work is not very obvious. There are just three respondents showing that they are influenced just by work. However, apart from the people who have been influenced by a single factor, six people mentioned that they were influenced by both family and study, and four respondents indicated they were influenced by both work and study. Moreover, one respondent thought he was influenced by all these factors, and at the same time one respondent thought he was not influenced by any factor.

Reviewing the opinions on the least influential factors, five factors were mentioned, including work culture, age, gender, family background and family responsibility. Gender was identified by the most respondents (12 respondents) as having the least influence in affecting employability, followed by work culture identified by nine respondents.

Approaches to manage employability

Different people may adopt different strategies to enhance their employability. Reviewing the choices from the respondents using Tomlinson's (2007) typology and explanation to give an indication of their approach to their future careers, work and employability, fifteen people identified their approach as Careerist approach, fourteen people went for the Ritualist approach and only one chose the Rebel approach.

The Careerist approach and the Ritualist approach almost got the even support from the respondents. For the people who chose the Careerist approach, it is demonstrated that almost each of them has got their own career goal or career plan. They aimed to fulfill personal values and personal development. For the people who went for the Ritualist approach, they have shown that the job for them at the moment is more like a means to make a living. Some of them (mostly female respondents) illustrated that getting a good job manifests itself as having enough money for their family and themselves to have a good life. While some of them mentioned that only after having certain financial guarantee, there is possibility for career development or personal fulfillment. Furthermore, in analysis of profiles of the respondents in relation to different types of British universities they studies, there were eight ritualist, six careerists, and one rebel in the teaching universities, but there were nine careerists and six ritualists in the research universities.

Conclusions

An understanding of employability predominately relates to the skills approach to manage employability, this is consistent with the skills agenda being promoted by many British universities. In terms of managing their future careers, work and employability, the results indicated that the Chinese students are careerists or ritualists. As far as the influential factors in their development of employability are concerned, personal skills and attitudes are perceived as the most influential factor to their employability with gender and age been the least influential. We will frame the discussion of the research in terms of the implications this may have on the preparation international students receive for their future employability, considering specifically the provision for those who may return home following graduation.

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