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### **International branch campus students' perceptions of what 'developing employability' is**

There is little consensus on the concept of employability in the literature despite its emphasis in the UK higher education (HE) for the past 20 years (Knight & Yorke, 2003; Boden & Nedeva, 2010). In HE, the difficulty lies in a lack of coherence about what is meant by employability itself (Tymon, 2011).

Some definitions assume that there is ample employment to be gained or focussed on the supply side (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Knight & Yorke, 2003). Brown et al. (2004) address these by looking at the relative dimension of employability. Holmes (2001) argues that graduate employability should be examined based on practice and identity in relation to performance. Wenger's (1998) idea of 'communities of practice' fits in with Holmes' 'graduate identity' approach to enrich our understanding of graduate employability. How individuals 'make their way through the world' (Archer, 2007), including employability-related choices and experiences at university, is saturated with social meaning. Although IBC students shared very similar cultural resources, they still differed in significant ways for competition in the labour market.

Most empirical research on graduate employability has been quantitative focusing on graduate destination and large-scale survey data and likely career trajectories of different groups of graduates (Tomlinson, 2007). A few notable exceptions are Brown and Hesketh (2004), Tomlinson (2005), and Kok and Cheah (2011). Some studies adopted multiple methods such as Mason et al. (2009) and Brennan and Shah (2003).

Despite a quality assurance requirement that any provision developing employability within a UK programme should also be provided at its IBC, there is little evidence of this in practice (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2015). In a TNHE literature review, O'Mahony (2014) identified 219 research records since 2005 but nothing on employability. However, there are a small number of employability studies (Speight et al., 2012; Bailey & Ingimundardottir, 2015).

Despite universities' best intentions, an individual's employability is ultimately his/her responsibility. Thus, isolating employability from the rest of individuals' 'construction of self' would impoverish our understanding (Li & Lowe, n.d.).

Research on employability in China has predominantly been quantitative (Morgan & Wu, 2011); focussed on Chinese university graduates (Guo & Heijden, 2008; Li, Morgan, et al., 2008; Li et al., 2009; Li, Ding, et al., 2008) and returning Chinese graduates from abroad (Partridge & Keng, n.d.; Mallam-Hassam & Donaghy, 2010; Hao & Welch, 2012). There is little on TNHE graduates but Speight et al. (2012) is an exception.

The Malaysian research scope on employability is broad: links between HE and industrial training (Pillai et al., 2012), differences between home and foreign graduates (Ball & Chik, 2001; Quah et al., 2009), skill development (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2010), employer perceptions (Husain et al., 2010; Hashim, 2011), a comparison of employer and graduate perceptions (Gurvinder Kaur Gurcharan Singh & Sharan Kaur Garib Singh, 2008; Wye & Lim, 2009), specific disciplines (e.g. Jusoh et al., 2007 on business graduates), sectors (e.g. Mohamad Sattar Rasul et al., 2009 focused on the manufacturing sector), location of tertiary institutions (a proxy for quality) and racial preference in

selection processes (Lee, 2012). With regards to Malaysian TNHE graduates, the research has concentrated on employers but few are qualitative or clear on terminology. Bailey and Ingimundardottir (2015) and Pyvis and Chapman (2007) are notably different but latter is not on employability specifically. They show cultural factors influencing the results based on nationalities. Hence, there is case for 1) framing the notion of employability from the students' understandings; and 2) examining if data revealed nationality or culture based differences.

The measurement of employability is often deployed through graduate destinations and employment rates surveys which provide a limited overview of employment rather than employability. Thus, this paper argues for a qualitative measurement following the graduate identity approach with the theoretical underpinnings of a socio-economic framework encompassing rate of return to education, signalling/screening and identity economics within the analytic dualism of structure and agency.

Participants' responses were rather mixed on the role university plays although the specific question itself did not refer to the university. Their responses reflected the complexity surrounding the definition of employability development. The overall understanding of employability development they presented was not reduced to any single approach such as the skills agenda, but rather displayed reflexive engagement with activities during their time at university that revealed their beliefs about the university's function and purpose which shaped their identity formation at university. This demonstrates how they had negotiated meaning of the purpose of their time at university. They mainly provided indicators to show what they understood by 'developing employability': knowledge and skills acquisition, practical work-related experience, academic achievement, character building, social capital, and knowing and learning how to present themselves during the job recruitment process by articulating this employability 'package' as a warrant for their graduate identity.

While instrumentalism was evident in the participants' understanding of 'developing employability', findings also suggest that it is more than instrumental. A possible explanation for the wider understanding of employability development is the pool of IBC participants itself, i.e., participant selection criteria included a minimum period of one semester of study at the parent university. The implication is that IBC students who spent part of their study at the parent campus may have a more holistic perspective on developing employability than their peers who stayed at the IBC for their entire degree.

(890 words excluding references)

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