

## **SRHE 2018 Individual Paper Proposal**

### **Stream: Employability, enterprise and graduate careers**

#### **Enhancing the Employability of International Students: Chinese students on taught Master's programmes in social sciences**

##### **Abstract**

As the largest source country of international students, China has witnessed a huge wave of returnees in the latest five years. Chinese international students, who expect positive benefits of overseas education on their career prospects, nowadays confront employment difficulties in the Chinese labour market. However insufficient research exists on Chinese students' understandings of the relationship between their overseas learning experience and their employability enhancement. The research that this presentation is based on takes Chinese international students (who completed their undergraduate studies in China) studying social science taught Master's programmes in the UK as the sample, adopting Capabilities Approach as the theoretical framework, employing semi-structured interviews and solicited diaries to explore: 1) what are the initial motivations of Chinese students choosing to study abroad, and what their expectations of studying abroad in terms of their employability enhancement; 2) how they manage their employability during receiving overseas education; and 3) what factors influence their understanding of and approaches towards employability management.

##### **Paper**

China currently sends the largest number of students of all countries to international study destinations. From 1978, the year that Chinese government enacted "Reform and Opening" policy, to the end of 2017, the total number of Chinese international students has climbed to 519,490,000 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018). Among these students, 313,200,000 have returned to China to develop their career after they graduated, with 73.87% of them returning to China after 2012 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018). Many Chinese students regard studying abroad as a significant stepping stone towards better career prospects (Willis, 2004; Wang, 2016). However due to the increasing number of Chinese international students and the huge wave of returnees, difficulties in the graduate employment market have been exacerbated, also affected by higher education expansion locally in China (Wang & Miao, 2017). Moreover, the international returnees do not only confront challenges in finding jobs, but also suffer low job satisfactions because of lower salaries than expected (Education Online, 2015, New Oriental, 2016), a mismatch between course of study and employment opportunities (Wang & Miao, 2016), and the challenges of adapting to the Chinese working context (Yuping & Suyan, 2015). These phenomena drive the imperative to explore how Chinese international students can make use of their overseas education to enhance their employability so as to achieve a better career future when they return to the Chinese labour market.

Reviewing the literature on studying abroad, Chinese international students and graduate employability, three main research gaps have been identified (Cao, 2017). First and foremost, most existing studies on graduate employability have a strong national focus, with fewer studies concentrating on the increasingly international dimensions of higher education and graduate employability. Secondly, the majority of existing studies on Chinese international students tend to investigate their language acquisition, academic achievements and intercultural adaptation, but seldom discuss their employability. Thirdly, compared to business students and engineering students, Chinese international students in social sciences are relatively speaking neglected by research studies. In order to fill these gaps, this research focuses on the following three research questions:

1. What are the initial motivations of Chinese students choosing to study abroad, and what are their expectations of studying abroad in terms of their employability enhancement?
2. How do these students manage their employability while receiving overseas education?
3. What factors influence these students' understanding of and approaches towards employability management?

This research is a qualitative study which involves a relatively small number of participants but explores their experiences and perceptions in depth. Capabilities approach (Sen, 1980, 1992; Nussbaum, 1995, 2000) is adopted as the theoretical framework, since it provides an angle to conceptualize the employability in a broader context and connects students' employability to their holistic lives and wellbeing. The targeted population is Chinese students who completed their undergraduate studies in China and study social science taught Master's programmes in the UK. In total 33 qualified students are involved in the sample group, with convenience sampling and snowball sampling used to recruit them. As for the data collection, diary-interview method (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977) was employed. To be specific, there were two rounds of semi-structured interviews, with the first one at the beginning (October-November, 2017) of the academic year 2017-2018 and the second one at the end (August-September, 2018). During the nine months in between, participants were asked to record their employability-related experiences in the solicited diaries for one week per month.

Data emerging from this research suggest that the motivations for current Chinese students studying abroad can be highly diverse, with the career development being an important expectation but not the only goal. The majority of participants in this research do understand the huge scale of Chinese international students and returnees, and they have realized the inflation of the overseas degree, which means the degree itself cannot secure them good jobs and competitive salaries when they come back to the Chinese labour market. Therefore while a small number of students directly linked their choice of studying abroad to career development, more participants expressed a higher

expectations on their personal employability enhancement rather than the graduate employment outcomes only. Furthermore, students looked forward to the long-term rather than the short-term benefits brought about by studying abroad. During this year, participants in this research developed their employability through different ways including academic learning, extra-curriculum activities and other experiences in everyday lives, with their teachers, classmates, friends, partner, parents, previous colleagues actively or passively involved in their employability management practices. As students in social sciences who believed that their courses were not particularly technically oriented, they drew more attention to the enhancement of their generic skills and personal attributes rather than the professional skills. In addition, this research also challenges the tendency in previous studies to homogenize Chinese international students, by demonstrating how some conversion factors such as various regions of origin, financial conditions, educational and professional trajectories, previous overseas experiences, adaptation to western academic culture, expectations for international networks and so forth influence students' strategies during overseas education. From a perspective of capabilities approach, this research discovers how employability management is embedded in a wide range of experiences in Chinese international students' everyday lives and how the fluctuations in students' self-evaluated employability interact with their wellbeing during their overseas journeys.

This research contributes to the research areas of international higher education and graduate employability from three perspectives. Empirically, it explores the experiences of Chinese international students in *social sciences* which is a group under-explored by previous studies. Methodologically, adopting diary-interview method to enter participants' everyday lives enriches the practices of this under-used method in the higher education domain. Theoretically, using capabilities approach to theorize the employability of international graduates showcases how this theory can be open to the issues across contexts.

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