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9 International Student Mobility and Employability: An Employer Perspective on the Impact of Study Abroad Experiences

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Abstract

Recent studies have considered the employability of international students because of their study abroad experiences. There is, however, limited research into how the curriculum of host universities aligns with the employability needs of international students, especially those who seek employment in their home countries. This study examines the employability needs of the Chinese labor market and mapping how international student mobility affects the employability of Chinese international students who return to China to work. We explore the perspectives of Chinese employers which have been neglected in previous studies. Results show that a one-year master's degree is the most sought-after degree by Chinese employers. Chinese employers prefer Chinese career channels over UK career channels for recruiting employees with study abroad experiences. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that Chinese employers value methodology skills (e.g., time-management, problem-solving) and knowledge-related skills (e.g., Chinese language and English language) the most when it comes to international student employability; conversely, interpersonal skills are considered least essential to student employability. Generally, however, Chinese employers do not perceive study abroad experiences to significantly enhance Chinese students' employability skills.

Keywords: internationalization, employability, employer perspective, study abroad

Introduction

Recent decades have seen an increase in the number of students studying overseas for career advancement (Pietro and Giorgio, 2019). Studying abroad is seen as culturally and academically enriching and enhancing students' employability when they return to their home countries (Pham, 2018; Teichler and Janson, 2007). Recently, considerable attention has been paid to how and to what extent study abroad experiences enhance or hinder students' employability skills (Harder et al., 2015; Matherly

and Tillman, 2019). Students' employability is perceived as important by employers. There has been evidence that many employers are facing a skill-shortage and are increasingly looking for excellent skills and competencies of overseas returnees (AEI, 2010; Cai, 2013; Van Mol, 2017). Currently, there are few studies that examine how students' study abroad experiences may influence their employability from the perspective of employers. In the meantime, it is important to understand the needs of the overseas labor market and whether they are aligned with the current curriculum in host universities. Therefore, it is necessary to comprehend how employers perceive students' employability once they return to their home country after studying abroad. This chapter seeks to fill this knowledge gap by providing insights into how international students' mobility affects their employability back home from the employer's perspective.

International Student Mobility and Employability

Education experiences are essential in supporting students in their attempt to gain employment (Di Pietro, 2015). In recent years, there has been a significant increase in students choosing to study abroad (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018). According to recent research, most of these students return home after their studies to pursue employment (Pham et al., 2019). For example, 'Zhao and Cox (2022) found that over 75% of Chinese international students expressed an interest to return to China at the beginning of their academic programs. Zweig and Ge (2018) observe a greater than 79% return rate on Chinese students who have graduated from the US and return to China for work. This demonstrates that international education can play a significant role in helping international students gain employment when they return home for work.

Employability has been defined from various perspectives, such as a capability to land jobs in labor markets and the ability to retain employment (Pham, 2021; Pham & Jackson, 2020). From a sociological perspective, personal traits significantly influence student employability (Purcell et al., 2012; Tomlinson, 2017). Most notably, competence and skills are two important concepts associated with student employability noted in research, and they are different from each other. Competence is defined as the "quality of being able and fit" (Vazirani, 2010, p. 123), and it is regarded as a reliable predictor of students' employability since it represents how students acquire knowledge and skills that can be effectively applied to a particular context, or to achieve a specific goal (Vazirani, 2010; Velden, 2013). Employability skills are generic skills that are transferable and necessary for employment (Husain et al., 2013; Mayer et al., 2016). In other words, competence focuses on utilizing

knowledge in the workplace, whereas skills focus on acquired knowledge from education and training (Suleman, 2018). Oliver et al. (2014) broadly identify six clusters of skills for investigating employer satisfaction on graduates' employability: foundation skills that include communication skills, problem-solving and critical analysis; adaptive skills that include the ability to adapt to new situations; team working and interpersonal skills; IT skills; pressure-coping related skills; and technical/domain skills. More specifically, the US Department of Education (n.d.), an influential institution in promoting graduates' preparation for global employment competitiveness, suggests an Employability Skills Framework (ESF) that involves nine specific skills summarized into three domains: applied knowledge including applied academic skills and critical thinking; workplace skills including resource management, information use, communication, systems thinking, and use of technology; and effective relationships including interpersonal skills and personal qualities. The World Economic Forum (2016) suggests a 21st century skills model that further emphasizes the significance of innovation and personal related aspects. These studies provide insights on the types of students' skills required by the labor market.

The concept of competence and skills are both useful to examine students' employability. However, students' competence cannot be directly measured, since it is based on the performance in practice as well as the outcome of evaluation in an activity (Glaesser, 2019; Loo and Semeijn, 2004; Suleman, 2018). Therefore, many previous studies investigate students' employability skills rather than their competence because skills can represent their acquisition of knowledge from education and are easier to observe through traditional research methods (Suleman, 2018; Velden, 2013). Thus, in this study, we leverage the concept of skills associated with students' employability to examine graduates' employability. Research has shown that international student mobility has a significant impact on the development of students' employability skills (Black et al., 2013; Hubbard, 2019). For example, Harder et al. (2015) contend that study abroad enhances students' technical skills, cultural awareness, attitudes, and soft skills. Numerous studies, however, highlight a lack of research on how enhanced employability skills at host universities align with the needs of global labor markets (Machlica et al., 2017; Zweig and Ge, 2018).

Employer Perspectives on Graduate Employability

Recent research proves that the role of employers is increasingly important in understanding the relationship between international students' employability skills and their study abroad experiences. According to Maxwell et al. (2008), employers are an important stakeholder in

developing students' employability skills since they identify what skills are required in the labor market. Suleman et al. (2021) argue that employers' engagement with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can greatly foster students' employability. In addition, the literature indicates that international employers act as important intermediaries between overseas students' employability skills and the needs of local and global labor markets (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010; Lowden et al., 2011; Succi and Canovi, 2020). According to these studies, employers' perspectives are vital for understanding how their students' employability skills are affected by their experiences abroad better to meet the needs of the overseas job market.

Furthermore, existing literature related to employers' perspective of graduates' employability highlights English language skills, communication skills, team-work skills, and problem-solving skills as the four most important attributes that employers seek in candidates (AEI, 2010). Recent literature has further identified a range of skills that employers value, including subject specific skills, enterprise leadership, numeracy, technical management, teamwork, interpersonal skills, communication, IT literacy, learning skills and creativity, attitudes towards work, and openness (Damoah et al., 2021; Eldeen et al., 2018; Harder et al., 2015; Suleman, 2018). These various skills are usually grouped into different skill sets for further analysis. For example, Crawford et al. (2011) highlight that employers value students' soft skills more than their technical skills. They identified six skills within the soft skills cluster that are most valuable to employers: communication, problem-solving, self-management, teamwork, professionalism, experiences, and leadership skills. Moreover, Hernández-March et al. (2009) suggest vocational skills and generic skills are two main categories for employment. Vocational skills refer to discipline-specific knowledge, and generic skills, as the name suggests, refer to generic employability skills. Hernández-March et al. (2009) further categorized the generic skills into three subcategories: knowledge-related skills, methodological skills, and interpersonal skills. Similarly, Rayner and Papakonstantinou (2015) identify three clusters of employability skills: vocational skills, interpersonal skills, and generic skills; with vocational skills (i.e., the ability to contextually apply knowledge) prioritized as the most valuable. This chapter adopts the theoretical framework adapted from Hernández-March et al.'s (2009) model combined with further elements derived from other relevant literature to investigate how international student mobility impacts on student employability from overseas employers' perspectives (see Table 1). As can be seen in Table 1, there are four categories of employability skills synthesized from the literature based on the Hernández-March et al. model: A. vocational skills, B. knowledge skills, C. methodological skills, and

Table 1 Theoretical framework on employability skills (adapted from Hernández-March et al.'s (2009) model)

<i>Employability Skills</i>	<i>Exemplar Skills</i>	<i>Reference</i>
<i>A. Vocational Skills</i>		
Discipline-specific knowledge	Sector-specific skills	1, 2, 6
Labor market knowledge	Knowledge of local market, Knowledge of overseas markets	7
Domain experience	Relevant work experience	3, 5
Customer service orientation	Customer service	6
<i>B. Knowledge skills</i>		
Written communication skills	Reading skills, writing skills	1, 2, 3, 4, 6
Oral communication skills	Presentation skills	1, 2, 3, 4, 8
IT skills	Computer skills	1, 6, 7, 8
English language skills	English language skills	1, 4
Numeracy skills	Numerical skills	2, 4, 7
<i>C. Methodological Skills</i>		
Curiosity	Curiosity, Positivity	3
Problem-solving ability	Analytical and problem-solving	1, 2, 5
Critical thinking	Critical thinking	2, 4, 5, 6
Time management	Time management skills	1, 5
Ability to work under pressure	Persistence	1, 3
Decision making	Decision-making skills	1, 4
Creativity	Creativity	1, 4
Awareness	Social and cultural awareness	4, 6
<i>D. Interpersonal Skills</i>		
Initiative	Initiative	1, 4, 6
Networking	Networking skills, Local contacts (Guanxi) in China	4, 6
Negotiating	Negotiation/persuasion	1, 8
Organization and leadership skills	Leadership	1, 2, 3, 6
Flexibility and adaptability	Adaptability, Flexibility	2, 3, 4, 6, 8
Self-confidence	Self-confidence, Assertiveness	2, 4, 6
Respect	Respect for senior colleagues, Respect for superiors, Respect for diversity, Employee loyalty	9

1. Hernández-March et al. (2009); 2. Rayner & Papakonstantinou (2015); 3. Crawford et al. (2011); 4. Oluwatobi et al (2017); 5. Prinsley & Baranyai (2015); 6. Coll & Zegwaard (2006); 7. British Council (2018); 8. Olivier et al. (2014); 9. Yorke & Harvey (2005).

D. interpersonal skills. Each cluster of skills incorporates a number of subclusters of skills (e.g., labor market knowledge) and each subcluster includes a number of specific skills (e.g., knowledge of local market, knowledge of overseas markets). All skills have been drawn from the existing literature on employability which can be found at the bottom of Table 1 (e.g., 1, 2, and 6 in the last column means that discipline-specific knowledge skills are supported by Hernández-March et al. (2009), Rayner and Papakonstantinou (2015) and Coll and Zegwaard's (2006) work).

Research Aim and Objectives

This chapter aims to understand the impact of study abroad experiences on the employability of Chinese students/returnees who seek graduate jobs in China from an employers' perspective. The research objectives are as follows:

- 1) To examine how study abroad programs impact Chinese students' employment from the perspective of Chinese employers.
- 2) To identify perceived essential employability skills in the Chinese job market.
- 3) To explore how the development of the identified skills could be impacted by study abroad experiences from the perspective of Chinese employers.

Research Method

To address these objectives, this study used a deductive approach to gather quantitative data through an online survey. It allows researchers quick and easy access to a relatively large group of overseas Chinese employers, a group that is often difficult to reach. The online survey was conducted in accordance with the employability model adapted from Hernández March et al. (2009), to examine how employers view overseas returnees' employability after they return to China. All the questions in the survey were designed in English and translated into Mandarin Chinese. The survey questions were cross-examined by two researchers who are native speakers of Chinese. A pilot study was conducted to avoid further ambiguity. The survey was then distributed through the LimeSurvey platform to Chinese employers who are responsible for recruiting employees (e.g., HR departments).

The survey was developed into two parts. In the first part of the survey, demographic information was collected, such as the employer's location, company size, and industry; this section aims to understand

employers' basic information and contextual background. The second part included questions such as how essential they consider the listed employability skills and whether these skills have been enhanced by study abroad experiences. The survey was distributed to Chinese employers through the employer networks of Career Services departments at three Russell Group universities in the UK. Respondents in our survey were Chinese companies that have recruited, or are currently recruiting, overseas Chinese returnees. A total of 109 questionnaires were collected, of which 50 were valid responses. Cross tabulation, T-test, and descriptive analysis were conducted for data analysis via IBM SPSS 26.

Results

According to the survey, there was an equal representation of small (26%), medium (40%), and large companies (34%) among employers. In most companies (80%), less than 25% of their employees have international backgrounds. Most companies in our survey offer positions in top-tier City (tiers 1-3) in China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and those of provincial capitals (Figure 1). This indicates that resources

Figure 1 Position offered by city

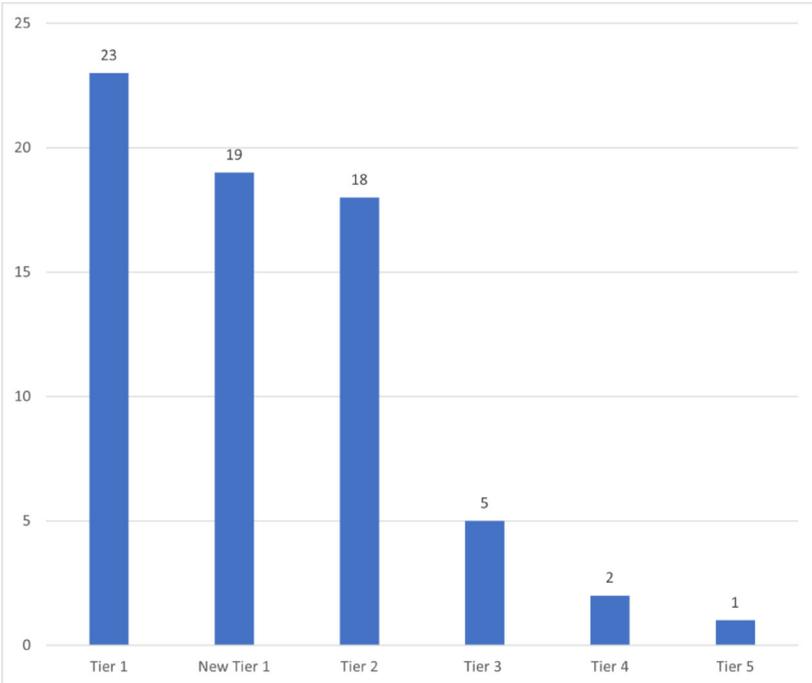


Figure 2 Preferred overseas degree by employers

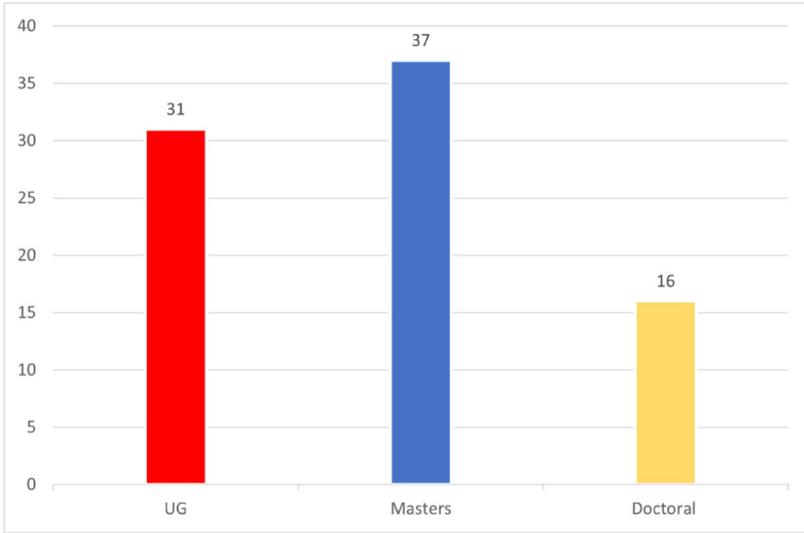
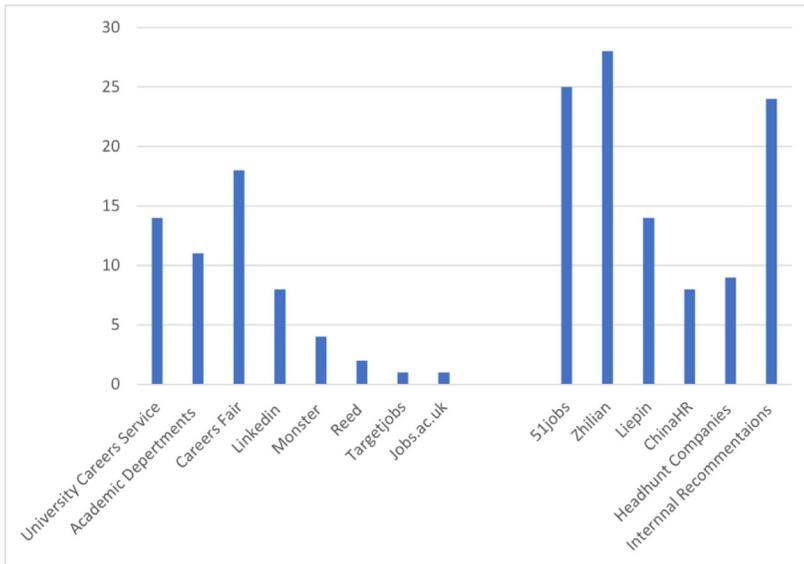


Figure 3 Career platforms used by overseas employers



for Chinese overseas returnees tend to be concentrated in top-tier cities, whereas employers in lower-tier cities are less equipped to compete for talents (China Daily, 2017). Furthermore, our data suggest that the most sought-after degree type is the master's degree, followed by a graduate degree. The doctoral degree is the least required (Figure 2).

Our data also indicates that employers in China are more likely to use Chinese career websites for recruiting purposes (Figure 3). Specifically, top career platforms include 51job and Zhilian. Internal recommendations play a significant role in the recruitment process, suggesting a need for Chinese international students to establish and retain contacts with local Chinese networks. This also highlights an area for UK universities to potentially strengthen engagement with overseas employers as academic partners or through career events. Except for LinkedIn, overseas employers seldom use UK career platforms, such as Reed, target jobs; nevertheless, they are engaged with career fairs, university career services, and academic department career liaisons. Thus, it is worth considering whether UK universities can engage with more global partners to support the employability of international students. It could also be argued that resources could be used to assist international students in preparation for career fairs.

Essential Skills vs Enhanced Skills by Study Abroad Experience

Table 2 demonstrates the percentage of all respondents who agreed that listed skills were essential to student employability and whether these skills were developed because of students' experience of studying abroad. Based on the employability model proposed by Hernández-March et al. (2009), a list of 28 employability skills derived from the literature were grouped into four clusters: vocational skills, knowledge skills, methodology skills, and interpersonal skills. As evident in Table 2, methodology skills (e.g., time management skills, initiative, analytical and problem-solving skills) achieved the highest average means (58.8%) in terms of how essential they are to international student employability. This indicates that Chinese employers place the greatest emphasis on the skills that relate to the modes of managing work-related tasks. The interpersonal skills cluster, on the contrary, received the lowest rank average (37%) among the four clusters, suggesting personal attributes and people skills are considered less essential to student employability by Chinese employers.

In terms of individual employability skills, sector-specific skills, within the vocational skills cluster, are considered highly essential, but are far

Table 2 Perceived essential skills and the impact of study abroad on these skills

Skills	Essential to employability	Enhanced by study abroad experience
A. Vocational Skills	Ave=42.4%	Ave=23.7%
Sector-specific skills	70.0%	14.3%
Customer service	64.0%	10.2%
Knowledge of local market	48.0%	0.0%
Relevant work experience	18.0%	4.1%
Knowledge of overseas markets	12.0%	89.8%
B. Knowledge skills	Ave=44.8%	Ave=33.5%
Chinese reading and writing skills	68.0%	0.0%
English reading and writing skills	58.0%	93.9%
Computer skills	48.0%	12.2%
Numerical skills	26.0%	2.0%
Presentation skills	24.0%	59.2%
C. Methodological Skills	Ave=58.8%	Ave=31.2%
Time management skills	82.0%	26.5%
Initiative	80.0%	14.3%
Analytical and problem-solving	80.0%	26.5%
Persistence	74.0%	10.2%
Adaptability	70.0%	28.6%
Creativity	50.0%	46.9%
Flexibility	46.0%	0.0%
Decision-making skills	40.0%	20.4%
Critical thinking	36.0%	61.2%
Social and cultural awareness	30.0%	77.6%
D. Interpersonal Skills	Ave=37.0%	Ave=22.2%
Self-confidence	56.0%	40.8%
Networking skills	52.0%	10.2%
Assertiveness	46.0%	59.2%
Respect for superiors	38.0%	0.0%
Negotiation/ persuasion	36.0%	34.7%
Respect for senior colleagues	30.0%	0.0%
Local contacts (Guangxi) in China	22.0%	4.1%
Leadership	16.0%	28.6%

less enhanced, indicating that there may be a misalignment between the subject knowledge required in the overseas industry and the knowledge promoted in the UK higher education sector. Another interesting finding is that although considered to be greatly enhanced by study abroad experiences, critical thinking skills and social cultural awareness were perceived as less essential to student employability. This is consistent with existing research which highlights the efforts of host universities in supporting Chinese international students to develop these skills. Nevertheless, our study suggests such skills are not essential for working in Chinese companies, indicating a mismatch in expectations of these skills between UK universities and Chinese employers. Furthermore, none of the respondents agree that skills relating to Chinese contexts have been enhanced, such as knowledge of the local market in China, flexibility (e.g., working outside office hours), and respect to superiors

or senior colleagues. As such, academic departments and careers services could do more to include global perspectives for international students who wish to seek employment outside of the UK.

Moreover, on average, Chinese employers tend to agree on the importance of the four skills clusters to student employability. However, when it comes to whether these skills have been enhanced by study abroad, it is noticeable that fewer Chinese employers consider studying abroad to have enhanced these skills for international students. There is room for improvement to incorporate employers' expectations to UK universities' curriculum design and career support services. Additionally, it would be useful for UK universities to support students to reflect and demonstrate these skills acquired during study abroad at interviews and in their future work environments to bridge the gap between industry employers and academic departments.

Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with the literature, suggesting that top-tier cities in China are becoming increasingly popular destinations for Chinese overseas returnees' employment (Li et al., 2021). Chinese employers who participated in this project intend to post job positions in top-tier cities, which accords with a trend noticed by China Daily (2017). This finding is consistent with that of Hao and Welch (2012) who found that most skilled Chinese overseas returnees are hired in first-tier cities in China, indicating that top-tier cities are the main graduate destination for Chinese overseas returning students. The results also demonstrate employers' preferred degrees on Chinese overseas returnees, most highlighting returnees with master's degrees compared to graduate and doctoral degrees. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies suggesting that master's students have developed stronger generic employability skills than graduate students in the UK (Artess et al., 2014; Dickinson et al., 2015). According to these studies, master's programs are becoming increasingly diverse and flourish in cultivating students' employability skills, making them more desirable to employers (Artess et al., 2014; Chhinzer and Russo, 2017). Our results are consistent with these findings in confirming the significant role of the master's program, but further highlight a salient area that undergraduate and doctoral programs could better satisfy employers' expectations, which could be investigated in future research.

Moreover, the results show that Chinese employers tend to recruit overseas returnees through local channels and networks rather than through global or UK recruitment channels. This is consistent with current literature, suggesting that the majority of Chinese employers prefer to post jobs through personal networks, Chinese social network

sites, and Chinese user-centered platforms, such as WeChat or 51jobs (Hao and Welch, 2012; Schaffer, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary for Chinese overseas returnees to establish contacts with Chinese domestic networks for their employment (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015; Xiong and Mok, 2020). There is a need for both Chinese overseas students and hosting universities to engage with global employer networks. As Rooijen (2011) argues, universities must actively engage with employers as partners to enhance students' employment opportunities.

The results also have implications on employers' perceived essential skills of Chinese overseas returnees. Returnees' methodological employability skills are valued the most by employers, while interpersonal skills are valued the least. Methodological skills can reflect returnees' ability to deal with the changing nature of workplaces (Hernández-March et al., 2009; Rayner and Papakonstantinou, 2015). As Rayner and Papakonstantinou (2015) suggest, employers emphasize methodological skills, including problem-solving and adaptability, revealing a preference for overseas returnees who are proficient in practical skills. Within the methodological skill cluster, skills such as initiative and problem-solving are perceived as most significant by employers, which is consistent with the findings of some current studies (L. Pham, 2019; Prinsley and Baranyai, 2015; Rampersad and Patel, 2014).

Interestingly, among these methodological skills, employers perceive essential skills such as initiative and time management to be insufficiently improved by international experiences, while skills considered less essential, such as critical thinking and social/cultural awareness, are significantly enhanced. This reflects a mismatch between university curriculum and labor market demands on returnees' employability skills.

Vocational cluster and knowledge cluster of skills are considered relatively important by employers. Raymond and Papakonstantinou (2015) argue that returnees' vocational skills such as discipline knowledge are essential in demonstrating their understanding of a scientific field and thereby valued by employers. As shown by our data, sector-specific skills and customer service skills are perceived as important by employers. Our results also confirm that knowledge related skills are perceived to be essential employability skills by employers (Hernández-March et al., 2009). Skills such as language proficiency and presentation skills are considered imperative by employers since effective communication is expected in the workplace (Crawford et al., 2011; Oluwatobi et al., 2017; Suleman et al., 2021). Chinese writing and reading skills are usually considered the most valuable among these skills as employers are working in a Chinese-language environment and

expect returnees to be proficient in Chinese communication so that they can be assimilated into local workplace context quickly. Local employers may doubt whether graduates studying abroad over years are still able to master local language conversation, so our results are generally consistent with Cheng's (2015) arguments that Chinese employers expect global graduates to have excellent Chinese conversation skills when working in a local context. However, these important skills are rarely enhanced from study abroad experiences because overseas course programs are usually English-language based programs (Matsuda and Friedrich, 2011). This indicates a significant mismatch between universities' curriculum design in the UK and the needs of the Chinese labor market.

Surprisingly, the interpersonal cluster of skills is perceived as the least important for employers. Our finding differs from those studies which emphasizes the importance of interpersonal skills (e.g., networking and negotiation skills) to student employability (Harder et al., 2015; Jogan and Herring, 2007; Oliver et al., 2014). It is likely that Chinese overseas returnees are not expected to establish strong networks in their early career stage by employers. However, employers show a strong preference in recruiting overseas returnees with good character qualities rather than interpersonal skills, suggesting that universities should consider supporting students to develop these qualities through the curriculum to meet labor market demands.

Conclusion

Although not the sole motive for Chinese students to come to the UK to study, the benefit to their employability is one of the most important. In this study, we investigated the perceived essential employability skills of returnee Chinese graduates from the perspectives of Chinese employers. Following the employability model developed by Hernández-March et al. (2009), our results show that Chinese employers most value employability under the methodological skills cluster, whereas those under the interpersonal skills cluster are valued the least. Despite this, employers consider all four skills clusters as not sufficiently developed by study abroad experiences, suggesting a mismatch between skills taught by universities in the UK and those expected by Chinese employers. This study also identifies areas for improvement in our current practices for preparing these students for the transition back to the workplace in their home countries, such as utilizing Chinese careers channels and promoting skills that are needed, yet not sufficiently developed, from the perspective of Chinese employers, such as methodological skills.

The generalizability of these results is subject to certain limitations. The project includes a relatively small sample size of Chinese overseas

employers. Nevertheless, our research results provide useful insight into their perceptions of international student employability, which is typically difficult to study due to limited access to overseas employers. Suggestions for future research directions include studies to further explore in-depth perspectives of Chinese employers using interviews or focus groups. Further studies can also focus on specific industries to provide more discipline-specific findings.

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