

R1.5 Beaumaris Lounge Friday 7 December 9.00-11.00

“I am a researcher but also your friend”: working with diarists during a long-term study on employability management (0224)

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Using solicited diaries in data collection enables the researcher to access participants' lives across time and contexts, which is difficult to achieve by other methods (Breakwell, 2006). Diaries also allow participants express their own versions or interpretations of events with fewer interventions from the researcher (Hammond and Wellington, 2013). However, diary studies, especially those with longitudinal purposes, require a vast amount of investment on time and efforts from participants, which leads to the challenges of both participant recruitment and retention (Xiao, 2016). This presentation aims to discuss how I have tried to work with diarists effectively throughout the process.

Solicited diaries, combined with semi-structured interviews, have been adopted as the data collection methods in my PhD project which focuses on the employability management of Chinese international students. Specifically, I conducted two-round interviews, with the first one at the beginning of the academic year 2017-2018 and the second one at the end. During the nine months in between, participants were required to record their employability-related experiences in diaries for one full week per month. The purpose of the diary research was to trace the process of how participants' understandings of employability were developed, and which strategies they used to make themselves more employable during receiving overseas education.

The population of this research was Chinese students who completed their undergraduate studies in China, and who were then studying social science taught Master's programmes in the UK. The challenges therefore in the participant recruitment were how to access sufficient participants within very limited time (since Master's students usually arrive in the UK at the end of September), and how to persuade enough number of people to join in such a time-consuming study. In terms of the participant retention, the main concerns were how to avoid drop-off and respondent fatigue.

Having successfully recruited 33 participants within one month and only lost one of them during the research period, in this presentation I share four principal strategies in relation to how I cooperated with my participants in the diary research. 1) what media and occasions I utilized to expose the research to a wide range of the targeted population; 2) how I 'marketed' the project to students; 3) how I designed the diary research to make it more participant-friendly; and 4) what other roles I played in my participants lives beyond the research.