

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Using graduate capital to understand Chinese PhDs' self-perceived employability

Manli Xu¹

¹*University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom*

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Abstract: This study employed a mixed method approach to explore Chinese PhDs' self-perceived employability which associated with how they understand to play the graduate labour market entry game in a more intense 'war for talent'. Utilising Tomlinson's graduate capital approach (i.e. human, social, cultural, identity and psychological capital), this study assessed Chinese PhDs' (N=234) perceptions of employability and the key dimensions of each form of capital via validated psychometric instruments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with PhDs (N=31) who completed the survey and indicated their interests to participate the follow-up study. The findings highlighted the positive correlation between forms of capital and Chinese PhDs' self-perceived employability. The evidence also showed PhDs' possession of forms of capital conferred advantageous onto their employability and career transition. A thorough understanding of Chinese PhDs' self-perceived employability may bring practical implications for relevant stakeholders when consider to embed graduate capital into PhD employability strategy.

Paper: Introduction

The key feature of PhD crisis discourse internationally is universities are producing too many doctorates for too few academic jobs, and they lack skills to signal employers outside of academia (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015). Particularly, China has been questioned producing too many PhDs since the expansion of higher education (Cyranoski et al., 2011). The increase in the number of PhDs is not only caused by domestic demand for highly-educated workforce, but also attributed to the sequential effect of widening access for undergraduate and master level. Domestic Chinese PhDs have to face the increasing competition with the overseas returners who also had appropriate qualification and skills (Xiahua, 2013). As the weakening currency of credential and the intensification of competition in the labour market where students' employability is of particular important to further our understanding of the complex 'war for talent' (Brown & Hesketh, 2004, p.2). Much of the existing research on Chinese PhDs have strongly focused on finding out which impact factors might contribute to 'positive outcomes' (A report on the doctoral quality in China, 2010), in which also implied a

political interest in and scrutiny of PhD's employability to be academics.

What is missing from the research is a consideration of how Chinese PhDs construct and manage their employability as they enter the labour market, and how they prepare and approach the target labour market in a more intense 'war for talent'. Due to the difficulty of accessing and tracking PhD groups as well as the lack of sufficient data in this field, the self-perceived employability of Chinese PhDs is under-researched. Thus, the main purpose of this study was to explore Chinese PhDs' self-perceived employability which associated with how they understand to play the graduate labour market entry game. A thorough understanding of Chinese PhDs' self-perceived employability may bring the practical implications for relevant stakeholders (i.e. supervisors, graduate school and career service) in helping PhDs make a successful transition into the labour market.

Conceptual framework

This study utilised Tomlinson's graduate capital model (2017), which conceptualised employability as 'constituting a range of dynamic, interactive forms of capital which are acquired through graduates' lived experiences' (p.340). Apart from dominant skills approach to employability, Tomlinson's model consists of five capital resources – they are human, social, cultural, identity and psychological capital. The model depicts two important dimensions for each form of capital, which includes the key resources related to each and how they are utilised when students make a transition into the labour market.

Tomlinson's model was developed mainly to inform an alternative understanding of students' employability and has not been applied to Chinese PhDs. However, the strength of using capital approach is its emphasis on the multi-dimensions of employability, and which also can inform a PhD's immediate relations with the labour market. Underpinned by this conceptual approach, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Chinese PhDs perceive their own employability and the scope of labour market?
2. How do they understand and utilise the forms of capital in preparing the transition towards labour market?

Methodology

This study employed a mixed method approach to explore Chinese PhDs' self-perceived employability which drew upon Tomlinson's graduate capital model. The convenient and volunteer sampling were used in the data collection due to it was difficult to access PhD groups in the target university. PhDs (N=234) were assessed their self-perception of employability and key dimensions of each form of capital via validated psychometric instruments (Rothwell et al., 2008; Hirschi et al., 2017; Stumpf & Colarelli, 1983; Dobrow & Higgins, 2005; Bateman & Crant, 1993; Luthans et al., 2007). 31 PhDs who completed the survey and indicated their interests to participate the follow-up study were invited to take part in semi-structured interview.

This study did not attempt to generalise the results but provided insights into how Chinese PhDs developed and sought to utilise capital resources towards managing their employability and career transition.

Findings

It was found the key dimensions of each form of capital together with parental influences (e.g. education and occupation) explained 55.6% variance of Chinese PhDs' self-perceived employability. Forms of capital positively correlated to Chinese PhDs' self-perceived employability, which means students who scored higher in the forms of capital were more likely to get higher score in their self-perceived employability. In line with quantitative results, interview evidence suggested five forms of capital differ in their content and scope but they equip PhDs' employability in advantageous way.

The majority of PhDs expressed their intentions to pursue a professional job (i.e. academics and R&D roles), so they perceived the importance of articulating excellent hard currencies, such as academic performance in research and publications. Clearly certain themes reflected PhDs' growing sense of the necessity of building up the relative graduate profile (i.e. attending highly-valued academic conferences, publishing paper as the first or independent author, obtaining CSC scholarship for overseas study). Human and cultural capital ascertained the important aspects of PhDs' employability which helped them to find out what is valued in and outside of academia, and how to establish prestige and distinction in a competitive academic field. The trust knowledge developed through the established networks increased STEM PhDs' possibilities of getting information of job opening that was not advertised. PhDs with the emerging academic identity impelled them towards proactively developing their academic employability. The possession of psychological capital helped PhDs to deal with the paper rejection, which improved their level of resilience in the face of potential set-backs in the future. The findings also revealed how gender and other biographical differences (i.e. work-experience, academic discipline, parental influence) influenced students' formation of the forms of capital, which in turn led them to see futures and approach the target labour market differently.

All these evidence-based sources may bring the practical implications for relevant stakeholders (e.g. supervisors, graduate school and career service) when consider to embed graduate capital into PhD employability strategy.

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