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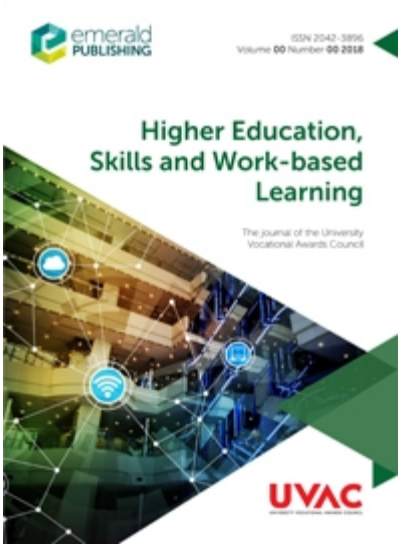

Employability, Aspirations, and Career Resources: Reflective Diary Insights from Postgraduate International Students

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Employability, Aspirations, and Career Resources: Reflective Diary Insights from Postgraduate International Students

Abstract

***Purpose*:** Drawing on sustainable career ecosystem theory as a framework, our study aims to explore how Asian international students studying in a UK-based University Business School view their employability, career aspirations, and career resources.

***Design/methodology/approach*:** 128 participants provided 602 voice-recorded reflective diary insights over six weeks while studying a mandatory employability module in a postgraduate Master's programme at a UK-based Russell Group University Business School. The reflective diary insights addressed employability (weeks 1 and 3), aspirations (weeks 2 and 5), and career resources (weeks 4 and 6). Thematic analysis was conducted before theme and code prevalence were counted to compare changes between the two time points for each topic.

***Findings*:** Employability includes skills, experiences and qualifications (theme 1), challenges (theme 2), and career ownership (theme 3). Aspirations include intrinsic motivators (theme 4), extrinsic motivators (theme 5), and person-organisation fit (theme 6). Career resources include people (theme 7), knowledge (theme 8) and signalling (theme 9). Time influences the interplay of person and contextual dimensions across the two timespans with different effects between and within themes.

***Originality*:** Theoretically, our study advances the empirical validation of sustainable career theory, as well as integrating graduate employability and career development streams into higher education research. Methodologically, it underscores the underutilised potential of diary studies in the field. Practically, it offers insights for lecturers, university career advisors, and employers to holistically address the employability, aspirations, and career resources of international students.

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Keywords: Aspirations, Career Resources, Employability, International Students, Postgraduates, Higher Education, Diary Insights.

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Introduction

The Chartered Association of Business Schools (2023) reports that 98 per cent of UK University Business Schools depend on revenue from postgraduate international students, with 70 per cent of full-time postgraduates coming from outside the EU, primarily from Asia. International students who began their studies in the 2020/2021 academic year contributed £41.9 billion to the UK economy, equating to approximately £560 per citizen (Universities UK, 2023). These figures highlight the scale, vibrancy, and value of the international postgraduate student market in the UK. Moreover, international students offer rich classroom opportunities for *all* students, promoting cross-cultural exchange of values and experiences to broaden perspectives (Tavares, 2021). However, adapting to the norms of UK study and employment can prove challenging (Cao and Henderson, 2021).

Although many international students thrive, it is crucial to recognise that University Business Schools must go beyond solely educating students in their chosen discipline (The Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2023). Accordingly, there is increasing interest in preparing international students for the university-to-work transition, in their chosen sectors and geographical locations, through the acquisition of various forms of employability capital (Pham, 2021; Pham *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, Nikou and Luukkonen (2024) advocate for a holistic approach to supporting international students, addressing their unique needs and experiences.

Concurrently, Healy *et al.* (2022) emphasise integrating employability and careers literature, while Baruch and Sullivan (2022) call for innovative approaches to careers research. Scholars are responding to these calls, such as using narrative frames with Chinese students in New Zealand (Soltani and Tomlinson, 2024) and a landscape of practice approach with Asian students in New Zealand (Soltani and Donald, 2024). Furthermore, Padgett and Donald (2023) highlight the need for qualitative insights to enhance the employability of Master's students in

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UK Business Schools, while Cao and Henderson (2021) note the underutilised approach of diary studies in higher education literature.

To address these gaps, our study uses sustainable career theory as a framework and aims to explore how Asian international students studying in a UK-based University Business School view their employability, career aspirations, and career resources. We collected 602 voice-recorded reflective diary entries from 128 participants over six weeks during a mandatory employability module in a postgraduate taught Master's programme at a Russell Group University. Theoretically, our study advances the empirical validation of sustainable career theory, as well as integrating graduate employability and career development streams into higher education research. Methodologically, it underscores the underutilised potential of diary studies in the field. Practically, it offers insights for lecturers, university career advisors, and employers to holistically address the employability, aspirations, and career resources of international students.

Literature Review and Development of Research Questions

Theoretical framework: Sustainable career theory

Sustainable career theory offers a valuable framework to bridge graduate employability and career development literature, as well as graduate and worker employability literature (Akkermans *et al.*, 2024). The theory has also recently been used by Blokker *et al.* (2023) to conduct a literature review to organise research on school-to-work transitions.

Sustainable career theory is defined as "the sequence of an individual's different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual" (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015, p. 7). The three dimensions are person, context, and time (De Vos *et al*., 2020), while the three indicators are health, happiness, and productivity (Van der Heijden, 2005; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). Within our current study, person

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refers to Asian international Master's students, context refers to a UK University Business School, while time captures the six-week period over which our diary study was conducted. Our focus on employability, aspirations, and career resources acknowledges how time spent at university can be an antecedent to a sustainable career (De Vos *et al.*, 2020), offering benefits to individuals and employers (Donald *et al.*, 2020).

Employability

Employability and employment, often conflated in graduate outcomes, are distinct concepts. Employability refers to the ability to obtain and retain a desired job (Rothwell and Arnold, 2007), while employment indicates where an individual has a job at a specific point in time. Thus, one can be employable but not employed due to external factors like the labour market (Jackson and Chapman, 2012). This distinction necessitates considering employability beyond mere employment metrics (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2018), aligning with sustainable career theory which highlights the interaction between personal agency and contextual factors over time (De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

Recognising the interplay of these factors, the focus has shifted from early 2000s skills-based models to employability capital (see Donald, Baruch *et al.* (2024) for a comprehensive review and the Employability Capital Growth Model). Pham *et al.* (2024) found, through a mixed-methods study of 188 international graduates in Australia, that employability capital significantly enhances employment chances and career sustainability. Petruzziello *et al.* (2024) observed the interaction between different forms of employability capital based on a two-wave design involving 227 Italian university students and graduates. Additionally, Tang et al. (2024) found that employability capital "not only helped the participants obtain employment but also enhanced their wellbeing, sustainable employment, and professional growth" (p. 1).

This integration of agency and structure addresses the historical overemphasis on the personal dimension of career sustainability (Akkermans *et al.*, 2024; Delva *et al.*, 2021),

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suggesting degree qualifications alone are insufficient for employability. Instead, holistic approaches to graduate employability are necessary (Cole and Coulson, 2022) to help navigate host labour markets (Pham, 2021; Pham *et al.*, 2024). However, empirical studies on how international students in UK University Business Schools view employability are still emerging (c.f. Cao and Henderson, 2021; Padgett and Donald, 2023). Therefore, we ask:

> Research Question One (RQ1): What does the term 'employability' encompass for Asian international students studying in a UK University Business School?

Aspirations

A recent qualitative study of UK graduates revealed a shift from prioritising salary and job titles to valuing flexible working, work-life balance, and inclusive work environments (Donald, 2023). While salary and job title remain important, they are no longer the dominant factors in graduates' career aspirations. This shift, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on daily life, especially for international students (Lai *et al.*, 2020), reflects social comparison dynamics between individuals (Sul and Wills, 2024). The combination of restricted freedoms, declines in well-being, and challenging labour market conditions has led graduates to prioritise health and well-being indicators of career sustainability over productivity ((Lai *et al.*, 2020).

Understanding the aspirations of Asian international students in a UK University Business School can guide lecturers and university career advisors in providing better support. For instance, Padgett and Donald (2023) highlight the positive impacts of a curriculum-based intervention for international students. Additionally, aspirational insights can help graduate employers attract, select, and retain early career talent, as seen in the accounting and finance sector in Australia (Jackson *et al.*, 2022). However, the perspectives of international students at a UK University Business School have yet to be thoroughly explored through a diary study approach (c.f. Cao and Henderson, 2021). Therefore, we ask:

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Research Question Two (RQ2): What are the aspirations of Asian international students studying in a UK University Business School?

Career resources

Sustainable career theory observes the interplay between person, contextual, and temporal dimensions (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). Consequently, individuals need to acquire career resources and be capable of operationalising these resources to signal their employability to prospective employers (Tomlinson and Anderson, 2021). The approach aligns with the conservation of resources theory whereby individuals can acquire resources within the symbolic notion of a resource caravan and then require resource passageways to help them deploy these resources (Hobfoll, 2012; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Metaphors such as Donald's (2022) Weather as a Career Metaphor (WCM) can also help students understand career-related information in a more accessible way.

Baruch *et al.* (2023) observe how various actors can play a vital role in supporting students to acquire career resources in preparation for undertaking the university-to-work transition. Examples of such actors include family and friends, academics, career advisors, and industry professionals. Additionally, Donald, Van der Heijden et al. (2024) explain how technological advancements via Automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) position career development professionals as linchpin actors within a sustainable career ecosystem to help individuals navigate these emerging challenges through their careers.

Access to career advisors and industry professionals is essential for international students in Australia to develop networks and to understand the norms and landscape of the host country's labour market (Pham, 2021). Similar findings from the United States show that "Chinese international graduates are excluded from access to and possession of the social and cultural capital necessary to adapt to academic, cultural, and social life" (Wang and Freed, 2021, p. 41). Career support is also valuable for domestic students as a longitudinal study of 322

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Vietnamese students found that career development learning enhances self-perceived employability, whereby scholastic and cultural capital play mediating roles (Ho *et al*., 2023).

However, Donald *et al.* (2018) based on interviews with undergraduates in the UK found that the students who need support the most are those least likely to make use of the university career service. Raising awareness of the existence of such services is crucial at the earliest possible point because career resources can accumulate (or fail to do so) over time via gain spirals (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, we ask:

> Research Question Three (RQ3): What career resources do Asian international students studying in a UK University Business School feel they need? How can they acquire these resources?

Method

Participants and procedure

This research employed a post-positive approach (per the Gioia *et al.*, 2013 protocol) to explore how international students from Asia view their employability, aspirations, and career resources while studying overseas in the UK. The approach was then extended to count the prevalence of themes and codes to enable comparison across time points.

Following ethical approval from the institutional review board, international students from Asia studying a mandatory employability module during a postgraduate taught Master's programme at a Russell Group University Business School in the UK were invited to participate in the study. During week 1 of the module, students were provided information about the study by Author 4 and subsequently provided informed consent if they wished to take part. Participants were informed that their decision to take part had no impact on their module marks and that data analysis would not begin until after the module marks had been awarded. They could also withdraw from the study at any time. However, data that had already been provided

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up until that point could still be used by the research team due to the anonymous data collection process.

Participation in the study involved each student providing a voice-recorded reflective diary entry once a week for six consecutive weeks during semester one of the academic year 2023/2024. Weeks 1 and 4 focused on employability. Example prompts included 'What does the term employability mean to you?', 'How employable do you currently feel?', and 'Why do you feel this way?'. Weeks 2 and 5 focused on aspirations. Example prompts included 'What does your ideal career look like? Why?' and 'What would make a career rewarding for you?'. Weeks 3 and 6 focused on career resources. Example prompts included 'What resources do you need for your career?', 'Who can help you to acquire them?', and 'Where do you feel you need more support in developing career resources?'. A diary method was considered suitable for our study since it captures "time-sensitive and context-specific details of a phenomenon" (Unterhitenberger and Lawrence, 2022, p. 1).

Participants recorded their entries on a mobile device and then sent their voice recordings to the research team via the Signal app. A total of 128 participants provided a combined 602 voice-recorded reflective diary insights over six consecutive weeks (averaging just over 100 per week). The gender split was 53% women and 47% men, representing the population under study.

Data analysis strategy

Author 4 prompted students during class each week to share their reflective diary insights on the topic for the specific week during the six weeks. Each week, Author 3 collated the voice recordings into a folder so that week one recordings were in folder 1, week two recordings in folder 2, and so on. Once the module was completed and the marks had been issued and ratified in the university system, Trint software was used to transcribe each of the recordings. Once the

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recordings had been transcribed, the six folders containing individual Word documents of the 602 responses were sent to Authors 1 and 2 for analysis.

Authors 1 and 2 independently followed the Gioia *et al.* (2013) protocol, moving between induction and deduction to identify first-order codes, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions. Deduction (top-down) used the three research questions as the aggregate dimensions, while induction (bottom-up) involved free coding and theme identification within each of the three aggregate dimensions. This was an iterative process whereby the authors used Microsoft Excel to help them identify and subsequently refine the codes and themes from the Word documents until they were satisfied that the process was complete. Each week was allocated a separate tab within the Excel worksheet, whereby each line represented a diary insight, and each column represented a code or theme. Subsequently, Authors 1 and 2 reviewed the codes and themes together. Where differences between Authors 1 and 2 were observed, these were discussed between the two authors and modified accordingly until a consensus was reached. This iterative and collaborative process also helped us review and refine our definitions of the themes and ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the process.

Given the size of our dataset and our interest in changes between time points, we focused the analysis on group-level changes between time points one and two (T1 and T2) for each of the three research questions rather than on changes at the individual level. This involved extending the Gioia *et al.* (2013) protocol by counting and comparing the representations of each theme and code at each time point to see whether the percentage of participants who discussed each theme and code increased, decreased, or stayed the same.

Results

Figure 1 summarises the final version of the first-order codes, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions based on the Gioia *et al.* (2013) protocol.

* Insert Figure 1 Here *

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Tables I-III show the changes in the number of times each theme and code was mentioned across time points one and two (T1 and T2) for research questions one to three, respectively. Kindly note that a participant was deemed to have mentioned the theme if they mentioned at least one of the codes within that theme. Change is calculated as the change in per cent between T1 and T2 for each theme and code since this helps to account for variances in response numbers. However, the raw number of responses is also provided for additional clarity.

* Insert Table I Here *

* Insert Table II Here *

* Insert Table III Here *

Findings and Analysis

Employability

Theme 1: Skills, experience and qualifications

Theme 1 encompassed skills (code 1), experience, (code 2), and qualification (code 3). Table I shows that at the theme level, there was 13.20 per cent less emphasis at T2 (week 4) compared to T1 (week 1). However, this masks variances at the code level whereby experience had 25.40 per cent less emphasis while qualifications had 21.75 per cent greater emphasis. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that qualifications remained significantly less represented compared to experience and skills. The findings are encouraging because they indicate that the international student views align with the dominant position in the literature that the degree (qualifications) alone are not enough to make an individual employable (Cole and Coulson, 2022).

Theme 2: Challenges

Theme 2 encompassed lack of confidence and self-doubt (code 4), barriers to employment and career progression (code 5), and the impact of COVID-19 on well-being and productivity (code 6). Table I shows that at the theme level, there was 3.74 per cent more emphasis at T2 (week 1) than at T1 (week 4). At the code level, the changes were 3.74, 5.80, and 6.15 per cent increases

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respectively, with barriers to employment and career progression the most prevalent at both time points. The findings align with the views of other international students studying in the UK who reported that COVID-19 impacted their well-being and productivity (Lai *et al.*, 2020) and that barriers to employment and career progression become more of a consideration for students over time as they get closer to entry into the labour market (Donald *et al.*, 2018).

Theme 3: Career ownership

Theme 3 encompassed proactivity (code 7), obtaining or retaining a job (code 8) and empowerment (code 9). Table I shows that at the theme level, there was 11.38 per cent more emphasis at T2 (week 4) compared to T1 (week 1). At the code level, there were increases of 10.95, 5.51, and 1.20 per cent, respectively. Empowerment barely featured in either time point, while proactivity remained the most dominant at both time points, reflecting protean career theory (Hall, 2004). The prevalence and a moderate increase in obtaining or retaining a job, likely links to the introduction of Rothwell and Arnold's (2007) definition of employability during week 1 of the module.

Aspirations

Theme 4: Intrinsic motivators

Theme 4 encompassed growth and learning (code 10), autonomy and purpose (code 11), and flexible working and work-life balance (code 12). Table II shows that at the theme level, there was 4.79 per cent less emphasis at T2 (week 5) compared to T1 (week 2). At the code level, the changes were 20.56, 4.78, and 2.07 per cent less, respectively. Growth and learning, flexible working and work-life balance were the most prevalent codes at both time points. The prevalence of codes 10 and 12 aligns with findings from interviews with UK graduates (Donald, 2023) although the fact that autonomy and purpose only appeared in 20.31 per cent of responses at T1, dropping to 15.53 per cent at T2 was surprising. A possible suggestion is that the findings reflect challenging labour market conditions (contextual/external factors) and an acceptance of

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having to trade off autonomy and purpose (at the individual/person level) in the initial stages of one's career (time).

Theme 5: Extrinsic motivators

Theme 5 encompassed salary (code 13), benefits (code 14), and promotion or job title (code 15). Table II shows that at the theme level, there was 17.51 per cent less emphasis at T2 (week 5) compared to T1 (week 2). However, changes at the theme level mask a more nuanced picture at the code level. Here we observe how salary and promotion or job title drop by 17.20 and 10.74 per cent respectively. In contrast, benefits increased by 10.85 per cent. Nevertheless, at T1, more than 40 per cent of respondents mentioned salary, promotion or job title, remaining above 30 per cent at T2. For comparison, benefits were 4.69 at T1 and 15.53 at T2. Our findings capture an intricate interplay for extrinsic motivators, although it is encouraging that overall participants place less emphasis on these aspects at T2 given the holistic approach taken to the module content (per Cole and Coulson, 2022).

Theme 6: Person-organisation fit

Theme 6 encompassed alignment with personal values (code 16), an inclusive and ethical environment (code 17), and good working relationships including happiness at work (code 18). Table II shows that at the theme level, there was 2.42 per cent less emphasis at T2 (week 5) compared to T1 (week 2). However, there was once again significant variance at the code level. Alignment with personal values dropped by 26.51 per cent, while in contrast an inclusive and ethical environment and good working relationships including happiness at work increased by 4.18 and 9.08 per cent, respectively. The significant drop in alignment with personal values perhaps follows a similar reason to the drop in autonomy and purpose (theme 4, code 11) reflecting challenging labour market conditions (contextual/external factors) and an acceptance of having to trade off autonomy and purpose (at the individual/person level) in the initial stages of one's career (time).

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Career resources

Theme 7: People

Theme 7 encompassed career advisors (code 19), industry professionals (code 20), academics (code 21), and family and friends (code 22). Table III shows that at the theme level, there was 3.74 per cent more emphasis at T2 (week 6) compared to T1 (week 3). Again, there was considerable variance at the code level. Seeking advice from career advisors and industry professionals increased by 6.98 and 11.84 per cent, respectively. In contrast, seeking advice from academics and family and friends dropped by 5.36 and 3.12 per cent respectively. However, advice from family and friends remained the highest overall at over 50 per cent for both time intervals. The increased emphasis on career advisors and industry professionals is encouraging as these actors can play a vital role in helping students, particularly international students, prepare for the university-to-work transition (Baruch *et al.*, 2023; Thanh, 2021).

Theme 8: Knowledge

Theme 8 encompassed labour market information (code 23), considering career options, (code 24), and career metaphors (code 25). Table III shows that at the theme level, there was 16.61 per cent more emphasis at T2 (week 6) compared to T1 (week 3). Labour market information and considering career options increased by 21.01 and 25.58 per cent respectively. Career metaphors increased by 2.29 per cent but remained above 50.00 per cent for both time points. The increased focus on knowledge from T1 to T2 is encouraging, showing an understanding of the interplay of person and contextual dimensions of a sustainable career (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). The focus on career metaphors was likely driven by the introduction of Donald's (2022) Weather as a Career Metaphor (WCM) in week 3.

Theme 9: Signalling

Theme 9 encompassed CV support (theme 26) and mock interviews (theme 27). Table III shows at the theme level there was 7.39 per cent more emphasis at T2 (week 6) compared to T1 (week

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3). CV support increased by 1.14 per cent to 22.50 per cent at T2, while mock interviews increased by 10.85 per cent to 22.50 per cent at T2. The increased focus on mock interviews is again encouraging and aligns with calls by Tomlinson and Anderson (2021) to focus on helping students signal graduate employability.

Discussion

Our findings reveal a nuanced interplay across themes and codes, reflecting the three dimensions of the sustainable career theory: person, context, and time (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015) and the indicators of health, happiness, and productivity (Van der Heijden, 2005). Notably, changes at the code level between T1 and T2 can be obscured when aggregated at the theme level.

RQ1 asked What does the term 'employability' encompass for Asian international students studying in a UK University Business School? Participants indicated three themes: skills, experience, and qualifications (theme 1), challenges (theme 2), and career ownership (theme 3). Challenges experienced at the personal level via contextual factors such as barriers to employment or career progression and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on well-being and productivity led to a lack of confidence and self-doubt. These findings align with a survey of management graduates in India, showing that perceptions of psychological capital and life well-being influence career sustainability (Nimmi *et al.*, 2022). Our findings also correspond to Donald, Baruch *et al.*'s (2024) 'Employability Capital Growth Model' capturing how various forms of employability capital (e.g., psychological capital, scholastic capital, market-value capital, and career identity capital), combined with external factors (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic, barriers to jobs or career progression), determine specific outcomes (e.g. employability, productivity, well-being). This supports previous calls to enhance human capital beyond the context of university boundaries (Jakubik, 2020), and underscores the significance of an

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employability capital approach for preparing students to navigate host labour markets (Pham, 2021; Pham *et al.*, 2024).

RQ2 asked: What are the aspirations of Asian international students studying in a UK University Business School? The findings show participants' aspirations centred on intrinsic motivators (theme 4), extrinsic motivators (theme 5), and person-organisation fit (theme 6). Surprisingly, autonomy and purpose were less prevalent (20.31 per cent at T1 and 15.53 per cent at T2), and benefits beyond base salary were minimal (4.69 per cent at T1 and 15.53 per cent at T2). Intrinsic motivators and person-organization fit had high coverage (over 79 per cent) at both time points, while extrinsic motivators declined from 71.88 to 54.37 per cent. This supports the view that graduates are prioritising flexible working, work-life balance, and inclusive, happy work environments (Donald, 2023). Perhaps this is indicative of social comparison dynamics (Sul and Wills, 2024) and the legacy effect of the COVID-19 restrictions that particularly impacted international students (Lai *et al.*, 2020).

RQ3 asked: What career resources do Asian international students studying in a UK University Business School feel they need? How can they acquire these resources? Participants indicated three themes: people (theme 7), knowledge (theme 8) and signalling (theme 9). Students showed increased interest in understanding contextual factors including labour market information and considering career options between T1 and T2. When taken together with the themes and codes from RQ1 and RQ2, this indicates a balanced approach by students acknowledging the interplay of person and context dimensions of career sustainability (De Vos et al., 2020, Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). It was also encouraging to see students considering operationalising and signalling their employability (Donald, Baruch *et al.*, 2024; Tomlinson and Anderson, 2021). Further encouragement comes from an increased awareness of the potential for career advisors and industry professionals to act as a valuable resource by providing career-related support and advice (Baruch *et al.*, 2023).

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Theoretical contribution

This study's theoretical contribution lies in the empirical validation of sustainable career theory by exploring how Asian international students view their employability, aspirations, and career resources while studying at a UK-based business school. Our approach is timely for three key reasons.

First, our study addresses the call by Healy *et al.* (2022) to integrate the graduate employability and career development literature streams within higher education research. By employing sustainable career theory as our framework, we also respond to Akkermans *et al.* (2024) who advocate for using this theory to bridge graduate and worker employability research. Additionally, we extend the work of Blokker *et al.* (2023), who recently used sustainable career theory to conduct a literature review to organise research on school-to-work transitions.

Second, our reflective diary insights responds to the call by Baruch and Sullivan (2022) for innovative methodological approaches in employability and career research, particularly those incorporating qualitative and longitudinal dimensions. Our study also acknowledges the observation by Cao and Henderson (2021) that diary studies remain underutilised in higher education research.

Third, our approach complements existing qualitative studies, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of Asian international students studying abroad. Examples of three recent studies that our current study complements include, (i) semi-structured interviews and journal entries with Chinese students in the USA (Hou, 2023), (ii) narrative frames with Chinese students in New Zealand (Soltani and Tomlinson, 2024), and (iii) a landscape of practice approach with Asian students in New Zealand (Soltani and Donald, 2024).

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Practical implications

Our study offers practical implications for lecturers, university careers services, and graduate employers by integrating graduate employability and career development themes.

From the perspective of lecturers and university careers service, our findings support the value of compulsory curriculum-based modules to prepare international Master's students for the labour market (Padgett and Donald, 2023). These modules can help address the low engagement with career services among students who need support the most (Donald *et al.*, 2018). Our study highlights the necessity of a holistic approach to support international students, acknowledging employability capital as an essential resource for their career sustainability (Pham *et al.*, 2024). We echo Pham *et al.* (2019), who advocate for collaboration among teaching and professional staff "to develop well-rounded programmes to sufficiently equip international students with multidimensional resources" (p. 394). Such a holistic approach ensures that the resources and support needed by international students are adequately considered (Nikou and Luukkonen, 2024). Combining sufficiency and necessity perspectives also leads to more effective and informed decision-making for students (Ma and Bennett, 2024).

For graduate employers, our findings suggest that while salary and job title remain important for the career aspirations of international graduates, other factors are becoming increasingly significant. Consequently, employers should prioritise creating inclusive work environments and offering flexible working arrangements to attract and retain early career talent. Employers must also be able to showcase these opportunities to graduates in an authentic way. They must also ensure international students have access to industry professionals and accurate labour market insights to develop networks and make informed decisions. These practices are likely to enhance sustainable career indicators of happiness, health, and productivity (Van der Heijden, 2005). At the organisational level, these can lead to sustainable competitive advantage, increased productivity, and profitability (Donald *et al.*, 2020).

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Limitations and future research

Our study was originally designed to last nine weeks, rather than six weeks, with three data collection time points for each theme. However, the number of diary responses provided across weeks seven to nine accounted for less than five per cent of the total responses received. This is a common issue with diary studies due to respondent fatigue (Cao and Henderson, 2021), which we advise researchers to keep in mind when designing such studies. Nevertheless, our research still provided interesting insights across the two time periods for each theme and the six-week duration. One approach that could be adopted to maintain engagement is to interview participants at the end of the study to offset this lower engagement with the diary approach.

Additionally, our study focused on international students from Asia at one specific business school based in the UK. The findings may not be generalisable to other international students from different regions, studying different degree disciplines, or pursuing undergraduate studies (since we know that perceptions of employability can change across degree disciplines and different years of study, per Donald *et al.*, 2018). This reflects how the diary method captures "time-sensitive and context-specific details of a phenomenon" (Unterhitenberger and Lawrence, 2022, p. 1). Future research could consider repeating our study approach in alternative contexts to compare and contrast the findings. The diary study approach could also be combined with quantitative (e.g., questionnaires) or additional qualitative approaches (e.g., interviews or focus groups) to provide richer insights.

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Table I: Employability Results for Time Points One and Two

Research Question One: Employability		T1	%	T2	%	Total	%	% Change T1 to T2	Notes
		n=98	100	n=90	100	n=188	100		0-4.99 = Slight change, 5-9.99 = Moderate Change, 10+ = Significant Change
Theme 1	**Skills, Experience & Qualifications**	**75**	**76.53**	**57**	**63.33**	**132**	**70.21**	**-13.20**	**Significant Change (less emphasis)**
Code 1	Skills	53	54.08	43	47.78	96	51.06	-6.30	Slight change (less emphasis)
Code 2	Experience	63	64.29	35	38.89	98	52.13	-25.40	Significant change (less emphasis)
Code 3	Qualifications	7	7.14	26	28.89	33	17.55	21.75	Significant change (more emphasis)
Theme 2	**Challenges**	**78**	**79.59**	**75**	**83.33**	**153**	**81.38**	**3.74**	**Slight Change (more emphasis)**
Code 4	Lack of confidence/ self-doubt	29	29.59	30	33.33	59	31.38	3.74	Slight change (more emphasis)
Code 5	Barriers to employment/ career progression	64	65.31	64	71.11	128	68.09	5.80	Moderate change (more emphasis)
Code 6	COVID impact on well-being/productivity	31	31.63	34	37.78	65	34.57	6.15	Moderate change (more emphasis)
Theme 3	**Career Ownership**	**52**	**53.06**	**58**	**64.44**	**110**	**58.51**	**11.38**	**Significant Change (more emphasis)**
Code 7	Proactive	35	35.71	42	46.67	77	40.96	10.95	Significant change (more emphasis)
Code 8	Obtain/retain job	24	24.49	27	30.00	51	27.13	5.51	Moderate change (more emphasis)
Code 9	Empowered	1	1.02	2	2.22	3	1.60	1.20	Slight change (more emphasis)

Table II: Aspirations Results for Time Points One and Two

Research Question Two: Aspirations		T1	%	T2	%	Total	%	% Change T1 to T2	Notes
		n=128	100	n=103	100	n=231	100		0-4.99 = Slight change, 5-9.99 = Moderate Change, 10+ = Significant Change
Theme 4	**Intrinsic Motivators**	**113**	**88.28**	**86**	**83.50**	**199**	**86.15**	**-4.79**	**Slight Change (less emphasis)**
Code 10	Growth/learning	81	63.28	44	42.72	125	54.11	-20.56	Significant change (less emphasis)
Code 11	Autonomy/purpose	26	20.31	16	15.53	42	18.18	-4.78	Slight change (less emphasis)
Code 12	Flexible working/ work-life balance	71	55.47	55	53.40	126	54.55	-2.07	Slight change (less emphasis)
Theme 5	**Extrinsic Motivators**	**92**	**71.88**	**56**	**54.37**	**148**	**64.07**	**-17.51**	**Significant Change (less emphasis)**
Code 13	Salary	68	53.13	37	35.92	105	45.45	-17.20	Significant change (less emphasis)
Code 14	Benefits	6	4.69	16	15.53	22	9.52	10.85	Significant change (more emphasis)
Code 15	Promotion/job title	56	43.75	34	33.01	90	38.96	-10.74	Significant change (less emphasis)
Theme 6	**Person-Organisation Fit**	**105**	**82.03**	**82**	**79.61**	**187**	**80.95**	**-2.42**	**Slight Change (less emphasis)**
Code 16	Alignment with personal values	65	50.78	25	24.27	90	38.96	-26.51	Significant change (less emphasis)
Code 17	Inclusive/ethical environment	63	49.22	55	53.40	118	51.08	4.18	Slight change (more emphasis)
Code 18	Good working relationships/happiness at work	53	41.41	52	50.49	105	45.45	9.08	Moderate change (more emphasis)

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Table III: Career Resources Results for Time Points One and Two

Research Question Three: **Career Resources**		**T1**	**%**	**T2**	**%**	**Total**	**%**	**% Change T1 to T2**	**Notes**
		n=103	100	n=80	100	n=183	100		0-4.99 = Slight change, 5-9.99 = Moderate Change, 10+ = Significant Change
Theme 7	**People**	**94**	**91.26**	**76**	**95.00**	**170**	**92.90**	**3.74**	**Significant Change (more emphasis)**
Code 19	Career advisors	25	24.27	25	31.25	50	27.32	6.98	Moderate change (more emphasis)
Code 20	Industry professionals	29	28.16	32	40.00	61	33.33	11.84	Significant change (more emphasis)
Code 21	Academics	39	37.86	26	32.50	65	35.52	-5.36	Moderate change (less emphasis)
Code 22	Family and friends	56	54.37	41	51.25	97	53.01	-3.12	Slight change (less emphasis)
Theme 8	**Knowledge**	**64**	**62.14**	**63**	**78.75**	**127**	**69.40**	**16.61**	**Significant Change (more emphasis)**
Code 23	Labour market information	26	25.24	37	46.25	63	34.43	21.01	Significant change (more emphasis)
Code 24	Considering career options	20	19.42	36	45.00	56	30.60	25.58	Significant change (more emphasis)
Code 25	Career metaphors	53	51.46	43	53.75	96	52.46	2.29	Slight change (more emphasis)
Theme 9	**Signalling**	**22**	**21.36**	**23**	**28.75**	**45**	**24.59**	**7.39**	**Moderate Change (more emphasis)**
Code 26	CV support	22	21.36	18	22.50	40	21.86	1.14	Slight change (more emphasis)
Code 27	Mock interviews	12	11.65	18	22.50	30	16.39	10.85	Significant change (more emphasis)

Figure 1

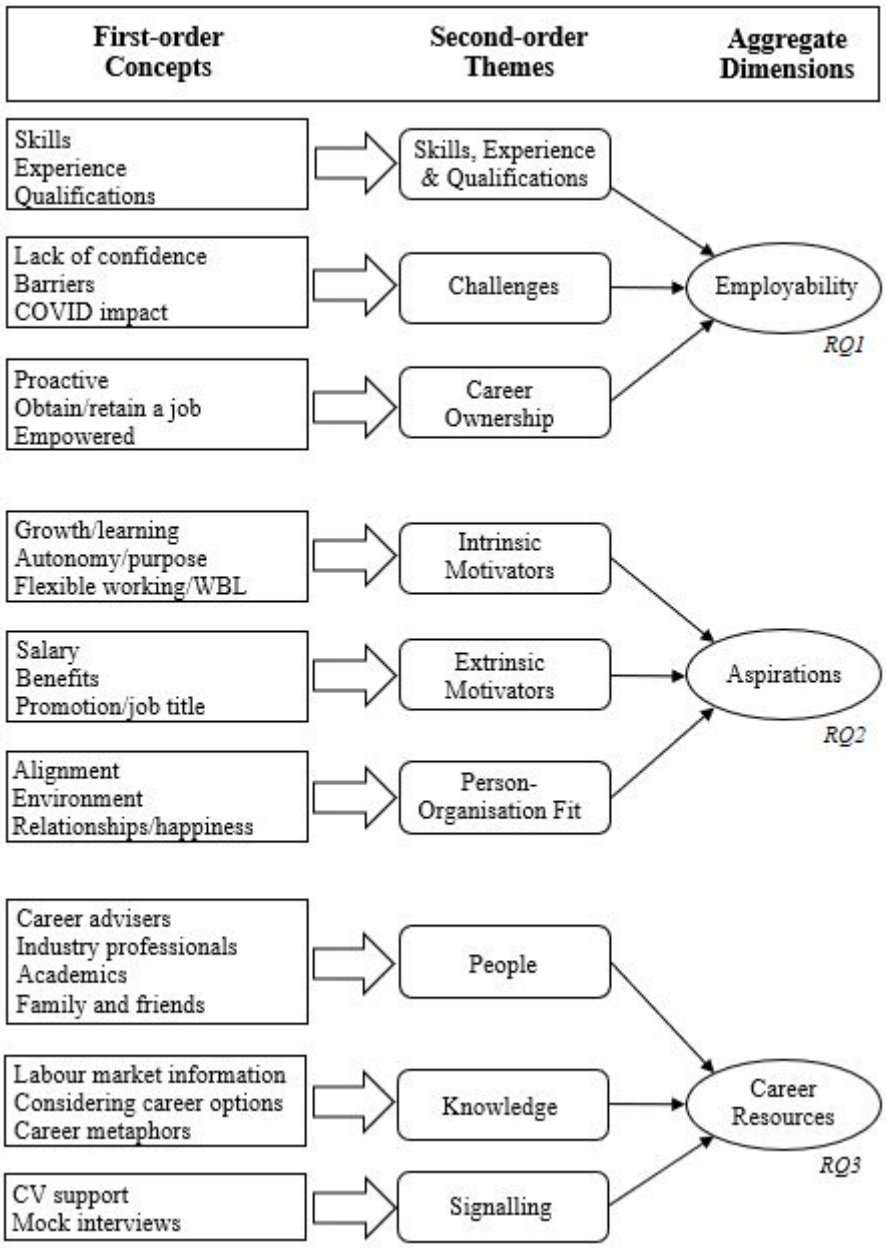
First-order Concepts
Second-order Themes
Aggregate Dimensions
Skills
Experience
Qualifications
Skills, Experience & Qualifications
Lack of confidence
Barriers
COVID impact
Challenges
Employability
RQ1
Proactive
Obtain/retain a job
Empowered
Career Ownership
Growth/learning
Autonomy/purpose
Flexible working/WBL
Intrinsic Motivators
Salary
Benefits
Promotion/job title
Extrinsic Motivators
Aspirations
RQ2
Alignment
Environment
Relationships/happiness
Person-Organisation Fit
Career advisers
Industry professionals
Academics
Family and friends
People
Labour market information
Considering career options
Career metaphors
Knowledge
Career Resources
RQ3
CV support
Mock interviews
Signalling

Figure Captions

Figure 1 evidences the first-order codes, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions.

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