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Chinese students' study in the UK and employability: the views of Chinese employers, students and alumni, and UK teachers

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ABSTRACT

While not the only motive for Chinese students to come to study in the UK, employability must be one key factor. Yet there is relatively little research on perceptions among students, employers and teachers of how studying in the UK impacts employment prospects. This paper seeks to compare the views of these stakeholders on what are the essential skills needed for employability and whether these match those gained through study abroad. The data used was from an online questionnaire. The data showed that while there seemed to be some agreement about what skills were valued for employability and about what was learned in studying in the UK yet there was quite a strong mismatch between the two. Free text responses to the survey confirmed from previous research that reverse culture shock and work experience issues were important barriers to employability. They also revealed some types of challenge not identified or given emphasis before such as a reverse language shock and a misalignment between the timing of recruitment rounds and study in the UK. The data also confirmed the relative weakness of career advice for international students.

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Employability; international students; overseas employers

Introduction

Much of the literature on internationalisation focuses on the challenge to students and educators of managing their transition to a new learning environment and culture. What has been far less researched is the benefit that study abroad brings to the student. While not the only type of benefit, it is in terms of employability that many young people think of the value of studying in another country. With over 120,000 students from China studying in the UK each year, making up nearly a quarter of all international students (UKCISA, 2020), the question of how study in the UK impacts Chinese international students' employability is a critical issue both for students themselves and for educators. Relatively little research has been conducted on this, in particular on the differing perspectives of all the stakeholders: employers, current students, alumni, and teachers.

Employability as a driver for study abroad

One useful definition of employability by Yorke and Knight (2006, p. 8) is that it is 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'. This emphasises not just personal attributes, alongside skills and knowledge, but also points to the idea of longer-term success and satisfaction in an employment role as being part of employability.

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Increasingly for a marketised education system, employability of graduates is a key purpose of HE and one of the main reasons for international students to study in the UK. Critics argue that education is for much more than this and that universities should resist the employability agenda (e.g. Artess, Hooley, and Mellors-Bourne 2017). Further the connection between skills and employability assumed in government policies may not hold (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011). Nevertheless, there is little doubt that employability is a key driver for studying abroad in the minds of students themselves, particularly when widely understood not merely in terms of skills and knowledge acquisition, but also in terms of character development. It is also a way many educators think about their own teaching.

Xiang and Shen (2009) provide context for international study for employability among Chinese students. From the 1980s candidates to be supported for study abroad were selected on merit by the state and rewarded with good jobs on their return. Later it became a way for relatively privileged families to buy advantages in the job market for their offspring, to 'gild' them, as it is sometimes referred to in China. However, people have started to ask whether returnees are 'sea turtles' (returning with knowledge) or simply 'seaweed' (Zweig and Han 2010). The advantage gained from education, including study abroad, has declined and is now rather uncertain, because of the growing number of returnees and graduates from the best home universities in a highly competitive job market. Nevertheless, study abroad remains seen as a worthwhile investment (Li 2013; Zhai et al. 2021). Many target working for multi-national companies and study abroad obviously would have particular value in this context (Mok, Lang, and Xiao 2020). Although in reality it may be that they do not succeed in gaining these types of job and actually have careers in private companies where the advantages are less clear, it remains a motivation. As well as the pull factors of its benefits, we could recognise the push factors for students wishing to learn abroad. This seems partly to do with the wider restrictive political regime but more specifically the Chinese educational system is seen as rather rigid, and students come to countries like the UK because of the greater choice they have in what to study (Mok, Lang, and Xiao 2020).

For many the value of the investment in study abroad is not so much merely for the qualification, or even skills and knowledge acquired, but the character development or 'SuZhi' gained (Li 2013). Studying abroad can lead to a profound identity transformation (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015). It also leads students to have a greater understanding of their own culture (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015). Female students in particular seek to use gaining extra credentials as a way to overcome gender discrimination in the job market (Tharenou 2010). Mid-career employees use it as a way to advance their career and break through a career bottleneck (Moseley 2009).

Skills, knowledge and attitudes for employability

While not the only way of looking at employability, one important aspect is how the skills, knowledge and attitudes developed through study contribute directly to a student's ability to create a career. A large number of attempts have been made to articulate the key skills and traits required in the modern workplace (e.g. Hinchliffe, William & Adrienne, 2011; Tynjälä et al. 2006; Washer 2007; Kotsiou et al. 2022). One influential framework, for example, is the World Economic Forum (2016), 21st century skills model which identifies foundational literacies, competencies (critical thinking/problem solving, creativity, communication and collaboration) and character qualities (curiosity, initiative, persistence, adaptability, leadership, social and cultural awareness). This listing reflects that as well as technical knowledge about a job, it is widely understood that soft skills, encompassing people and communication skills and appropriate attitudes, are an important component of employability and likely to become more so (Mok, Xiong, and Ye 2021).

More specifically a small number of studies have tried to capture the employability attributes that Chinese students might need. Huang and Turner (2018) suggest that most Chinese students anticipated that studying abroad would improve their employability, particularly through greater understanding of cultural issues, self-confidence and self-management, better interpersonal skills

and self understanding, echoing previous studies such as that of Gu and Schweisfurth (2015). Singh and Fan (2021) differentiate benefits in terms of different forms of capital: human, psychological, identity, cultural and social. Su and Zhang (2015) undertook a study of Chinese students and employers that sought to identify the main attributes that each group prioritised and compare the rank order of their ratings. Although not about international study, it is a highly relevant piece of literature for the topic of this paper, but is marred by poor translation to English, meaning that some of the terms they asked participants to rank are hard to precisely understand and their definition unclear, at least from the published paper. Nevertheless, it is interesting that employers rated the top attributes as: sense of responsibility, teamwork, professional knowledge, 'morals quality' and initiative. Students' top ranking skills were 'teamwork', 'initiative', 'sense of responsibility', 'solve professional problems' and 'understanding others rightly'. The findings suggest a certain level of mismatch between the priorities of the two groups.

The most useful reference point for the current study is a British Council (2018) report that surveyed 350 employers in China to explore their perceptions of graduates of overseas studies returning to the country. Although it investigated only employers' views it did compare their attitudes to returnees from study abroad to their attitudes to home taught students. The report showed clearly that employers did see study abroad as advantageous. It found that study abroad was seen to equip Chinese international students with significant advantages over their peers with domestic degrees in areas such as creativity, problem-solving and analytical skills, and interpersonal and communication skills (British Council, 2018). Interestingly, however, it also found that it disadvantaged them relative to local graduates in terms of a lack of knowledge of the local market and in developing local networks, and because they were perceived to be less disciplined and less loyal to their positions due to having more job opportunities (British Council, 2018). Thus study abroad was seen as having significant benefits overall, but also some drawbacks (Xiong and Mok 2020).

A key aspect of employability is that work experience seems to be increasingly seen as a necessary part of the international student study 'package' by employers (Gribble, Rahimi, and Blackmore 2017). However, immigration and visa regulations imposed on international students by host countries together with a lack of built-in placement opportunities within academic programmes, often prevent students from finding meaningful work placements or internships (Goodwin and Mbah 2019; Jackson 2017). Gribble, Rahimi, and Blackmore (2017) argue that international students face difficulties in justifying their international qualifications in the competitive labour markets in their home countries due to a lack of formal work experience and placement opportunities in their study abroad programmes.

Employability support for international students in the UK

Another related issue is how well UK universities support their students' employability, not just through the curriculum, but in terms of careers advice. The evidence suggests that there is a lack of an understanding of the needs of international students and overseas employers both in academic programmes and career support services. Li, Mitts, and Whiston (2021) suggest that while highly motivated to gain career counselling Chinese students use these services little because such services lack understanding of international students' home job markets. Similarly, Huang and Turner (2018) assessed the perceptions of Chinese students in the UK on university support and graduate employability. Their research suggests UK higher education institutions are largely UK-centric and that there is a lack of focus on the employability needs of international students. Similarly, Goodwin and Mbah (2019) examined the roles that administration, curriculum and career services play in the UK supporting international student work placements but found them geared mostly towards home students, often leaving many international students relatively unprepared when entering the job market.

Research aim and objectives

While the experience of Chinese students studying abroad has been quite extensively studied, there has been a relative neglect of skills development and employability, and of comparing views of different stakeholders. This paper sets out to address this gap by comparing the perspectives of Chinese employers, Chinese students on UK courses and alumni of those courses, and UK teachers on how study in the UK impacts student employability. The questions the research sought to answer were:

- (1) What skills do employers, students, alumni and teachers believe are essential to employability, and do their views align?
- (2) What skills do they think study abroad enhances and does that match the requirements for employability?
- (3) What barriers are there to gaining employment after study abroad?

Methods

To answer these research questions, an online survey was designed and distributed to Chinese employers, alumni, current students, and UK teaching staff in May 2020.

The main body of the questionnaire asked respondents to categorise the level of importance of 34 different skills/ attributes derived from the literature, firstly as for how they contribute to employability and then how far study abroad in the UK enabled students to strengthen them. These included a mix of hard skills (e.g. good with numbers), communication and soft skills, and personal attributes. The World Economic Forum (2016) character qualities were included, as well as critical thinking, problem solving and creativity. It also included items that were found to be significant in the British Council study, such as knowledge of local markets. Recognising the ambiguity of many of the terms on such listings, the lack of standard definitions (Mok, Xiong, and Ye 2021) and that some terms do not have a mandarin equivalent, in the Chinese language version of the questionnaire (sent to employers, alumni and students) we provided a gloss on some terms, such as:

- Loyalty to the employer (to the organisation and positions)
- Adaptability (e.g., ability to adapt and act effectively in new situations)
- Assertiveness (e.g., able to express one's own views firmly)

The survey also included questions about their motive to study abroad and level of study, and their perception of careers support services (students) or sector of work (employers and alumni).

The survey was distributed to employers through personal contacts and to the contacts of the University of Sheffield careers service, with an invitation for respondents to ask their own contacts to participate. Current students were recruited from the University of Sheffield volunteers list and through the university Chinese Students Society. Again, respondents were invited to ask contacts to participate. Alumni were recruited from contacts, the university Chinese Student Society and indirectly through groups based in China for students who have studied in the UK. Teachers were recruited via the University of Sheffield volunteers list.

Employers responding to the survey ($n = 45$) were evenly distributed between small and medium enterprises and large companies and came from a wide range of industries, including higher education (24%), Engineering and Manufacturing (16%), Accounting and Finance (11%) and Business Management (11%). The majority of employers had less than 25% of their employees with study abroad experience.

A total of 148 questionnaires were collected from alumni ($n = 59$) and current students ($n = 89$), including female ($n = 89$); male ($n = 58$); other ($n = 1$). Most were studying or had studied at a PGT level (80%). The majority of participants were from the social sciences (50%).

The response from teachers was disappointing (n = 17). Of these only two respondents claimed to have good knowledge of the Chinese employment market: most said they had little or no knowledge of it. The low response rate might reflect a widespread lack of knowledge of Chinese employability.

The analysis of the questionnaire data was based on descriptive statistics. As an exploratory study we did not base the questions on a pre-given model or hypotheses, so our analysis is primarily of descriptive statistics, tested for significance. In some cases, particularly for UK teachers, the response rate precluded identifying statistically significant patterns. We place stress on the value of qualitative responses to open text questions.

To further support the quantitative data from closed questions, open-ended questions were included in the survey, for example, asking employers how they thought studying in the UK contributes to Chinese students' employability and about their experiences of employing Chinese overseas returnees. Alumni and students were asked about their main concerns about working/ applying for jobs in China. A thematic approach was used to analyse the free-text data collected from open questions.

Findings

Motivations for students to study in the UK and degree level preferred by employers

The most frequent reasons students (current and alumni) gave for pursuing a UK degree were, in order, personal growth, employability, life experience, speed of gaining a degree (the programme length is shorter in the UK compared to other countries), and to gain English language skills (Figure 1). Thus, although employability is not by any means the sole driver, it is ranked as the second most important reason to study abroad.

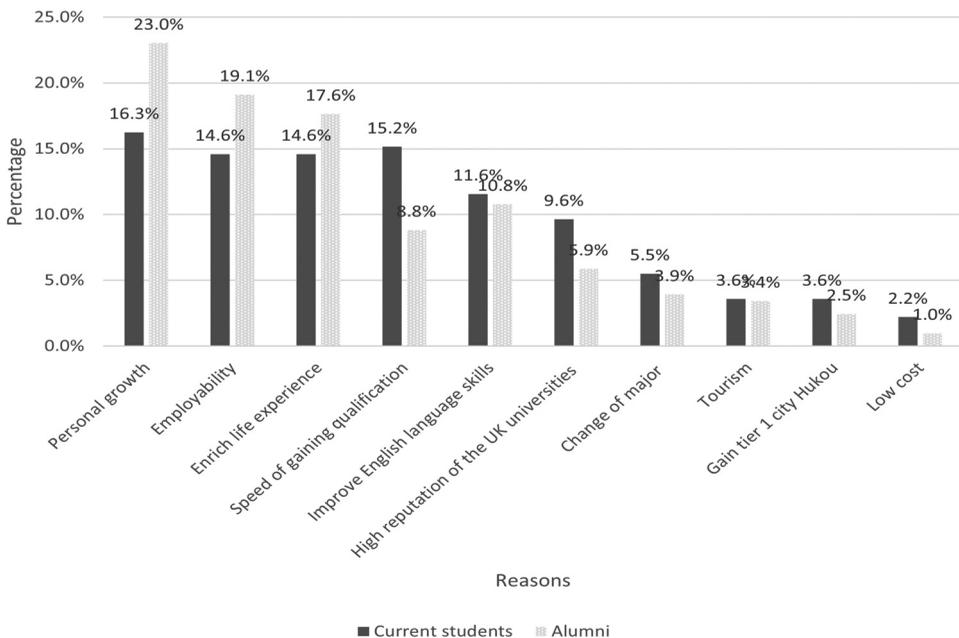


Figure 1. Reasons for current students and alumni to pursue a degree abroad.

According to the survey data, a PGT degree is the most sought-after degree level by employers (46%), followed by a UG degree (34%). A PGR degree is deemed less desirable (20%). Consistent with this our data indicates that a majority of alumni and current students surveyed have or are studying a PGT degree. The survey also showed that most students intended to return to China for employment after graduation.

What makes a student employable?

To address our first research question about views of employability, employers, alumni, current students, and teachers were asked to categorise a list of 34 different skills derived from the literature, into not important, essential, and desirable skills. For the current paper, we focus on what was deemed to be essential. Responses were analysed using SPSS. We calculated the frequencies (percentages) of skills selected by participants within each stakeholder group and then ranked the options on the basis of frequency. In the tables below we present the top essential skills (percentages and calculated rank number) from the perspective of employers and then map them with how these skills were viewed by current students, alumni, and teachers.

Figure 2 shows the top 10 essential skills from the perspective of employers. Employers considered time management and ability to take the initiative as the joint top essential skills for employability. Subject specific skills, Chinese language and foreign language skills are also prominent. They seemed to have a mixed view of the 21st century skills identified by the World Economic Forum (WEF), with some highly valued others towards the bottom of the list (Table 1). There was some impressionistic evidence that there might be sectoral differences between employers. For example, the largest group of employers (those in HE) seemed to value foreign language more and time management and ability to take initiative less than others. The numbers in the different employer groups were too small for the differences to be statistically significant

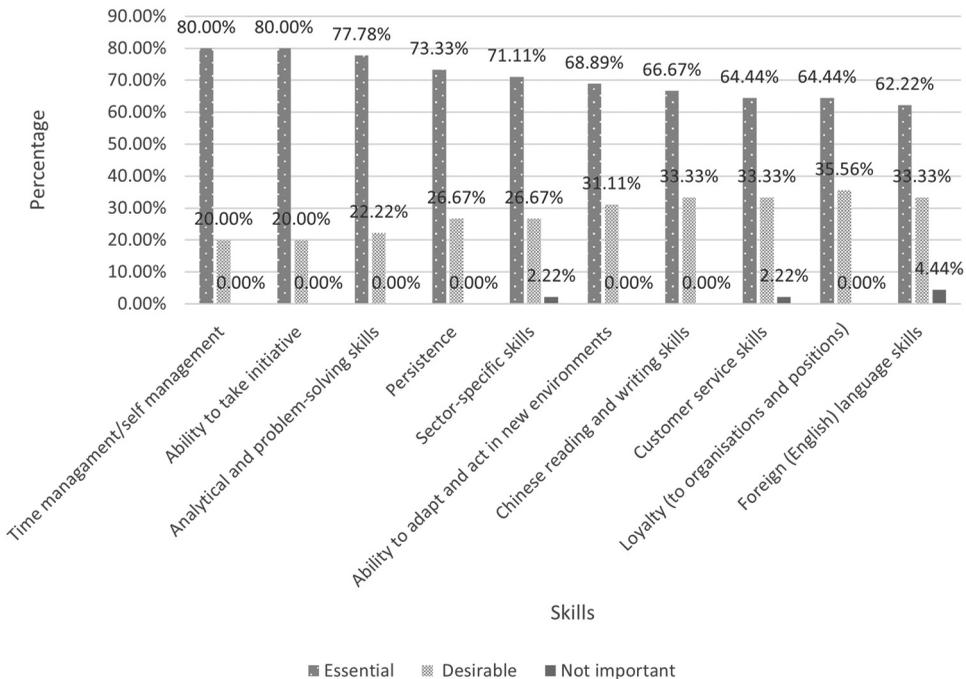


Figure 2. Employers’ rating of top 10 essential skills.

Table 1. Employers' ranking of WEF 21st century competencies and character qualities.

| Skills | Percentage response (essential skills) | Calculated Rank |
|--|--|-----------------|
| Ability to take initiative (积极主动) | 80% | 1 |
| Analytical and problem solving skills (分析能力和问题解决能力) | 78% | 3 |
| Persistence (坚持努力的态度) | 73% | 4 |
| Ability to adapt and act in new situations (适应力,例如适应新环境) | 69% | 6 |
| Creativity (创造力) | 47% | 16 |
| Curiosity (拥有对于新事物好奇心) | 38% | 19 |
| Critical thinking (批判性思维) | 36% | 22 |
| Social and cultural awareness (跨文化意识) | 29% | 26 |
| Leadership skills (领导力) | 11% | 33 |

To examine the similarities and differences between different survey participants further analysis was conducted. Spearman's rho correlation was calculated to identify relationships between the variables of which skills were considered essential to employability by employers, alumni, current students, and teachers respectively (Table 2). There was a statistically significant relationship between answers from employers and alumni ($r_s = .78, p < 0.001$), employers and current students ($r_s = .84, p < 0.001$), employer and teachers ($r_s = .507, p = 0.002$). Thus employers' perception of what skills contribute to employability is strongly related to those of alumni and current students and is moderately related to teachers'. This shows that both alumni and students understand what employers are looking for in employees. UK teachers have a less aligned perspective. This is not surprising because the needs of employers may well be different in the UK, plus participants acknowledged that they did not necessarily know much about the Chinese labour market.

More descriptively, Tables 3 and 4 present the skills rated in the top and bottom 10 by employers, and how other participants rated these same skills.

Reflecting further on Tables 3 and 4, in terms of the skills thought to be essential most agreement seemed to be around time management, analytical and problem solving skills, ability to adapt and Chinese language skills, and with the exception of teachers, ability to take the initiative and persistence (Table 3). Loyalty to the employer and customer service seemed to be the only items that were important to employers and appeared relatively low down the other lists.

Teachers thought ability to take the initiative, assertiveness, persistence, customer service and loyalty to the employer were less essential than did employers. It is perhaps surprising that they under-rated the first three items, since they would generally be deemed important in employability in any context. Perhaps not surprisingly, given their importance to UK educators, they thought critical thinking and social and cultural awareness were more important to employability than did Chinese employers.

In terms of what was rated as essential less frequently, again answers were similar between the four groups (Table 4). It is rather surprising to see work experience so low down the list. Also, given that Chinese workplaces are generally perceived to be hierarchical the low rating of respect for superiors and for elders was again surprising. The low rating of leadership skills is perhaps more in tune with expectation.

Table 2. Spearman's rho correlations among essential employability skills ($n = 34$).

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|--|--------|--------|--------|---|
| (1) What makes employable (employers) | - | | | |
| (2) What makes employable (alumni) | .774** | - | | |
| (3) What makes employable (current students) | .838** | .888** | - | |
| (4) What makes employable (teachers) | .507** | .543** | .491** | - |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)

Table 3. Employers' top ten essential skills for employability and how they were rated by alumni, current students and teachers.

| | Percentage of Employers identifying item as essential | Calculated Employers' ranking | Alumni | Calculate Alumni ranking | Current students | Calculated Current student ranking | UK Teachers | Calculated UK Teachers' ranking |
|---|--|-------------------------------------|--------|--------------------------------|---------------------|---|----------------|--|
| Time management and self management skills (时间管理/自 我管理能力) | 80% | 1 | 75% | 2 | 75% | 2 | 70% | 2 |
| Ability to take initiative (积极主动) | 80% | 1 | 68% | 4 | 63% | 5 | 40% | 18 |
| Analytical and problem solving skills (分析能力和 问题解决能 力) | 78% | 3 | 83% | 1 | 72% | 3 | 60% | 5 |
| Persistence (坚持努力的 态度) | 73% | 4 | 66% | 6 | 60% | 8 | 40% | 18 |
| Subject specific skills (专业能力,针 对于行业本 身) | 71% | 5 | 64% | 7 | 76% | 1 | 70% | 2 |
| Ability to adapt and act in new situations (适应力,例如 适应新环境) | 69% | 6 | 71% | 3 | 66% | 4 | 60% | 5 |
| Good reading/ writing skills in Chinese (中文阅读写 作能力) | 67% | 7 | 58% | 11 | 53% | 11 | 60% | 5 |
| Customer service (客户服务能 力) | 64% | 8 | 39% | 22 | 44% | 17 | 30% | 24 |
| Loyalty to the employer (忠于所属企 业以及岗位/ 员工忠诚度) | 64% | 8 | 32% | 27 | 43% | 19 | 40% | 18 |
| Foreign (English) language skills (外语(英文)水 平) | 62% | 10 | 46% | 17 | 58% | 10 | 50% | 10 |

What students gain from study abroad

This section considers what skills respondents thought were acquired through study abroad (the first part of research question 2). Participants were asked to categorise the list of 34 skills as to whether they were strengthened, not changed or weakened by study abroad experiences. For the current paper, we focus on skills that were considered enhanced by study abroad. We calculated the frequencies (percentages) of skills selected by participants as strengthened within each stakeholder group and provided a rank number in relation to the 34 skills. We present the top enhanced skills (percentages and calculated ranks) from the perspective of employers and also map them with whether these are considered as essential employability skills by each other stakeholder.

Table 4. Ten skills least often ranked as essential for employability according to Chinese employers mapped to the ranking by alumni, current students and teachers.

| | Percentage of Employers identifying item as essential | Calculated Employers' ranking | Alumni | Calculated Alumni ranking | Current students | Calculated Current student ranking | UK Teachers | Calculated UK Teachers' ranking |
|--|---|-------------------------------|--------|---------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| Respect for diversity (尊敬多元文化) | 33% | 23 | 37% | 25 | 46% | 16 | 20% | 32 |
| Willingness to work outside 9–5 (可以接受加班) | 33% | 23 | 27% | 30 | 26% | 32 | 30% | 24 |
| Respect for superiors (尊重领导) | 33% | 23 | 49% | 16 | 43% | 19 | 25% | 28 |
| Social and cultural awareness (跨文化意识) | 29% | 26 | 32% | 27 | 27% | 31 | 50% | 10 |
| Respect for those who are older because of their experience (尊重前辈) | 29% | 26 | 39% | 22 | 40% | 22 | 25% | 28 |
| Good with numbers (数学能力) | 27% | 28 | 24% | 32 | 30% | 29 | 45% | 15 |
| Ability to create a wide set of personal and family friends and contacts who can be drawn on for work purposes (乐于将个人关系网用于工作中) | 24% | 29 | 20% | 34 | 25% | 33 | 25% | 28 |
| Presentation skills (演讲能力) | 24% | 29 | 42% | 21 | 42% | 21 | 45% | 15 |
| A wide set of local contacts in China (在当地拥有良好的人际关系网) | 22% | 31 | 32% | 27 | 35% | 28 | 50% | 10 |
| Work experience (有相关工作经验) | 16% | 32 | 27% | 30 | 37% | 26 | 30% | 24 |
| Leadership skills (领导力) | 11% | 33 | 36% | 26 | 25% | 33 | 20% | 32 |
| Knowledge of overseas markets, eg UK (了解海外市场) | 9% | 34 | 22% | 33 | 28% | 30 | 25% | 28 |

Spearman's correlation was calculated to identify relationships between the perceptions of employers, alumni, current students, and teachers respectively (Table 5). There was a strong statistically significant correlation between employers and alumni ($r_s = .84, p < 0.001$), employers and current students ($r_s = .80, p < 0.001$), employer and teachers ($r_s = .76, P < 0.001$). Thus, in terms of what skills students have developed studying abroad, there was a statistically significant correlation between all the groups' answers, suggesting that as a whole the respondents shared a common

Table 5. Spearman's rho correlations among skills gained from study abroad (N = 34).

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|--|--------|--------|--------|---|
| (1) Skills gained from study abroad (employers) | - | | | |
| (2) Skills gained from study abroad (alumni) | .837** | - | | |
| (3) Skills gained from study abroad (current students) | .803** | .933** | - | |
| (4) Skills gained from study abroad (teachers) | .761** | .865** | .900** | - |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)

understanding of the skills that are gained through study abroad. This is interesting because again the employers, alumni and students – even UK teachers – have a shared understanding of the value of study abroad.

Employers were asked what skills overseas returnees have more of compared to students who studied in China. The top ten are presented in [Figure 3](#).

The first two items (foreign language skills and knowledge of overseas markets) are unsurprising. Other skills seem to revolve around diversity and abilities in critical thinking, creativity and curiosity. There were few areas where there seemed to be a difference in rating of the specific different skills by the different respondent groups, though the figures are too low to test for statistical significance. The one area where there did seem to be a marked difference was the emphasis placed by students and teachers on subject skills. This suggests that while employers see study abroad as primarily about the experience as a whole and place more focus on soft skills, students and teachers place emphasis on the subject studied. It is not surprising that teachers invest significance in their subject.

Do the gains from study abroad match each group’s priority for employability

The third analysis was to consider whether each group thought that the skills students gained from study abroad matched what those groups thought students needed for employability ([Table 6](#)).

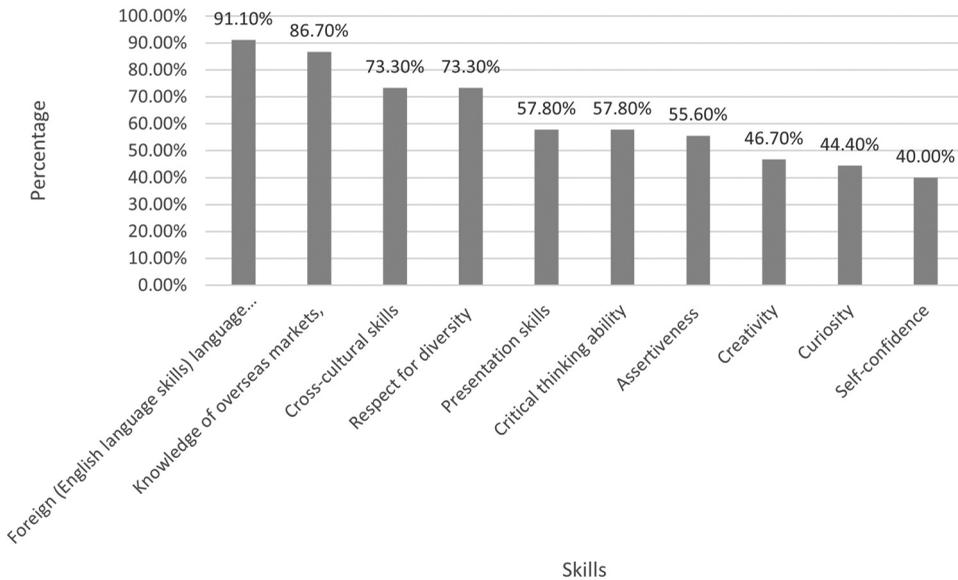


Figure 3. Employers’ top ten skills that returnees are stronger in than home students.

Table 6. Spearman’s rho correlations between what makes employable and skills gained from study abroad (N = 34).

| | | 1 | 2 |
|------------------|------------------------------------|--------|---|
| Employer | 1. What makes employable | - | - |
| | 2. Skills gained from study abroad | .037 | - |
| Alumni | 1. What makes employable | - | - |
| | 2. Skills gained from study abroad | .416** | - |
| Current students | 1. What makes employable | - | - |
| | 2. Skills gained from study abroad | .416** | - |
| Teachers | 1. What makes employable | - | - |
| | 2. Skills gained from study abroad | .056 | - |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)

Table 7. Employers' top ten essential employability skills mapped to what is gained through study abroad.

| | Top skills seen as essential for employability | | Rating of same skills for whether they are gained by study abroad | |
|---|--|----|---|----|
| Time management and self management skills (时间管理/自我管理能力) | 80% | 1 | 24% | 15 |
| Ability to take initiative (积极主动) | 80% | 1 | 16% | 18 |
| Analytical and problem solving skills (分析能力和问题解决能力) | 78% | 3 | 24% | 15 |
| Persistence (坚持努力的态度) | 73% | 4 | 9% | 23 |
| Subject specific skills (专业能力,针对于行业本身) | 71% | 5 | 16% | 18 |
| Ability to adapt and act in new situations (适应力,例如适应新环境) | 69% | 6 | 29% | 12 |
| Good reading/writing skills in Chinese (中文阅读写作能力) | 67% | 7 | 2% | 25 |
| Customer service (客户服务能力) | 64% | 8 | 11% | 20 |
| Loyal to the employer (忠于所属企业以及岗位/员工忠诚度) | 64% | 8 | 4% | 24 |
| Foreign (English) language skills (外语(英文)水平) | 62% | 10 | 91% | 1 |

Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was again used to assess the correlation between what skills each group perceive as essential to employability and what skills are perceived to be gained from studying abroad. For employers, there was no evidence of a significant relationship between the two variables ($r_s = .037$, $p = .836$). There was significant evidence of a relationship between essential employability skills and skills gained from studying abroad from the perspectives of alumni ($r_s = .416$, $p = .015$) and current students ($r_s = .416$, $p = .014$). Both groups reported moderate positive correlations between the two variables. Similar to employers, there was no statistically significant evidence of a relationship between the two variables for teachers ($r_s = .331$, $p = .056$). Thus while students and alumni see what is gained from study abroad as increasing employability, the data does not show a statistically significant correlation for employers and teaching staff.

Thus, here there seemed to be some important mismatches. For employers only one item of the top ten skills gained from study abroad was also in the top 10 skills rated as essential for employability (foreign language skills). Although employers had said that they saw study abroad as valuable many of the most essential traits making someone employable were not being gained (Table 7). Only foreign language skills were in the top ten of essential skills and also appeared in the skills most likely to be gained from study abroad. Similarly, while respect for diversity, social and cultural awareness and critical thinking were all seen as high up the list of skills gained (points also recognised by students) they were low priorities for employability according to employers (Table 8). Also presentation skills and leadership were seen to be gained but were not high up the list of skills that employers valued.

Students' views showed more alignment between what was gained and what was needed for employability, but still with some big discrepancies (Table 9, 10). Ability to take initiative, self confidence, persistence and networking skills were all seen as weakly developed by study abroad, even though of great value to employability. Social and cultural awareness, awareness of UK markets, critical thinking and respect for diversity were seen as strengthened markedly by study abroad but were much lower down the list of employability skills.

Reverse culture shock and language barriers experienced by overseas returnees

In addition to the quantitative data from the survey, there were some interesting insights in the free text comments which deepen our understanding of the issues around employability, allowing us to address research question 3. Thus data from the open text comments shed more light on the

Table 8. Employers' rating of top ten skills gained from study abroad relative to value for employability.

| | Top skills gained from study abroad | | The rating of the value of these skills for employability | |
|--|-------------------------------------|----|---|----|
| Foreign (English) language skills (外语(英文)水平) | 91% | 1 | 62% | 10 |
| Knowledge of overseas markets, eg UK (了解海外市场) | 87% | 2 | 9% | 34 |
| Respect for diversity (尊敬多元文化) | 73% | 3 | 33% | 23 |
| Social and cultural awareness (跨文化意识) | 73% | 3 | 29% | 26 |
| Critical thinking (批判性思维) | 58% | 5 | 36% | 22 |
| Presentation skills (演讲能力) | 58% | 5 | 24% | 29 |
| Assertiveness (自信果敢) | 56% | 7 | 49% | 15 |
| Creativity (创造力) | 47% | 8 | 47% | 16 |
| Curiosity (拥有对于新事物好奇心) | 44% | 9 | 38% | 19 |
| Self confidence (自信) | 40% | 10 | 51% | 13 |

Table 9. Top 10 skills for employability according to current students mapped to skills gained.

| | Top skills seen as essential for employability | | Rating of same skills for whether they are gained by study abroad | |
|---|--|----|---|----|
| Subject specific skills (专业能力,针对于行业本身) | 76% | 1 | 91% | 1 |
| Time management and self management skills (时间管理/自我管理能力) | 75% | 2 | 68% | 9 |
| Analytical and problem solving skills (分析能力和问题解决能力) | 72% | 3 | 79% | 7 |
| Ability to adapt and act in new situations (适应力,例如适应新环境) | 66% | 4 | 91% | 1 |
| Ability to take initiative (积极主动) | 63% | 5 | 57% | 16 |
| Assertiveness (自信果敢,例如,坚定表达自己意见立场) | 63% | 5 | 68% | 9 |
| Self confidence (自信) | 61% | 7 | 57% | 16 |
| Persistence (坚持努力的态度) | 60% | 8 | 51% | 18 |
| Good at networking within the profession (工作中的人际交往能力) | 60% | 8 | 38% | 22 |
| Foreign (English) language skills (外语(英文)水平) | 58% | 10 | 89% | 3 |

challenges in adjusting to a different working culture, including work pace, different teamwork concepts, and working in a monocultural environment. Alumni reported that they had challenges to adjust to a faster pace of life when they returned to China.

Slow pace of life in the west clashes with the fast pace of lifestyle in China (alumni 1)

Attitudes to teamwork also differed:

In the UK, students were taught to work in the team. But in the work environment in China, we are often required to be individually responsible for some tasks. Therefore, ability to independently carry out tasks is more important. (alumni 3)

Table 10. Top 10 skills gained by study abroad according to current students mapped to employability.

| | Top skills gained from study abroad | | The rating of the value of these skills for employability | |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|---|----|
| Subject specific skills (专业能力,针对于行业本身) | 91% | 1 | 76% | 1 |
| Ability to adapt and act in new situations (适应力,例如适应新环境) | 91% | 1 | 66% | 4 |
| Foreign (English) language skills (外语(英文)水平) | 89% | 3 | 58% | 10 |
| Respect for diversity (尊敬多元文化) | 87% | 4 | 46% | 16 |
| Social and cultural awareness (跨文化意识) | 83% | 5 | 27% | 31 |
| Critical thinking (批判性思维) | 82% | 6 | 49% | 15 |
| Analytical and problem solving skills (分析能力和问题解决能力) | 79% | 7 | 72% | 3 |
| Knowledge of overseas markets, eg UK (了解海外市场) | 75% | 8 | 28% | 30 |
| Time management and self management skills (时间管理/自我管理能力) | 68% | 9 | 75% | 2 |
| Assertiveness (自信果敢,例如,坚定表达自己意见立场) | 68% | 9 | 63% | 5 |

Underlying this was that values and awareness formed during their overseas studies did not necessarily fit well with hierarchical workplace cultures they experienced on their return.

There are differences between Chinese culture and British cultures. Value and awareness formed during our overseas study period does not fit with the State owned enterprises working environment. (alumni 20)

Employers also saw significant differences in work culture that were a problem for integration. Thus students who had become accustomed to UK standards of working hours tended to be less flexible in Chinese work environments, which often require employees to work out of normal office hours.

Overseas returnees are more independent. They have better English language skills, particularly spoken English. They are more active and positive in the workplace. They prefer a clear division between work and life. They cannot understand and even reject the culture that requires work out of office hours. (employer 3)

Overseas returnees are often confident and full of ideas, but they lack practical experiences and a diligent attitude. (employer 40)

Employers also perceived them to have a lack of local knowledge essential for the business

Independent thinking, but lacks localisation, especially about Chinese literature and cultural knowledge. (employer 11)

In our assessment centre evaluation, overseas students demonstrate strong presentation skills. However, they lack local knowledge and sector-specific knowledge compared to our domestic students. They usually have a shallow understanding of the industry but lack a clear understanding of the role for which they apply. (employer 12)

According to our quantitative data, Chinese employers considered Chinese reading and writing skill as an essential for student employability (Figure 2 above). However, alumni, current students, and employers all reported that the overseas study experience sometimes had weakened this skill for students. This could be because English speaking and writing skill is considered one of the essential criteria for assessing students' academic performance and employability in universities in the UK. Subject knowledge is taught in English. Students present what they have learned in English. However, the consequence is that students lack the equivalent vocabulary in Mandarin for job interviews and work when English communication is secondary or no longer required. Some free text comments shed light on how this became a problem on return

My subject is Information Management. I wish to take the civil service exam. However, they do not have this subject in the application form. They have Management discipline or Information System discipline. It is difficult to explain what I studied in the UK. (alumni 5)

No English working environment after graduation. Cannot put the English language skills into good use. (alumni 30)

Lack of work experience

A recurring theme which emerged from the open text comments on the survey was the lack of practical elements and subject-related internship or placement opportunities within the relatively shorter academic programmes (e.g. the one-year postgraduate taught degree) offered by the UK higher education institutions. This is in conflict with the rating of work experience towards the bottom of employers' ratings of things essential for employability (Table 2). This low ranking might have been because responding employers recognised that few returning students had such experience and so rated it only as desirable. Some participants said they had witnessed a decrease in the value of the one-year programme common in the UK in the Chinese recruitment market. Although such programmes offer a speedy route for gaining certification, they provide limited opportunities for students to gain practical experience relating to the subjects they study.

Lack of subject-related work experience, which disadvantages us compared to students whose programme offers work experience. (alumni 15)

Actually, most local students have internships or work experience, which give them better knowledge of the industry. (employer 19)

Overseas returnees are often confident and full of ideas, but they lack practical experiences and diligent attitude. (employer 40)

It was also interesting to note that according to alumni some programmes overly emphasise academic content (e.g. theory and research methodology) and overlook practical and technical aspects, which negatively impacts their employability.

There is too little practical elements or internship experience in one-year master's program, which is not good for building CV. (alumni 3)

The academic programme focuses too much on theory and methodology and lacks practical and technical elements. (alumni 37)

The timing of programmes relative to Chinese recruitment rounds

A recurrent theme in open text comments on the survey was that both current students and alumni reported a clash between the recruitment period in China and graduation time in the UK. In China there are two major recruitment seasons, namely the spring recruitment round (March-May) and the autumn recruitment round (September-December) (Xinhuanet 2018). This issue is more significant in the one-year postgraduate taught degree, because most students would not complete their dissertation projects until September and do not receive degree certificates until December or January. Teaching clashes with the spring recruitment round.

Missed out the recruitment peak period in China as we have to study in the UK. (alumni 23)

In the autumn round many students applying for jobs in China are unable to provide the official certification required by the employers when signing contracts. This results in international students losing opportunities to apply for or retain job offers.

The graduation time is different between the UK and China. It is difficult to find jobs without a degree certificate. Therefore, I missed many good job opportunities. (alumni 50)

Lack of relevant careers support

The data also suggested a weakness in terms of how UK institutions supported Chinese students in gaining employment. Alumni and current Chinese students rated university career support around 3/5 (on a scale of not helpful to very helpful), although alumni (3.42) scored support slightly higher than current students (3.15).

In the qualitative data alumni and current students reported a lack of resources about the Chinese recruitment market and other forms of support (e.g. mentoring) from the careers services in the UK. For example they commented that CV requirements and job specifications in China are different from those in the UK. Professional profile photos are often required to be included in the CV in China, whereas, this is not the case in the UK. An English style CV is secondary or optional for those students who wish to apply for positions in China.

Thus, compared to Chinese students who study in China and become familiar with Chinese recruitment processes and work environments, or have established social networks during their studies in China, overseas returnees may become disadvantaged in the job market.

Personally, I believe there is a limitation of our knowledge of career information in China. We don't have a peer mentoring system in the UK compared to local students in China where senior students/alumni share useful insight knowledge with junior students. For example, depends on our knowledge and skills, which career path is best for us. (current student 43)

A further dimension of this issue was that current students and alumni rely more on Chinese career platforms to search for jobs rather than UK ones. Current students consider university careers services as an important resource compared to other UK career resources (Figure 4). However, alumni found that UK university career services are less helpful when it comes to finding jobs in China. Employers seldom use career websites in the UK, although some employers would contact UK university career services and career officers of academic departments of relevant disciplines. This suggests that there is a need for UK careers service to be familiar with some popular Chinese job sites to provide support for Chinese international students.

Discussion

Students gave employability as the second most important reason to study in the UK. This result corresponds with findings of other studies which place employability high up the list as a reason for studying abroad but acknowledge other factors such as personal growth (Li 2013; Gu and Schweisfurth 2015). Given that employability is not the sole purpose of study abroad, some level of mismatch between what was considered useful for employability and what was gained from study abroad should not necessarily be seen as a problem. Employers did see the value of study abroad, with an emphasis on PGT study.

There was considerable agreement between employers, students and alumni on what constituted employability. The consistency of response between employers, alumni and students suggests that they probably understood the terms in the questionnaire in the same way, even though they are rather abstract. UK teachers were a little out of line, though there were still considerable areas of similarity in their view. The top ten listing of essential skills for employers included generic skills, subject skills, and both Chinese and foreign (English) language skills.

There was also quite a lot of alignment between the groups about what students gained from study abroad, such as foreign language skills and certain values such as respect for diversity. There was an emphasis placed by students and teachers on subject knowledge that was less strong among employers. The study supports the finding from the British Council (2018) and

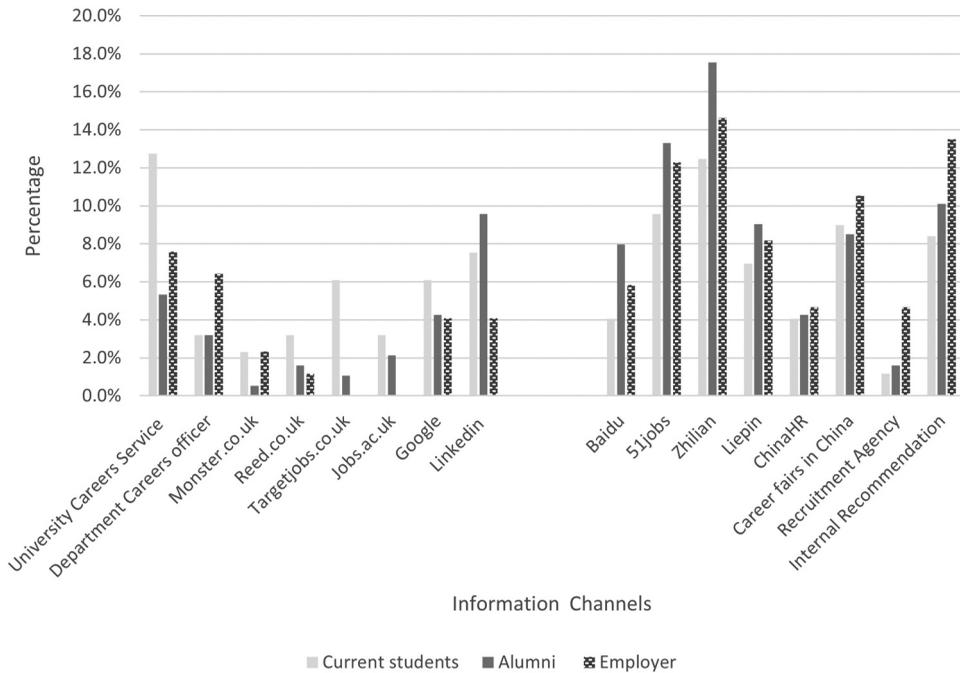


Figure 4. Information channels used by respondents for careers information.

others (Xiong and Mok 2020) that as well as gaining from study abroad, students that had studied abroad lagged behind home taught students in some areas. Interestingly, employers had a very mixed view of the WEF twenty first century skills, placing some very highly and others towards the end of their list. This could be seen as pointing to the cultural relativism of the WEF framework. Perhaps it could also be seen as related to a somewhat more hierarchical view of management in China where curiosity, critical thinking and leadership skills are not seen as important for graduate level roles, whereas attributes relating to loyalty and managing relations are given greater stress.

What is striking, however, is that there did seem to be many differences between what employers said they wanted for employability and what they thought was gained from study abroad. Many of the top ten skills deemed essential did not seem to be strongly developed by study abroad, while many things that were seen as gained did not count strongly for employability. This is a little troubling, but may partly reflect that students study abroad for other reasons than employability. Further, the link between skills and employability is a complex one. Students and alumni tended to see more correlation between what was gained from study abroad and what was needed for employability.

Qualitative data from the study showed up some other issues around employability: namely, employers' perceptions of the attitudes and work expectations of students who were returning from abroad, reverse culture shock, language issues, lack of work experience in UK masters programmes, the timing of the Chinese recruitment round relative to UK study especially at Masters level, and the weakness of support to employability provided by UK careers services. Previous research has identified reverse culture shock as an issue (Gill 2010). However the language barrier uncovered in this study is a new finding. While learning English is rated as valuable, not surprisingly it is lower on employers' priorities than Chinese language skills. Ideas studied in English may be hard to articulate in Chinese, reducing the ability of returning graduates to leverage their learning.

Previous research (Goodwin and Mbah 2019; Jackson 2017) points to the importance of work experience to returning students, so the finding that this was an issue aligns with the literature. It is hard to see how this can be addressed within the single year's Masters programmes offered in the UK, however. What has not been noted before is the way that study in the West, especially at PGT level, makes it hard to fit into the Chinese recruitment round.

This study supports previous work that found weaknesses in careers support to international students (Huang and Turner 2018; Goodwin and Mbah 2019). One could also argue that the mismatch in responses between UK teachers and the other participants, and the low response rate of teachers, reflect that UK institutions remain rather UK centric in general, reflecting a limited depth of internationalisation.

Conclusions

Although not the only reason Chinese students come to the UK to study, the benefit to their employability is one of the most important. This study was one of the first to investigate the perceived benefits in some depth from a skills perspective. It is the first to seek to systematically compare the perceptions of Chinese employers with current students and alumni, and with UK teachers. It also identified some important new factors of importance at work, such as the problem of explaining skills learned in English and the issue of the timing of UK single year courses in relation to the recruitment rounds in China.

The findings of the study have significant implications for UK HE and suggest some practical recommendations for universities, UK teachers and careers services.

Employers value study in the UK, even if there is a mismatch between what is gained and what makes students employable. Nevertheless, given the issues students had adjusting to the Chinese workplace, consideration should be given within UK programmes to making students reflect more about how workplace cultures differ and prepare for a culture shock. If current thinking among teachers on the soft skills needed by graduates reflects the 21st century skills model, we might need to reflect on whether this is more culturally specific than we might realise or that Chinese students (and employers) need more direct explanation of the assumptions about complex and uncertain futures that lie behind the characterisation of these attributes. There is scope to support students to think how to explain the skills they have acquired, especially subject skills, in a more persuasive way, and in Mandarin. Consideration should also be given to how UK curricula can align more to employability priorities. However, it is possible that this should focus on articulating rather than changing skills acquired.

The emphasis placed on work it, at least in open text comments on the questionnaire, suggest the potential value of work experience within UK programmes, even if what is practical within one year Masters programmes is limited to approaches such as insight days. Adapting programmes to fit the Chinese recruitment cycle would also be of potential value.

Careers services could add value by gaining more understanding of Chinese employers' needs and of the different recruitment processes and channels that they use. The current paper is a starting point for gaining such an understanding. Nevertheless, there is scope for considerably more research in the areas discussed in the paper.

There will be significant differences by employment sector and subject of study that were not possible to uncover from the relatively modest scale of response in this study. Future research might explore further whether there are major differences between employers in different sectors in the skills valued. As well as being probable such data would be invaluable for students developing their careers. The response rate from teachers in this study was rather disappointing, but it was felt that there was enough of interest to report the results here. The response rate perhaps reflected UK educators' lack of confidence in their own understanding of employability for Chinese students or even interest in supporting this. Further research into how UK teachers view Chinese student employability, and how this is instantiated within curricula would be useful. This apparent lack of

knowledge is in itself worrying, given the contribution of Chinese students to the UK educational system. Some interesting issues around employability were confirmed or newly identified in this study. Investigating these through narratives of experience transitioning to the workplace would help understand how the advantages and issues play out through the processes of recruitment and on-boarding.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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