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## **International experience, universities support and graduate employability**

### **--- Perceptions of Chinese international students studying in UK universities**

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### **Biographical note**

Dr. Rong Huang is an Associate Professor in Tourism Marketing at Plymouth University. Her research interests focus on aspects of the tourism phenomenon and published articles in relation to international student travel, food tourism and intermediation. She is also known as an expert for experience of international students in the UK and published many articles related to Chinese students travel and employability related issues.

Dr Rebecca Turner is an Educational Developer at Plymouth University. Her research interests include examining the role of research and scholarship in college-based HE, the contribution evaluation can make to educational development practice and student transitions.

## **International experience, universities support and graduate employability**

### **--- Perceptions of Chinese international students studying in UK universities**

#### **Abstract**

Recent policy developments in English Higher Education have resulted in employability placed in the spotlight, whereby the success of universities will be measured based on graduate employment. This represents the latest focus placed on employability in the sector, as universities are increasingly expected to provide employment-ready graduates to meet the demands of a global economy. In response universities have invested considerable energy into initiatives and services to enhance the employability outcomes of graduates. However, institutions have largely been UK-centric on their focus, with limited attention paid to the employability needs of international students. In this paper, we report the outcomes of a study centred on the largest group of non-EU domiciled international students in the UK, those from Mainland China. Drawing on survey data we examine Mainland Chinese students' attitudes to their employability and the support they engage with through their UK University. We pay specific attention to the opportunities presented through the 'international' nature of the HE experience, and consider how these are utilised by both the students, and their institutions, to develop their future employability. We conclude by proposing recommendations for universities and institutions to enhance the support offered to this often overlooked, but significant group of students.

**Keywords:** Employability, International students, international experience, Chinese students

#### **Introduction**

The forces of internationalization and globalization have had considerable influence on organisations and their expectations of their employees. This has created a need for employers to recruit personnel with knowledge and understanding of cultural issues, as well as the ability to operate in culturally diverse contexts and manage international relationships (Crossman and

Clarke 2010). Consequently researchers (e.g. Henderson 2011; Huang et al. 2014) claim that employability of university graduates is becoming a core issue in many countries and enhancing graduate employability is a priority for many stakeholders in higher education (O’Leary, 2017).

A theoretical framework is essential for the effective evaluation of employability but there are a wide range of definitions of employability coexisting in current literature (Williams, et al 2016). Pegg et al. (2012) argue that the term ‘employability’ remains poorly defined and is considered primarily with reference to individual skills development. This skills focus reflects the original framing of the concepts by Dearing (NCIHE, 1997) who framed employability in terms of the acquisition of skills for life. Holmes (2013) critically examines three competing perspectives on employability, termed as the ‘possessive’, ‘positioning’ and ‘processual’ approaches, arguing that processual approach offers a more coherent explanation of employability that reflects both past actions and future needs in this area, making connections to the lifelong component of employability work, the need for which is of growing significance (Pegg et al., 2012). Many discussions highlight a diverse range of factors as contributing to graduate employability (Harvery 2005; Pegg et al., 2012). For the purposes of this work we drew on the work of Cole and Tibby (2013) who developed a framework for employability informed by a national study involving a range of stakeholders to explore contemporary employability practice. They identified the need for a flexible and broad ranging definition to ensure that employability provision remains responsive to the demands of employers, students and the sector. The presented employability as a lifelong process that applied to all students, whatever their situation, course or mode of study. Employability should support students to develop a range of skills, knowledge, behaviours and attributes that enable them to be successful in life not just

employment. They stated it was a university-wide responsibility, therefore not the remit of one specific group, and that it was essential for students to be made aware of components of employability to promote their lifelong learning (Cole & Tibby, 2013). In the context of international students the inclusive and holistic nature of this definition is important, as is the recognition that employability is about more than skills.

In 2015, there were 663,915 non-UK domiciled students studying at British universities; 75,270 were European Union students and 588,645 were non-EU students (HESA 2016). Among these non-EU students, most are drawn from Mainland China. This paper examines the perspectives of Mainland Chinese students in the UK regarding their international education and graduate employability. To date, limited attention has been paid to the employability of international students, despite the significance of the numbers coming to the UK for their higher education (Henderson, 2011; Shumilova and Cai, 2011; McGrath et al., 2015). Drawing on data collected from the students at all levels of study from twenty-five UK universities; we consider their motivations to study abroad and evaluate their perceptions of claimed benefits of international education. We also explore their engagement with different initiatives implemented to support students' development of employability skills. Furthermore, we examine how those claimed benefits of international study, and their engagement with the university support, may vary across the range of institutions that the respondents were drawn from, i.e. research-intensive or teaching-focus universities. Given the UK-centric nature of the majority of this provision, we provide insights into an overlooked aspect of student employability. We conclude by identifying areas for future work in this area, particularly with respect to how universities can better support international students.

### ***Relationship between international experience and employability***

An 'international experience' represents activities such as student exchanges or studying abroad, international volunteering work, internships and personal travel that give students experience of another country or cultural context (Crossman and Clarke 2010). They are perceived as exciting and rewarding experience, given students the chance to get to know different countries and nationalities, and are recognised as contributing to their individual development (Kneale 2008). Moreover, it is observed students enjoy these international experiences may choose to live and work internationally later in life (Brooks et al. 2012).

It is acknowledged that international experiences and employability are related (Bakalis and Joiner 2004; Nilsson and Ripmeester 2016) with positive advantages to individual's career development gained through international experiences (Norris and Gillespie 2009). King *et al.* (2010:32) point out that: 'Students who study in an international arena, especially if they attend high-prestige universities, accumulate multiple and mutually-reinforcing forms of capital—mobility capital, human capital (a world-class university education), social capital (access to networks, 'connections'), cultural capital...and, eventually, economic capital'. Overcoming the challenges associated with living and working in another country helps individuals become more flexible and culturally aware, which can enhance employability (Tharenou 2015). In her research of employability construction through the eyes of Chinese postgraduate students in the UK, Li (2013) recognised that Chinese students seemed to refer the skills and competence obtained from their UK experience by using Chinese term 'SuZhi'. This might be translated as

‘human quality’ (Li 2013) as it is closely linked to the idea of personal achievement and development.

Rizvi (2000:214) argues that employers attribute greater value to an international education, which can offer ‘exposure to different people and cultures, to different ideas and attitudes, and to different ways of learning and working’. Crossman and Clarke (2010) claim that employers identify graduates with international experience as possessing the skills to build relationships and networks overseas, and to conduct business inter-culturally with cultural sensitivity (Campbell 2010). Other recognised advantages include language acquisition, knowledge of other cultures, the opportunity for experiential learning and the development of transferable skills (Jones 2013; Li 2013). Students themselves recognise the value ‘soft skills’ they develop from international experiences, particular in terms of gaining an enhanced sense of self-confidence and problem-solving skills (Jones 2013; Ripmeester 2015). However, Waters and Brooks (2010) identified an alternative perspective on the international student experience in their study examining the motivations of UK students studying abroad. They stated that, in opposition to a common image of ‘international students’ seeking to develop their future employability or gain experience of other cultures, UK students are seeking ‘excitement’ and ‘adventure’ from overseas study. They suggested that UK students use the opportunity to delay the onset of a career and prolong a relatively carefree student lifestyle. Furthermore, they argue that UK students remain a highly privileged group and their experiences serve only to facilitate the reproduction of their privilege (Waters and Brooks 2010).



Overseas educational experiences have historically been recognised as offering an advantage in the Chinese labour market (Li 2013; Li et al 2008). Mainland Chinese students have regarded it as a further opportunity to enhance their experience and confer substantial advantage on their return to China (Huang, 2013). Indeed this is evidenced by the response of employers; one third of the employers perceive a graduate with overseas experience as more employable, with studying overseas making an applicant well-rounded in terms of skills, experience and personal development (Campbell 2010; Brooks et al. 2012).

Despite these potential benefits there are growing concerns documented in Chinese media (e.g. Sina Education 2009; Enorth News 2012; China News 2012) regarding the ‘dire’ situation of Chinese graduates returning from international study and the apparent loss of their previously valued competitive advantage. Equally, employers have revised their expectations of the perceived value of the overseas qualifications as some overseas students actually do not have the required knowledge and skills (China News 2012). A situation has arisen whereby many overseas graduates cannot reach the high-standards employers hold, whilst at the same time do not want to take jobs that will give them the necessary knowledge and experience but with a low salary (China Education 2012; China News 2012). Indeed, we may be seeing the effects of credential inflation, which is devaluing the potential gains made through international experiences due to the numbers of students taking this option (Waters 2009). Therefore the nature of the international experience (i.e. whether they are engaged in study or work in another country versus travelling) may become increasingly important. The employability of Mainland Chinese students with international experiences is clearly very complex and an issue that universities can no longer ignore (Huang et al. 2015; Thareno 2015).

### ***British university support to enhance students' employability***

Employability issues are of central concern to UK universities and there are growing expectations for institutions to provide suitably skilled graduates (Pegg et al. 2012). This follows recommendations in the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997), which called for universities to familiarise students with the employment environment and stimulate reflections on such experiences. Consequently, universities have provided considerable support to enhance student employability and contribute to their human capital (Sleap and Reed 2006).

Universities seek to develop skills required by employers and integrate these within the pedagogical design of courses (Harvey 2005; Boden and Nedeva 2010). Embedded employability provision operates in-conjunction with centralised careers services, work placements and professional development planning to promote graduate employability (Harvey 2005; Pegg et al. 2012). These represent the tried and tested approaches to develop students' employability (Harvey 2005). However, they are often limited in their focus, centred on preparing students for employment immediately following graduation (by focusing on the skills needed to gain employment) and framed generally by a skills discourse – as the work of Cole & Tibby (2013) highlight, employability to be view is much broader terms to have a lasting impact. More recently, universities have also recognised the value of extra-curricular activities (Lau et al. 2014), as demonstrated through the proliferation of extra-curricular award schemes (Norton and Thomas 2009; Watson 2011). These often involve collaboration with a Student Union, and afford recognition of the additional 'work' students undertake voluntarily through involvement with various societies, communities organisations or volunteering activities (Stuart et al. 2008).

The development of these awards has followed the introduction of the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR). A HEAR report provides a single record of a student's achievement, detailing their course content, academic achievements, additional study and engagement with extra-curricular activities (UUK 2007). It is perceived as a valuable resource for students to use to stimulate discussion with employers and demonstrate the wider value of (UUK 2007). Though this signifies the wider value of extra-curricular activities to current undergraduates, it centres on a retrospective demonstration of experience rather than encouraging student to develop a more prospective or lifelong appreciation of employability. Indeed this is reinforced by the work of Farenga and Quinlan (2016) who document three models used by Russell Group Careers Services to support students' preparation for graduate careers, which they describe as 'Hands-Off', 'Portfolio' and 'Award' where the focus is very much on what students already possess and can demonstrate on leaving university, rather than fostering attitudes and behaviours to lifelong employability.

Currently, the British government is implementing the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which is widely perceived as 'a paradigm shift in the approach to teaching and learning in HE in England' (Neary 2016: 690). The core ambition of the framework is 'to raise the quality and status of teaching' (Hubble et al. 2016: 9) and draws on a series of proxy metrics, including graduate employability, to provide a measure of 'teaching excellence'. The inclusion of graduate employability has placed a renewed focus on this issue and the support institutions provide to develop this.

Most universities offer the general employability support aimed at *all* students. Teichler (2009: 198) criticises this approach commenting many studies of graduate employment “are based on general, i.e. not country specific, assumptions”. There are currently few universities that offer *specific* employability support for the international students. The significance of the international student market to UK universities is not disputed; however, there are perceptions that the universities are solely interested in international students as a source of revenue (Brooks et al. 2012). The absence of tailored employability support for these students, many of who return home to take up employment, could be taken as an indication of this perception. Although it can be assumed that engagement in extra-curricular or PDP, for example, should be relevant to international students, employability is framed from a UK perspective, designed to meet the requirements of the UK labour market. We therefore have to question how universities support international students contextualise their future employability (Brooks et al. 2012). This need was highlighted through a study of Mainland Chinese graduates returning home following graduation from Australian universities (Henderson 2011). The skills, knowledge and experiences these graduate possessed were shaped by the demands of Australian employers, requiring students to contextualise their learning and experiences to their home country on their return, potentially delaying their entry into the labour market (Henderson, 2011).

Based on their postcolonial analysis of international students, Madge, Raghuram and Noxolo (2009) called for an ‘engaged pedagogy’, which involving ‘both rethinking and unsettling the spatialities involved in international student mobility and in relocating the ‘voice’ though which such concerns are articulated (2009:44)’. The same authors (2015) argued for a conceptual relocation from international student to international study, which enables recognition of the

multiple contributions (and resistances), of international students as agents of knowledge formation not just flows of people (Raghuram, 2013). We think there are three the implications of their argument for universities who intend to enhance international students' employability. First, for those who working with international students at HE institutions, it is imperative to reflect our practice and our role in the world of HE. Our intertwined experience with international students has implications for all who are involving, not just international students alone (Madge et al., 2015). Second, for international students, it is necessary to understand the nature of their international experience and become more proactive stakeholder to develop and enhance their own employability. Third, for HE institutions, it is important to consider the mobility of the students in the context of mobile careers instead of an isolated time to develop their employability (Findley et al, 2012). Hence, they need to promote and enhance shared space of knowledge inhabiting by academics and students to produce, reproduce and circulate knowledge.

### **Study methods**

This research reports the second part of a national research project in Britain. As the first part of the project was published in Huang et al., (2014) which including detailed discussion of the research process, only key research information are discussed here. This paper reports the outcomes of the questionnaire in relation to Mainland Chinese students' motivations for studying abroad, perceived benefits to their future employability (Brooks et al 2012; Campbell, 2010; Crossman and Clarke, 2010; Kneale, 2008) and engagement with initiatives available within their institution to promote graduate employability (Brooks et al., 2012; Cranmer, 2006; Pegg et al 2012). The research was undertaken with full ethical clearance from the researchers

University, and adhered to the guiding principals of the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2011). Data were gathered using a seven-point Likert scale (1 means absolutely disagree and 7 means absolutely agree). The Seven-point Likert scale was adopted as Cooper and Schindler (2008: 309) highlight that “the 7 and 9 point Likert scale are better approximations of a normal response curve and extraction of more variability among respondents”.

To ensure reliability and validity the questionnaire was designed in English then translated to Chinese. A back translation method (Sperber 2004) was used in order to avoid any misunderstanding. Following Hair et al. (1992) the survey was piloted with 30 students, resulting in minor revisions to the wording of three questions. The final questionnaire was produced in Qualtrics and disseminated using two approaches. Firstly an email link was sent to all Chinese international students at the university where both authors work. It was also distributed through the Chinese Student and Scholar Association (CSSA) - the official organisation for Mainland Chinese students and scholars currently in the UK (CSSA UK 2016). A convenience sampling strategy was used; though there are clear limitations to this approach, given the exploratory nature of this work, and the focus on a specific population, it was highlighted as a more effective approach to capture the perspectives of this population (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015). In total 196 online responses were collected, of which 141 were usable. Second, face-to-face questionnaires were administered by a member of the research team at five British universities leading to 308 usable responses. At end, 504 questionnaires were returned of which 449 were usable. Given the methods of survey administration and the sampling strategy, there are potential implications for the generalizability of the outcomes. However, researchers (e.g. Fosnacht et al., 2013) are increasingly advocating the importance of focusing on good survey

design over response rates, and given the challenges of accessing this sample population, the risks associated with non-response and survey fatigue in research undertaken with undergraduate students (Porter et al., 2004) we concentrated our effort on promoting engagement rather than enhancing response rates.

Descriptive statistics were first calculated using SPSS (Version 21.0), then a principal component factor analysis, using varimax rotation, was undertaken to determine whether distinct dimensions of different initiatives were adopted by respondents to develop their employability. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin statistic and Cronbach's alpha values were referenced to confirm the results of the factor analysis. Principal component factor analysis was used as it is the easiest way to carry out data reduction as it is based on linear transformations (Guidici 2007). Varimax rotation was used as Tabachnick and Fidell (2001) argue that it is the most widely used rotation method and maximises the factor loading of each variable on one of the extracted factors whilst minimizing the loading on all other factors. To determine whether the factoring procedure was appropriate, the Kaiser-Myer-Olkin (KMO) statistic was referenced. The rule of KMO scale according to Keiser (1974) is above 0.90 (very good), 0.80 (good), 0.70 (medium) and less than 0.60 (poor), but usually under 0.60 is still allowed as not less than 0.50. Hence based on the above rule, the measure (.911) was "good," indicating that it was safe to proceed with the factor analysis. Based on Child's (1970) recommendation, only those factors with eigenvalues equal to or greater than 1.0 were extracted. The initial analysis results indicated that four factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1.0 existed. Another two criteria were used to determine the viability of each dimension. First, only items with factor loadings of at least .40 were retained (Tabachnick & Fidell 2001). Factor loadings are the correlations between a variable and the factor that has

been extracted. According to Hair et al (1992) “factor loadings greater than +0.30 are considered significant, loadings greater than +0.40 are more important while loadings more than +0.50 are very significant”. Each dimension was subjected to reliability testing. Items that reduced the reliability of a dimension were eliminated from further analysis, and only factor dimensions with Cronbach’s alpha values greater than .60 were deemed acceptable.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Respondent profile***

Among 449 total respondents, similar numbers of male (n=215) and female students (n=234) completed the questionnaire; most respondents were between 22 and 30 (n=296) or 18 and 21 years old (n=150). 41.6% of respondents were studying for a master’s degree, whilst 37.2% were in the final year of the first degree – perhaps explaining the greater proportion of students in the 22-30 age group.

Most were studying Business-related subjects (n=178, 39.6%) and Accounting and Finance (n=85, 26.3%) as is often the case for Chinese students (Huang et al., 2014). The respondents were drawn from 25 universities; 233 respondents were from research-intensive and 216 respondents were from teaching-centred universities. The respondent profile was consistent with current trends of the Mainland Chinese students in the UK (HESA 2016).

### ***International experience and reasons for studying in the UK***

The respondents were asked about their prior international experiences and 45.9% of the respondents reported that they had no experience of been abroad. Among those who had



international experience, 44.3% of them previously travelled abroad and 21.6% had already of studied abroad. Respondents rated a series of reasons identified from the literature as motivating students to study abroad. They believed that studying in the UK would enhance their career prospects in China (mean=4.99). This means British universities should explicitly consider how they support students to achieve this. Luo (2013) observed that effective use of career services could benefit international students as it can support their academic and cultural integration, which in turn benefited the retention of international students. Therefore, central services should tailor provision so that it both attractive and relevant to international students, and staff should expand their understanding of the labour market beyond the UK. This finding counters recent trends discussed above regarding a reduced labour market value of an overseas degree (e.g. Li 2013; Li, Morgan and Ding, 2008).

Reputation of the HE institutions also rated highly. In China, gaining a degree from elite universities improves recruitment prospects (Yang 2008) therefore it is likely that similar considerations affect Chinese students' choice of institution abroad. Comparatively speaking, respondents rated 'available funding (scholarship) opportunities' (mean=3.42) less importantly. This finding provides empirical evidence to Huang's (2008) belief that Mainland Chinese students coming to the UK were comparatively richer than those studying at American universities who are more dependent on scholarships. 'Recommendations from family and friends (mean=3.32)' was identified as least important reason. This reflects societal shifts in China, whereby the younger generations are less influenced by their family and friends compare to their parents' generation (Tsang, 2015).

### *Perceived benefits of international experience to employability*

A major component of the questionnaire considered respondents' perceptions of the applicability of claimed benefits of an international experience (as cited in the literature) to their own situations. Again a 7-point scale was used, with 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree, to assess the respondents' feelings about the benefit of these different factors. The respondents recognised the breadth benefits cited within the literature and mean scores for all 23 benefits of international experience were higher than 5. However, an analysis of mean scores of all these benefits, it is clear that they were focused on what they can get out of it for themselves (e.g. 'Gaining a better understanding of yourself' (mean=6.01) and their own development (e.g. 'Developing self-confidence' (mean=5.87), 'Developing flexibility' (mean = 5.78) 'Improving written communication skill' (mean = 5.75). Comparatively speaking, they were thinking less in terms of future career development. (e.g. 'Confirmation of chosen career paths' (mean = 5.46), 'Having more opportunities for networking' (mean = 5.42)).

A factor analysis was conducted on the benefits listed in Table 1 to discover the underlying dimensions of such benefits using a principal component factoring method with a varimax rotation. Activity items eliminated as a result of this overall "cleansing" procedure were 'Getting to know a particular country', 'Getting to know people from different country', and 'Gaining an advantage in the recruitment process'. The final number of the items was reduced to 20.

After these criteria were applied, the optimal number of factor dimensions was found to be four and were named as 'Increasing Personal Critical Awareness' (F1), 'Competitive Communication Advantages' (F2), 'Substantive Personal Understanding' (F3), and 'Better Personal Cultural Capital' (F4). Items related to Increasing Personal Critical Awareness included increasing

knowledge of cultural issues, developing self-management skills, developing a deeper open-minded critical attitude and increasing tolerance of ambiguity contributed heavily to the first factor. This factor consisted of seven items. The Cronbach's alpha for the factor was .882. This factor had an eigenvalue of 8.217 and accounted for 39.129% of the variance explained. Items related to Competitive Communication Advantages e.g. developing better interpersonal skills, improving written communication skill and developing flexibility. This factor consisted of six items. The Cronbach's alpha for the factor was .832. This factor had an eigenvalue of 1.986 and accounted for 9.457% of the variance explained. Items related to Substantive Personal Understanding such as gaining a better understanding of self, broadening horizons, and more opportunities for networking. This factor consisted of three items. The Cronbach's alpha for the factor was .723. This factor had an eigenvalue of 1.374 and accounted for 6.541% of the variance explained. Items related to Better Personal Cultural Capital such as confirmation of chosen career paths, increasing social capital, and becoming more persistent. This factor consisted of four items. The Cronbach's alpha for the factor was .653. This factor had an eigenvalue of 1.030 and accounted for 4.907% of the variance explained. The underlying dimensions of different activities are represented in Table 1 below:

**[Insert Table 1 near here]**

The items that comprise each factor were added together to generate a mean score for each of the four dimensions. The overall mean scores for the four benefit dimensions were as follows:

Increasing Personal Critical Awareness, 5.62 (SD = .826); Competitive Communication

Advantages, 5.64 (SD = .806); Substantive Personal Understanding, 5.68 (SD = .848); and Better Personal Cultural Capital, 5.44 (SD = .913).

This echoes Marginson's (2014:6) idea of international education as 'a process of self-formation within conditions of disequilibrium in which student manage their lives reflexively, fashioning their own changing identities, albeit under social circumstances largely beyond their control.' At the time of undertaking their international study the 'soft currencies' gained from the overseas experiences are of more significant merit. This provides further evidence to what Li (2013) argues the discourse of 'SuZhi', which has stronger explanatory power for the phenomenon being studied given its broader social applicability rather than being instrumental to employability as is the notion of personal capital.

The research showed that the Chinese students recognised the breadth of claimed benefits of an international experience but overall they focused on those that may be perceived most relevance to them during their period of international study. 'Gaining a better understanding of yourself', 'Developing self-confidence', and 'Developing flexibility'. Whilst these are benefits that will support their future development, universities need to work to strengthen the agency of the students, and its scope and resources, to facilitate self-formation (Marginson 2014). Though this is challenging it resonated with the recommendations of related researchers (e.g. Singh 2005; Volet and Jones 2012). Institutions also need to support international students to consider different types of benefits associated with international study, encouraging them to look beyond course content to the overall value of the courses in relation to developing critical self-awareness and personal cultural capital development.

### *University support to develop future employability*

Respondents were asked to identify available provision to support them in developing their employability, then rate both their willingness to engage with this provision and perceived usefulness to them (see Table 2). Respondents were aware of provision such as work-based learning (52%), employability training workshops (50%) and specific modules related to employability (49%). They are likely to be exposed to explicitly through course curricular, as these examples often documented as embedded in degree programmes (Yorke and Knight 2006). As a result, they demonstrated a relatively high willingness to take part in these activities. Respondents were also aware of societies and clubs (49%) and extra curriculum awards (49%), perhaps indicating the relatively high profile nature of these activities at the time of data collection (e.g. Norton and Thomas 2009).

**[Insert Table 2 near here]**

However, the perceived usefulness of these activities was rated relatively low (4.47 and 4.45 respectively); this could reflect Chinese international students' lack of the cultural understanding to recognise the relevance of such opportunities to their future development. It may also indicate linguistic or cultural barriers, as these have been recognised as negatively affecting international students' abilities to participate / integrate with peers (Campell et al. 2014). Respondents demonstrated limited awareness of personal tutorials (42%) and central career services (41%). This is consistent with related work (e.g. Nilsson et al. 2004; Singaravelu et al. 2005) which has previously identified international students as not engaging with careers services due to differences in cultural values (Byon et al. 1999) or their support not to be seen as worthwhile

(Shen and Herr 2004). Chinese students may present a specific challenge for careers services to engage with as traditionally family influence exerts an impacts on Asian students' career choices (Sun 2015; Wong and Liu 2010; Yi et al. 2003; Yoo and Skovholt 2001), though this may not hold true from the data we presented above. Miller et al. (2016) argues that such cultural difference may contribute to some of the hesitancy surrounding international students' use of career services.

Instead directly introduce such activities, institutions might want to first promote value of extra-curricular activities for developing different employability skills (Lau et al., 2014). Institutions might want to make it explicitly to Chinese students how such activities will help them develop and improve their communication skills and cultural capital as they originally hoped when they decided to study abroad (Huang, 2013; Huang, et al., 2014).

### ***Differences between Research-intensive Universities and Teaching-focus universities***

Independent sample t-test identified significant differences amongst two of four benefit dimensions (Increasing Personal Critical Awareness and Competitive Communication Advantages, Table 3) according to institution type. Chinese respondents at teaching-focused universities rated higher than their compatriots at the Research-intensive universities on these two dimensions of benefits of international experience to their development of employability. This may reflect the increasing diversity, in terms of their academic ability and future aspirations, of Chinese international students in the UK (Iannelli and Huang 2014), the differing strategies used by institutions to enhance employability, and the extent to which international students are engaging with these initiatives.

**[Insert Table 3 near here]**

Although the students from both types of universities are willing to participate in all kinds of university supports (mean >4), an analysis of the mean score for each university support (see Table 2), it is apparent that the students at research-intensive universities demonstrated higher willingness than their compatriots at teaching-focused universities to participate. Furthermore, the perceived usefulness of this listed support to develop their employability shows similar patterns between the research and teaching-focused universities. Such results seem to be consistent with differences in types of activities the Chinese students use to develop and improve their employability reported by Huang et al. (2014) in relation to the same group of the students at two types of universities. Indeed, Huang (2008) observed differing career aspirations for Mainland Chinese students at teaching or research-focused universities.

## **Conclusions**

This research gathered data from 449 Mainland Chinese students studying at 25 British universities. Although 45% of respondents had no prior international experience, 21% had previously study abroad. The opportunity to improve career prospects in China was the most important reason to study abroad while recommendations from family and friends were the least important for them.

The major component of the questionnaire considered respondents' perceptions of the applicability of claimed benefits from the literature of an international experience to developing student employability to their own situations. In this regard, 'Gaining a better understanding of yourself', 'Developing self-confidence', and 'Developing flexibility' were most reported benefits. Comparatively speaking, 'Having more opportunities for networking', 'Becoming more persistent', and 'Getting to know a particular country' were less convincing benefits. The factor

analysis identified four underlying dimensions: ‘Increasing Personal Critical Awareness’, ‘Competitive Communication Advantages’, ‘Substantive Personal Understanding’, and ‘Better Personal Cultural Capital’. In relation to their awareness, willingness to participate and perceived usefulness of different types of university support to develop and improve their employability, it is clear that respondents were more aware of those activities which embedded in the curriculum and their willingness to engage with central services was limited. Finally, it is clear that there are significant differences in the students’ perceptions regarding willingness to participate and perceived usefulness of those employability activities provided by universities among the respondents who are studying at research-intensive to those in teaching-focus universities.

This study adds a much-needed international dimension to the study of graduate employability, which tends to be focused on the needs to undergraduates in the UK or USA (Harvey 2005). Based on the outcomes of this study we offer following recommendations to universities who support international students to develop their employability:

- 1) As respondents rated the ‘chance to improve career prospects in China’ after their international study as the most important reason to study in the UK, British universities should consider how to effectively achieve it. To overcome potential language and cultural barriers we recommend career services seek to proactively reach international students; this could be supported by translating promotional materials and offering career services in natural settings (e.g. in residence halls or collaboration with international societies). Peer-led models of professional mentorship for international students (Miller et al. 2016) may serve to promote engagement as studies (e.g. Miller et al. 2016; Yang et



al. 2002) have observed peer mentoring as effective in assisting international students to address visa issues, assist with preparation in for interviews and also job search process. Peer mentoring also encourages students share their personal experiences with those have undergone similar experience (Miller et al. 2016).

- 2) Even at the relatively high profile nature of extra-curricular activities at the time of data collection (e.g. Norton and Thomas 2009), the research showed that Chinese students had relatively low awareness and perceived usefulness of extra-curricular activities. In order to actively engage this group of students, institutions might want to translate some extra-curricular activity promotional materials in order to overcome language barriers (Shen and Herr, 2004). Popular Chinese social media sites (e.g. Wechat, QQ) could be used to populate extra-curricular activities as many Chinese students are keen to use them for different purposes (Shu and Scott, 2014)
- 3) Based on apparent differences in perceived benefits of international education among Mainland Chinese students at different type of universities, the individual institutions might want to reconsider their strategies used to enhance employability and engage international students. In terms of those significant differences in awareness and willingness to engage, and the perceived value of different forms of university supports to develop and improve graduate employability, the individual institutions need to reconsider their approaches in engaging different types of Mainland Chinese students in their employability activities as such students are not a homogeneous cohort (Iannelli and Huang 2014).

There were some limitations on this study. First, we cannot claim the samples to be representative of all Chinese international students who are studying in the UK. Secondly respondent numbers were relatively low due to challenges in engaging with this specific population over the timeframe in which the research occurred. Third, an inherent issue of self-reported data is always reliant on the participants' memories. In spite of the limitations, however, we consider that this research has added to the knowledge of employability, and provided fruitful leads for researchers interested in the international student phenomenon.

As Popadiuk and Arthur (2014) argue research centred on international students tends to concentrate on initial and middle stages of their sojourn, with limited consideration of support given to international students support them through the transition from university to work. Based on the data reported here we identify several directions future research may take to address this gap. This study could be replicated with Mainland Chinese students studying in other countries to verify whether the findings are consistent. Comparative research with other international students will enhance our understanding of the impacts of an international education, and the range of benefits it bring to student employability. Regarding the identified differences between research-intensive and teaching-focus higher education institutions, replication of the current research elsewhere, and with other international student groups, as this could have implications for how employability is promoted across the HE sector. To date many studies into graduate employability have tended to focus on the benefits of participation, and there has been less research into the factors inhibiting participation or success on different employability activities, and hence more could be investigated in order to better engage the international students.

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**Table 1: underlying dimensions of different claimed benefits**

<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Increasing Personal Critical Awareness</b>	<b>Competitive Communication Advantages</b>	<b>Substantive Personal Understanding</b>	<b>Better Personal Cultural Capital</b>
Increasing knowledge of cultural issues	.764			
Developing self confidence	.749			
Strengthening self- management skills	.745			
Developing a deeper open-minded critical attitude	.728			
Becoming more proactive to make things happen	.691			
Willingness to experience new things	.646			
Increasing tolerance of ambiguity	.597			
Improving performance under pressure	.525			
<hr/>				
Developing better interpersonal skills		.818		
Improving communication skill (face to face)		.718		
Improving written communication skill		.703		
Gaining a better understanding of foreign business practice		.616		
Developing flexibility		.543		
Developing self-directed learning		.519		
<hr/>				
Gaining a better understanding of yourself			.740	
Broadening horizons			.697	
Having more opportunities for networking			.625	
<hr/>				
Confirmation of chosen career paths				.772
Increasing social capital				.747
Becoming more persistent				.516
<hr/>				
Eigenvalue	8.217	1.986	1.374	1.030
Variance explained (percentage)	39.129	9.457	6.541	4.907
Cumulative variance explained (percentage)	39.129	48.586	55.127	60.034
Cronbach's alpha	.882	.832	.723	.653
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.				

**Table 2 Willingness to participate and perceived value of different types of university support**

<b>University support to develop employability</b>	<b>Willingness to participate* (mean)</b>	<b>Perceived usefulness** (mean)</b>
Work-based learning activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching-focused universities</li> <li>• Research-intensive universities</li> </ul>	<b>4.84</b> 4.50 5.15	<b>4.65</b> 4.27 5.01
Specific modules related to employability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching-focused universities</li> <li>• Research-intensive universities</li> </ul>	<b>4.65</b> 4.18 4.98	<b>4.53</b> 4.06 4.81
Employability training workshops <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching-focused universities</li> <li>• Research-intensive universities</li> </ul>	<b>4.63</b> 4.11 5.11	<b>4.52</b> 4.03 4.89
Career service from careers advisers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching-focused universities</li> <li>• Research-intensive universities</li> </ul>	<b>4.61</b> 4.31 4.90	<b>4.48</b> 4.18 4.86
Extra curriculum awards for students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching-focused universities</li> <li>• Research-intensive universities</li> </ul>	<b>4.60</b> 4.31 4.83	<b>4.47</b> 4.15 4.78
University student societies and clubs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching-focused universities</li> <li>• Research-intensive universities</li> </ul>	<b>4.58</b> 4.07 4.52	<b>4.45</b> 4.00 4.54
Personal tutorials for academic and also non-academic matters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching-focused universities</li> <li>• Research-intensive universities</li> </ul>	<b>4.30</b> 4.35 4.94	<b>4.28</b> 4.23 4.79
Note: *1 means least likely and 7 means most likely; ** 1 means least useful and 7 means most useful		

**Table 3 Overall mean scores for benefit dimensions by types of universities (Mean and standard deviation)**

	Increasing Personal Critical Awareness	Competitive Communication Advantages	Substantive Personal Understanding	Better Personal Cultural Capital
Research-intensive universities	5.54 (.804)	5.56 (.782)	5.66 (.782)	5.44 (.844)
Teaching – focus universities	5.71 (.842)*	5.72 (.826)*	5.70 (.826)	5.44 (.944)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. Dimension scores were coded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)

\*Significant at .05 level