

## Contributions of Capitals to Chinese International Graduates' Employability in Australia

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### Abstract

*This research explores the employability of Chinese international graduates in the Australian labor market. It captures the significance of six forms of capital (i.e., human, social, cultural, psychological, identity, and agentic) to Chinese international graduates when they develop their careers in Australia. The research employed Bourdieu's theory of practice and a capitals-based approach as the theoretical framework. Data were collected via an online survey (N=203) and in-depth interviews (N=14). The findings reveal that in addition to getting employments in Australia, the graduates also benefited from developing and utilizing these six capitals in terms of sustainable employments, professional growth, and well-being. As such, this research argued for a broad definition of employability which include different capitals as the inputs and different aspects of employability outcomes as the outputs, namely, employment outcomes, sustainable employments, professional growth, and well-being. The findings also implied that various stakeholders should share responsibilities to support international students in building multiple capitals.*

**Keywords:** agency, Bourdieu, capital, graduate employability, international students, mixed method

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### Introduction

Australia's well-established education industry is the second most popular destination for international students (OECD, 2021). However, there is a large gap between this high popularity as the study destination for international students and the employability outcomes of international graduates after they graduate in Australia. According to the Australian Census in 2016, less than half of international graduates were in full-time employment (Chew, 2019). International

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graduates had difficulties securing a job in the field of study (Tran et al., 2019), were underemployed, and were doing low-skilled jobs (Chew, 2019). Previous studies have reported the possible reasons leading to the situation, such as structural factors relating to governmental policies and economic situations (Blackmore et al., 2017; Tran et al., 2019), employers' unconscious bias against international graduates (Blackmore & Rahimi, 2019), and international graduates' difficulties in proving their competitiveness (Blackmore & Rahimi, 2019; Jackling & Natoli, 2015; Tang, 2022).

Chinese international students represent the most significant proportion of all international students in Australia (Australia Trade and Investment Commission, 2021), and experienced similar challenges as mentioned above (Blackmore et al., 2017; James & Otsuka, 2009; Tharenou, 2015). Particularly, according to the 2016 Australian Census, Chinese international graduates represented the lowest employment rate in the Australian labor market (Chew, 2019). This issue drew the author's attention to explore Chinese international graduates' employability in Australia.

### **Literature Review**

Although employability has different definitions based on different perspectives, philosophies, and disciplines (Williams et al., 2016), the most acknowledged definition is from Yorke (2006) who defined employability as "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy" (p. 4). For the outputs or outcomes of employability, in addition to employment outcomes (Hillage & Pollard, 1998), recent research has extended this definition by arguing that employability outcomes at least include other aspects, such as sustainable employments (Clarke, 2018), well-being (van Casteren et al., 2021), and professional growth (Pham & Jackson, 2020).

The employability outcomes are found to be primarily determined by a range of factors at the macro (i.e., government, society), meso (i.e., employers, universities, parents), and micro levels (i.e., individuals) (Pham & Jackson, 2020). Previous studies explored how the factors at macro and meso levels influence international graduates' employability outcomes (e.g., Blackmore & Rahimi, 2019; Cameron et al., 2019; Niu et al., 2022). However, there is currently limited research investigating how individual graduates develop and utilize different resources to navigate the host labor market and achieve their desired employability outcomes at the micro level. According to Tomlinson (2017) and Pham and Jackson (2020), at the micro or individual level, these individual inputs and resources of employability can be categorized into six capitals as follows: human capital (professional knowledge, professional skills), cultural capital (cultural knowledge and embodied behaviors), social capital (effective networks), identity capital (professional identity), psychological capital (resilience, adaptability), and agentic capital (the capacity to strategize various resources).

The six capitals have been argued as significant resources for graduates to navigate the labor market (Tomlinson, 2017; Pham et al., 2019). However, little is known about the significance of these six capitals to international graduates' employability trajectories. This study aims to fill this research gap by exploring how these six capitals contribute to Chinese international graduates' employability in Australia. This study was guided by an overarching research question: How do capitals contribute to Chinese international graduates' employability in Australia?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employed a combination of Bourdieu's (1984) theory of practice and a capitals-based approach (Pham, 2021a) as a theoretical framework. Bourdieu's four capitals (i.e., economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capitals) can be applied universally to understand human practices in different research fields. In the field of graduate employability, the notion of capital has drawn great attention by researchers. A capitals-based approach is the subsequent work developed by Pham (2021a) based on the graduate capital model of Tomlinson (2017). Tomlinson (2017) and Pham (2021a) expanded Bourdieu's (1986) four capitals by claiming that graduates need to develop and utilize six capitals, including human, cultural, social, psychological, identity and agentic for optimal employability outcomes.

Under the Bourdieusian approach, international students are viewed as a marginalized group because, similar to the migrants, international students' capitals are often undervalued (Lusis & Kelly, 2006). As such, their agency is considered constrained because they have limited power over the rules set by the mainstream values in the field of host country (Tholen, 2015). This is where a capitals-based approach complements the Bourdieusian approach and provides a perspective departing from viewing international graduates as the deficit group. Therefore, the underpinning theoretical framework of this research offers a holistic approach to understanding international graduates' employability.

**Table 1: Demographic details of the Chinese international graduates who completed the online survey (N=203) and in-depth interviews (N=14)**

Variable	Sub-groups	Survey Respondents		Interview Participants	
		N	%	N	%
Gender	Male	82	40.4	7	50
	Female	121	59.6	7	50
Age	18-23	10	4.9	1	7.1
	24-29	122	60.1	6	42.9
	30-35	62	30.5	5	35.7
	36-41	9	4.4	2	14.3
Highest degree	Bachelor's degree (coursework and honors)	54	26.6	2	14.3
	Master's degree (coursework and research)	143	70.4	10	71.4
	PhD degree	6	3.0	2	14.3
Graduation length from the first degree obtained in Australia	0-1 year	31	15.3	6	42.9
	1-3 years	73	36.0	1	7.1
	3-5 years	30	14.8	3	21.4
	5-10 years	52	25.6	2	14.3
	More than 10 years	17	8.4	1	7.1
Discipline (multiple disciplines are applicable)	Non-STEM	175	75	13	59.1
	STEM	58	25	9	40.9
Employment status (multiple statuses are applicable)	Employed full-time	106	52.2	6	42.9
	Employed part-time	31	15.3	2	14.3
	Employed casual	34	16.7	4	28.6
	Unemployed looking for work	18	8.9	1	7.1
	Study (doing PhD)	20	9.9	2	14.3
	Self employed	10	4.9	1	7.1

*Note:* These categories are not mutually exclusive which indicates the nature of complex employability trajectories.

## Methodology

This research employed the sequential explanatory mixed-method approach to answer the research question. With ethics approval obtained, it started with an online survey measuring the participants' self-perceived contribution of capitals to their employability (N=203). The survey results were used to conduct the interviews (N=14) to help explain in more detail the initial survey results (Creswell, 2014). The recruited respondents met the following selection criteria: 1) They are originally from China; 2) They came to study in Australia as an international student; 3) They obtained a degree(s) in Australia; and 4) They had working experiences in Australia. The demographic details survey respondents and interview participants were reported in Table 1.

The quantitative data from survey was analyzed using SPSS v28. The principal components analysis was conducted to measure validity with all factor loadings exceeding 0.5 (Hair et al., 2006). Inter-item consistency was assessed by Cronbach's alpha, each exceeding 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978). Six new variables were computed to integrate the items under each capital. Descriptive statistical analysis in Table 2 was conducted to calculate means and standard deviations. Thematic analysis was applied and was mainly theory-driven in analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Findings

Based on the survey results, social capital was given the lowest score among all the capitals in terms of the contribution on the graduates' employability. The interview data provided insights by revealing that the participants had limited control over the impact of social networks on their employment outcomes, as such were more willing to develop other capacities such as professional skills, English proficiency, cultural understanding. One participant shared,

I don't rely a lot on other people. We can't expect job referrals equal job offers... Additionally, it's not easy to build social capital, so it's easier to build up other capacities. (a postgraduate in speech pathology)

The qualitative findings also revealed that utilizing these six capitals in addition to being employed, benefited the participants in many other aspects. For instance, the participants acknowledged the social support from their peers and significant others in terms of increased well-being from companionship, professional skills growth from job preparations, and development of professionalism. Additionally, the participants could better sustain their job when applying their identity capital in aligning their career goals with their passion. They could also enhance their professional skills when undertaking agentic capital in engaging proactive actions and effectively strategizing resources.

**Table 2: Respondents' self-perceived contributions of each capital to their employability in Australia (N=203)**

	M	SD
Contribution of Human Capital to employability (8 items)	3.938	.807
Contribution of Social Capital to employability (9 items)	3.690	.821
Contribution of Cultural Capital to employability (6 items)	4.033	.726
Contribution of Psychological Capital to employability (8 items)	3.859	.729
Contribution of Identity Capital to employability (8 items)	3.906	.675
Contribution of Agentic Capital to employability (10 items)	3.914	.688

*Note:* Strongly disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Undecided = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly agree = 5. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation. There are 49 items in total.

## Discussion

This study argued for a broad definition of employability which entails different capitals as the inputs and different aspects of employability outcomes as the outputs. In other words, in addition to human capital, other inputs of employability include social, cultural, psychological, identity, and agentic capitals. For employability outcomes, it does not merely include employment outcomes, but also include sustainable employments, professional growth, and well-being (Clarke, 2018; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020; Pham, 2021b). The findings revealed that although some participants were employed, their well-being was negatively affected because of labor exploitation in terms of low pay. Therefore, it is essential to have psychological capital to be resilient and adaptable so that the participants could maintain their well-being to cope with the adversities. Additionally, although some participants were doing low-skilled jobs or voluntary jobs, they did not complain because these activities met their needs for professional growth in terms of accumulating work experience and strengthening their professional skills.

This research will help international students and graduates better understand how to develop and utilize capitals as their resources and inputs of employability to better navigate the Australian labor market and achieve different aspects of employability outcomes. This study will advance the comparative and international higher education field in terms of deploying an innovative capitals-based approach as an underpinning theoretical framework in understanding international graduates' employability. Especially, it is essential for higher education to embed both human capital and other five employability capitals in their teachings or programs to prepare international graduates' employability better. Potentially, this study will support the government in issuing more appropriate policies to enhance international graduates' employability outcomes, and hence maintain competitiveness in the global international education market. Likewise, this study will help Australian employers better understand the resources and capitals possessed by international graduates to develop more effective collaborations with relevant stakeholders to support international graduates. Finally, this study will initiate ideas and principles that could guide comparative research on the employability of international graduates from different nations in the future.

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