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Enhancing Employability: A Systematic Review of Successful Strategies for Chinese International Students During and After Their Overseas Studies

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Abstract. With Chinese academic credential inflation, recent years have been witnessing a heated debates on overseas diploma's values and international students' employability. This study conducts a systematic review to examine how Chinese international students enhance their employability during and after their overseas education. Drawing on the PRISMA framework, relevant literature from 2015 to 2025 was retrieved from Web of Science and Scopus, focusing on the relationship between international study experiences and Chinese international students' employability. The review addresses three research questions: (1) the individual strategies adopted by Chinese international students, (2) the institutional support provided by overseas universities, and (3) potential improvements for strengthening employability support. Findings indicate that students primarily rely on strategies such as developing language proficiency, cross-cultural competence, soft skills, and internship experiences to improve their labor market competitiveness. Overseas institutions contribute through career services, internship opportunities, and skill-development programs, though their effectiveness varies. It is also notable that mismatches remain between the skills gained abroad and those valued by domestic employers, highlighting the need for better alignment.

Keywords: Chinese international student, employability, international study

1. Introduction

According to Chinese Statistical Yearbook [1] published by National Bureau of Statistics, the job positions provided by the labour market in 2023 are 10 million less than that in 2019, while the number of university graduates in 2023 increased to twice more than 5 years ago. Apart from the domestic graduates there are many Chinese students who are graduated from overseas institutions and plan to get a position back home. The statistics might evidently indicate that the fierce labour market has required students to be prepared and enhance their employability in advance. Meanwhile, Chinese international students' employability are suspected because they are lack of Chinese domestic knowledge and adaptability [2,3]. At present, fewer Chinese international students regard studying abroad as a guarantee for employment within China [4]. And exchanging a foreign academic diploma, which may not be as competitive as it was in the labour market, with costly tuition fees keeps students stuck in indecision [5]. What's worse, with higher education expansion in

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China, tertiary education resources are more accessible than decades ago, the increasing domestic and international graduates has contributed to high unemployment and underemployment rates [6].

As for Chinese domestic labour market, employers now may endure different perspectives on international study. For instance, Chinese employers in some fields has shown a shift in preference when recruiting new employees and they emphasize less on western credentials compared with years ago [7]. Specifically, some believe that there is a mismatch between skills acquired abroad and those valued by themselves and that the returnees lack localized knowledge to adapt to domestic employment environment [5,7]. This leads to the decline of international education as students usually hesitate that expensive international education may not necessarily enhance their employability required by the domestic employers. Additionally, some international students perceive that those foreign institutions sometimes insufficiently support them on cultivating their employability [8].

Present studies related to international students from China, employability and international study is deficient. It is claimed that most research has concentrated on employability neglecting the context of developing country and Chinese international students [9]. Some research also indicate the mismatch of employability between the skills gained by students and skills requested by employers, and successful strategies that international students used to apply for an occupation remain unclear [10]. Additionally, most research papers employ Bourdieu's Theory of Capital to analyze international students employability which, to some extent, may not clearly explain the relationships as the capitalism is a vague and broad concepts. Meanwhile, the concept also neglect items concerning individual factors. Moreover, with tight budget and unequal status between school and students, suggestions provided to the institution might not be that easy to be adopted by the authorities [8].

Therefore, concerning the topic of Chinese international students' strategies of enhancing employability, there are too much different research from diverse angles and perspectives. Not only is the number of the research in adequate but it is also hard to get an overview on Chinese international students' employability and employment. This systematic review aims to figure out successful strategies that Chinese international students use to be outstanding in labor market, explore the effects of international study on Chinese international students' employability, and seek suggestions for foreign education institution of helping promote international students' employability.

Here are three research questions,

(1) What successful strategies do Chinese international students individually use during and after their overseas study to improve their employability?

(2) What successful strategies do overseas institutions provide to enhance Chinese international students' employability?

(3) How can Chinese international students' employability get better supports from overseas institutions and individuals?

2. Method

In order to provide an overview on the topics of Chinese international students' employability from the perspectives of students, institutions and employers, this study adopt systematic literature review to summarize various outcomes. Meanwhile, Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews (PRISMA) is used as it can minimize the publication bias through its high quality and transparency [3]. By employing PRISMA guidelines [11], this research systematically reviews the papers concerning Chinese international students' employability and their international study. Despite

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systematic reviews sometimes lack scientific guidelines, PRISMA provides a transparent guideline checklist which is widely accepted as a high qualitative revision process and makes the research method easier to replicate [12]. This research strictly follows this revision process (the process detail see, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1nIF9SqMUowzXCpsHQIfF2y_D7Cm8klGydaW4amMHN5g/edit?usp=sharing). In identification stage, there are 53 papers on Web of Science and 27 papers on Scopus can be found relevant to the topic, while one of the papers exists in both databases and the other one cannot be downloaded. Next, after screening all papers by titles, abstracts and keywords, only 24 research is left. Following the retrieval process, during which only one cannot be retrieved, 23 studies are assess for eligibility and one is deleted for not suitable in researcher's employability definition, 3 for not mentioning Chinese international students and another one for not in Chinese labour market. Finally, 5 quantitative studies and 13 qualitative studies are included in the systematic review.

2.1. Data resources and strategies

Two electronic databases (Web of Science and Scopus) are used to search relevant topic research over the last decade (25th August, 2025), from 2015 to 2025. Both databases widely embody research studies in various fields which are of high quality as well. Additionally, two databases employ the Boolean logic method to search the relevant papers, which is much more accurate and efficient. Specifically, the research terms included "employability", "Chinese international students" and "international study". While the articles written in English and the research published year mentioned above are used as filter items. In order to avoid publication bias and the research qualities, this systematic review includes journal articles and thesis while excludes news, blogs, posters, conference paper, etc. And only the last decade research papers are included. During the databases searching process, there are 80 results in total, which contains 53 results in Web of Science and 27 results in Scopus appearing to be relevant to the research topics. Among the studies, apart a review, 48 research are journal papers, 4 theses and 2 are conference paper. In Scopus, there are 25 research articles and 2 review.

2.2. Selection of the study

With the search results in the databases, the researcher further shifts the results through carefully reviewing the titles, abstracts and keywords. The research is to be included if all the terms, employability, Chinese international students and international study, are mentioned by the authors. While if one of the terms is not included or not relevant, then the research is excluded. The rest of the text of potential relevant text is reviewed for final inclusion. According to above mentioned criteria, after deleting 26 irrelevant results, there are only 54 papers left, 50 research articles and 4 theses.

2.3. Eligibility criteria

The eligibility criteria are detailed items that enable readers to decide whether the study addresses the research questions and should be included in the systematic review. The articles are going to be screened for three rounds. In the first round of analysis, the results of the databases are screened through the titles, abstracts and keywords. In the second round of analysis, the duplicated articles, which are embodied by both databases, are deleted. Meanwhile, the articles are screened to find out

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whether there are any papers which cannot be found. In the third round of analysis, the selection criteria are decided according to the three research questions, definition of the employability, sample selection and Chinese labour market. Specifically, Chinese international students only include international students from China who are studying in the colleges. And international study must be the programs lasting over than a half year. And employability should be defined as a set of university students' achievements that help them successfully gain employment and manage their future career, such as developing relevant skills, understanding or personal attributes [13]. According to the serous criteria, there are only 20 journal papers and 4 theses. (the included articles see, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1aMQTpctRGptcwttOtTxsiX53I1uTZiM_eAc9UeMiqK0/edit?usp=sharing) Then, the results are summarized and integrated into a document and those which does not explicitly examine the relationship of Chinese international students' employability and international study are excluded. Articles in this round are retrieved for a comprehensive examination to decide inclusion in this study.

2.4. Coding analysis and quality assessment

The main results are extracted from the included texts according to themes, strategies of enhancing employability and corresponding suggestions from the angles of individuals and institutions. And the results are classified and duplicated or similar results are to be synthesized. Especially, the review mainly examines whether the research mentioned anything related to successful strategies Chinese international students and overseas institutions use to enhance employability, and what they are supposed to do to improve college students' present employability and schools' career training programs. In terms of quality assessment, the papers are examined by their research methodologies. Among the research, the most reliable research are experiments and intervention followed by relationship exploration and other qualitative research like case study, interviews, etc.

3. Content focus

3.1. Strategies for enhancing the employability of Chinese international college students

The decision of studying abroad is actually a strategy that Chinese students employ to enhance their employability. It is indicated that Chinese students hold a firm belief that studying abroad can stand a better chance of finding a good job in China [14]. On the one hand, credential inflation and the intense competition in Chinese labour market pose stresses on students [2,14]. On the other hand, they are well aware of the benefits and attribute they can get from international study. Specifically, those benefits and attributes cultivated are language proficiency, soft skills (adaptation, communication, cooperation), internship experiences [15], cross-cultural understandings [14], professional skills [16], job hunting skills [17], seeking support [18].

Among the perceived skills, Chinese students believe the most beneficial one is language proficiency. A few research explicitly indicate why the international experiences help enhance international students' language proficiency. But evidently, the international institutions in the UK, the United States, Australia and New Zealand all employ English as the instruction medium, and requires international students to read papers and hand in thesis in English as well. Despite language barriers exist and some students find it difficult to blend in, they will actively set up goals to improve their language skills even if their work environment cannot provide adequate language learning opportunities [18,19]. Some Chinese students also mentioned that international companies

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are fond of students who have international experiences because they emphasis English proficiency which is used as working language [17].

3.1.1. Personal skill cultivated during international study

Students mentioned that their soft skills have been cultivated, those skills mainly include adaptation of new environment, communication skills and teamwork skills [16,20,21]. Welch explained that graduates from overseas universities are generally perceived to possess some distinctiveness in the labour market, which created by their cultural and social capital in the forms of English competence, cultural exposure, global mindsets, communication skills, teamwork spirit, and independence, often referred to as 21st century 'soft' skillset favoured by multi-national companies [22]. Specifically, Chinese students has realized that the instability of their future career and they have mentally prepared to flexibly get their job and adapt to a brand-new labour environment [14,17]. During the courses, to solve problems and generate new ideas together with mutual respect, teamwork and communication skills are emphasized in tourism major in Australia [16]. However, different perspective exist that working independently is usually valued compared teamwork in the UK [10]. It is also indicated that overseas experiences have formed students' independency both in academia and in daily life [14]. Other strengths are also appreciated by employers such as problem solving, critical thinking, presentation, independent and communication [21].

Another skill students perceive benefits their employability is their cross-cultural understandings, despite Chinese international students may feel it a challenge to acculturate local customs either because language barriers or lack of opportunities and support, they can gain deep insights in western culture and better cross-culture understandings [14,23]. Some worked with the locals on purpose to improve domestic cultures [19] while some meet challenge to blend in but know they have to move forward [18].

Finally, professional skills are what international students values because some study abroad to seek high quality education [14,19,24]. For doctoral students, they can gain professional support through their supervisor, academic conference and supervisors' resources [25].

3.1.2. Personal skill cultivated during international study

As for internship experiences, students realize that internship is extremely helpful when applying for a position, but institutions sometimes fail to provide enough training relating to their career [16,17,26]. Internship, as a career training, can help students understand working conditions and develop relationships with hospitality workers and supervisors [15]. Meanwhile, it can shape students' pre-professional identities in advance, that is, prepare them for the professional skills in working [21]. For PhD students in the UK, they perceived fieldwork and teaching opportunities a useful way of acquiring practical skills not taught in the typical curriculum [25]. Some students are even willing to apply for an internship as their first job [17].

Among the research of the two data bases only one research mentioned Chinese students' job-hunting skills in details. Apart from the skills mentioned above that Chinese international students try to improve, they also adopted skills like adopting more realistic employment expectations to adapt to new situations, accepting mismatch between their disciplinary training and jobs, presenting their unique advantages, avoiding jobs requiring their unfamiliar knowledge and finding jobs in government or in second-tier cities [17].

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3.1.3. Surrounding people's support for international students

The last but not least, Chinese students seek helps from institutions, teachers, peers and their parents. Several research mentioned that support from parents are mainly helping students' to find a decent job through their social networks, or so-called "guanxi". Compared with those who are lack of social capitals, overseas students can easily get a job through the "guanxi" of their parents [21]. But some students also believe it is their own responsibility to find a job [14]. Students' personal social networks may help them to be employed because their friends can recommend them to employers [2,26]. Students also seek help from the universities by actively participate in career support programs and within those activities one should develop the networks [19,24]. Additionally, it is indicated that Chinese international students can be inspire through their hometown counterpart or get help from their friends in China [17,23].

As for help from institutions, most research mentioned support is provided from supervisors and teachers. Students are likely to seek advice from their supervisor and the lab technician who can help on their future career planning [18,26]. Research on doctoral students has mentioned that they find career experiences provided by their supervisors really valuable and they can attend those academic conference, in which their supervisors highly involve in, to develop effective networking and find career opportunities [10,17]. A few students, on the contrary, mentioned that British supervisors do not give much support as they expected and they were afraid of seeking help from the supervisors [18]. Students also seek help from the universities by actively participate in career support programs and within those activities one should develop the networks [19,24].

3.2. Fostering graduate employability: strategies employed by international higher education institutions

The support provided by the international institutions are conducted mainly through the means of relevant career programs, activities and services. Usually, universities provide career guidance and hire career advisor outside school to guide students to accomplish transition of school to work and complete personal information on LinkedIn, while some even embed employability training into curriculum [23,24]. UK universities employ Personal Development Planning and Progress Files to help students make up plans in advance and constantly follow up the graduates situation to make adjustments simultaneously [26]. In Hong Kong, compared with western teachers, Chinese teachers are more likely to take up a moral role in shaping and guiding the behavior of their students and thus support students job exploration [27]. PhD students are prepared for their academic career by engaging in the positions like Teaching Assistant [25]. A diverse ethnicity in universities provides students environment to experience different cultures but it maybe superficial [20].

However, some students argue that some universities fail to support or provide helpful career training projects for various factors. Most students claimed that the career training is in poor quality or unhelpful for that universities are lack of adequate resources and trained staff [25]. For instance, existing counseling and career services in some Hong Kong and Britian universities appear inadequate to meet the needs of nonlocal Chinese students as they center on the local labour market [24,25,28]. British doctoral students claimed that support from the supervisors is deficient because students are afraid of communication with them [18]. Some are not satisfied with the career train which they believe should be integrated with their program courses [16]. On the other hand, it might be extremely difficult for overseas universities to meet diverse needs of international students who are from different countries [29].

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3.3. Fostering employability: evaluating improvements in support initiatives for international students at overseas universities

3.3.1. Constructive suggestions for institutions and social support on international students' employability

Institutions are given a bunch of suggestions concerning providing qualitative career guidance and improving students' employability. It is claimed that school should create an integrative, one-stop unit to coordinate career services for nonlocal students after fully acquiring cultural competence for practice beyond the host culture to the cultures the nonlocal Chinese students are from [28,30]. Career training are expected to be integrated with professional curriculums and students should be more informed about the support and services that they are entitled to [15,25,31]. Additionally, intervention from academics is needed, that teachers encourage international students to actively participate in classroom discussion and more support are advocated from university staffs [16]. It is also highly recommended that universities enhance international students' language proficiency, ensure an overall culturally inclusive environment or create multilanguage inclusive environment [16,20]. Outside the classroom, more opportunities, filed research, teaching assistant, workshop, lectures, alumni meetup, etc. should be provided to students [2,25,26]. As for the internship projects, school should cooperate with the employers, set up goals, make up internship training plans [15]. Meanwhile, international students' opinions are important when considering career training programs as well as their human, cultural capitals, social and psychological capitals [24,26]. And their perspectives are advised to investigated through questionnaires, course evaluations together with interviews and survey [31].

Meanwhile, government are suggested to cooperate with the overseas schools to carefully design career training programs which are suitable for international students future career [32]. Constructing a continuous system for employers to regularly give feedbacks for schools who can actively adapt their programs to meet evolving job market needs [33]. Simultaneously, the authority ought to invest more resources and budgets in career support programs to address skill shortages in the labor market [34].

In sum, the school need to create more opportunities for international students, cultivate their employable skills, and develop students' cultural intelligence and agility, while specifying the aims of helping to achieve international experience and generalizable knowledge [14,21]. Additional cooperation is needed among society and schools to help students enhance employability.

3.3.2. Practical advice for Chinese international students' employability

Corresponding suggestions are offered for Chinese international students. Students are encouraged to make up plans in advance and actively participate in career training programs, such as internship, voluntary projects, etc. to enhance their employability and soft skills [16,19,31]. In addition, students should maintain a good relationship with peers and teachers in order to seek help whenever in need [24]. Meanwhile, they are supposed to construct social networks by all means to stand a better point when finding a job and improve job-hunting skills [26]. During the job-hunting period, not only should Chinese students have the ability of self-regulated learning, but they are expected to adjust their expectations and develop self-efficacy [2,24].

The insufficient connections among university, international students and employers generally exist. This would cause mismatch of employability between students and employers, that is the

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employability students develop may not meet the demands of employers and employers sometimes suspect whether the returnees can adapt to Chinese working environment [2,10,30,31].

4. Conclusion and limitations

4.1. Conclusion

This systematic review highlights the diverse strategies Chinese international students and overseas education institutions employ to enhance students' employability during and after overseas study. Individually, Chinese students have been realized the fierce competition within their hometown employment, thus, some students purposefully focus on strengthening their language proficiency, developing soft skills such as adaptability, communication, and teamwork, as well as seeking internship opportunities and enhancing professional competences and social networks. However, some students may not represent their relentless efforts on developing their employability. Hence, the suggestions are given that they should plan in advance, actively attend career training programs, like internship, voluntary project, alumni meetup, etc. as well as maintain social networks with parents, teachers and peers, and employ proper job-hunting strategies.

Overseas institutions also contribute through career services, embedded employability programs, and cross-cultural opportunities, although the quality and relevance of such initiatives vary across contexts. Importantly, the review reveals persistent mismatches between the skills students acquire abroad and the expectations of domestic employers, particularly regarding localized knowledge and applicability in the Chinese labor market. Therefore, it is essential for universities to learn about international students' needs and their hometown employment situations. Then, with the cooperation of employers and firms, tailoring carefully designed programs to accomplish greater alignment between institutional support and labor market demands. In a word, both universities and students must take more proactive roles in bridging the employability gap, with universities enhancing inclusive and practical training opportunities and students actively cultivating social capital and self-efficacy.

4.2. Limitations

Despite its contributions, this review is subject to several limitations. First of all, this systematic review views all Chinese international students as a same group and international institutions as a simple organization. And variations in study design, participant demographics, and national contexts of host institutions make it difficult to draw universally applicable conclusions. Additional issues such as gender differences, socioeconomic background, different majors, economy and disciplinary variation among Chinese international students were not fully addressed, leaving space for future studies to explore these nuanced factors in greater depth. Lastly, the review primarily synthesizes findings from qualitative research and a few quantitative research, which may limit the generalizability of results to broader populations.

4.3. Future studies

According to the limitations mentioned above, future research should expand in several directions. First, future study may control the demographic information and the overseas institutions from different regions. Secondly, future studies should pay more attention to individual differences among Chinese international students, such as gender, socioeconomic status, disciplinary background, and cultural context, to provide more nuanced insights. Longitudinal and quantitative research is needed

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to complement qualitative findings, offering stronger generalizability and clearer evidence on the long-term impact of international study on employability outcomes. Lastly, comparative studies across different host countries and employment markets could shed light on how local contexts shape the employability trajectories of Chinese returnees, thereby offering more targeted recommendations for both students and institutions.

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