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**Revisioning the Employability of  
International Students: A longitudinal  
diary-based study of Chinese Master's  
students in the UK from a capabilities  
perspective**

**By**

**Xuemeng Cao**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
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## Declaration

The project presented by this thesis was conducted by the author between October 2016 and December 2019. I declare that this thesis and other materials contained in the thesis represents original work undertaken by the author. I confirm that this thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

The thesis contains some brief passages which have been adapted from the following published paper:

Cao, X. (2017) Enhancing the Employability of Chinese International Students: Identifying Achievements and Gaps in the Research Field. *Exchange: the Warwick Research Journal*, 5(1), 77-89.

## Abstract

As the largest source country for international students, China has witnessed a huge wave of returnees over the last five years. Chinese international students, who expect positive benefits from overseas higher education (HE) with regard to their career prospects, are beginning to confront employment difficulties in the Chinese labour market. However, insufficient research exists on Chinese students' understanding of the relationship between their overseas learning experience and employability enhancement.

This research takes Chinese international students (who completed undergraduate studies in China) studying social sciences taught Master's programmes in the UK as the sample, adopting the Capabilities Approach as its theoretical framework and employing semi-structured interviews and solicited diaries to explore their employability management (EM), specifically regarding their motivations for receiving HE abroad, expectations with regard to employability enhancement via international HE, employability management practices during their overseas journeys, and factors impacting their EM and career plans.

This thesis argues that participants choose to receive HE abroad out of both intrinsic and instrumental motivations, with career development standing out in the motivation set. Participants' expectations regarding employability enhancement, as achieved by receiving HE abroad, are not only for graduate employment outcomes but also for long-term personal development. Regarding overseas journey as *living* abroad rather than simply *studying* abroad, participants' EM practices permeate their overseas daily lives in addition to specific events relating to learning and working. Moreover participants' EM is not only determined by their own choices, but also the impact of conversion factors, including their previous experiences, important "others" involved in their overseas lives, and their own agency of enlarging internal capabilities and interacting with external contexts. Receiving HE abroad is effective in supporting graduate employability of participants by equipping them with capabilities and functionings which are difficult to achieve without international experience; however, it is as participants' freedom of career choice is heavily impacted by strong conversion factors such as family background, relationship status, financial status and gender.

## Chapter One Introduction

China currently sends the largest number of students of all countries to international study destinations. But why are Chinese students apparently so passionate about receiving HE abroad? How does the overseas experience benefit their future career development and, indeed, their broader lives? What is valued the most by Chinese students regarding overseas higher education (HE)? How much do HE providers know about Chinese international students? This thesis is based on a study adopting a capabilities approach (CA) and diary-interview methodology to explore the employability management of UK-educated Chinese students enrolled on taught Master's programmes in the social sciences. This research puts *employability management* under the spotlight, giving voice to an under-explored group of students, illuminating the connections between international HE, employability management, and well-rounded human development. CA, an under-utilized theory in graduate employability research, gives this study a solid theoretical foundation in the conceptualisation of employability and the research design, and in its turn will benefit from this research in its wider application. The diary-interview methodology, which is underused in HE research, has produced a rich dataset for this longitudinal study, with numerous methodological implications. This introduction presents the motivation to do this research, its empirical, theoretical and methodological context, of this research, its significance, and sets out the structure of the thesis.

### 1.1. Why do this research

The choice of this research topic was driven by the real-world problems suffered by returning Chinese international students starting and/or developing their careers in the Chinese domestic labour market. Nowadays, with the increasing number of Chinese international students and the huge wave of returnees, the title of *haigui*<sup>1</sup> is no longer such a "halo" in the Chinese labour market. *The Annual Report on the*

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<sup>1</sup> *Haigui*: people returned to home country after completing overseas study. 'Haigui' is homophonic with 'sea turtles' in Chinese.

*Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad (2017)* published by CCG<sup>2</sup> (Wang and Miao, 2017) stated that the employment of Chinese international returnees had entered the “bronze age” from the “golden age”, with this argument emerging earlier in the media (The China Press, 2016). Further, media (XINHUANET, 2018) and research (Hao and Welch, 2012) have both reported that students graduating with a one-year taught Master’s degree from the UK (and other countries) were more likely to receive criticism that they were less competitive in the Chinese labour market, compared to graduates with longer overseas learning experience, or even domestic Master’s students from top-tier Chinese universities. However, the increase in quantity of Chinese international students has not stopped; indeed, the UK has overtaken the US as the country having the largest group of Chinese international students, with taught Master’s students contributing significantly to this figure (Zhao, 2019). There are a number of questions that need to be explored in terms of the relationship between receiving HE abroad and developing one’s career back in China: are career-related considerations still a strong enough motivation for current Chinese students to receive HE abroad? How do they interpret their choice of receiving HE abroad under the current employment situation of China? What are they expecting from receiving HE abroad in terms of their later employment, employability, and longitudinal career development?

With these questions, I broadly explored previous research in relation to Chinese international students, finding the issue of their employability was an extremely rare research topic. This situation, then, clearly represents a gap in current research, reflecting the fact of insufficient attention with regard to this issue from higher education institutions (HEIs) in host countries. I further doubted the extent to which teachers in host universities knew about their Chinese students regarding how they expected their employability to be enhanced via studying abroad, what their employability-related experiences were, and what particular support they needed. Adding to these concerns, I also found there was even less known about

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<sup>2</sup> CCG: Centre for China & Globalization

Chinese international students enrolled on social sciences courses, which was another clear research gap which needed to be addressed.

Additionally, the initial exploration of research on graduate employability suggested a seemingly absolute connection between employability and employment, where the employment outcome was considered the most effective or even the *only* effective criterion for assessing employability. Nevertheless, thinking over the issues which can make an individual more employable, the question emerged in my mind: is an employment outcome actually the end goal of employability? This inquiry inspired my curiosity about the extent to which Chinese international students actually consciously consider their employability. How do they manage their employability while receiving HE abroad? How do they evaluate the impact of receiving HE abroad on their employability (versus employment) in the first instance? As such, I decided to conduct an in-depth study on UK-educated Chinese taught Master's students in the social sciences to explore their perceptions of receiving HE abroad and employability, tracing their employability-related experiences during their year overseas, and determining the extent to which receiving HE abroad might – or might not – enhance their employability. The implications of this research, despite being based on UK-educated Chinese students, may be also applicable to other countries hosting Chinese international students.

## 1.2. Chinese international students

China is the world's largest source market for international students. From 1978, the year that the Chinese government enacted its "Reform and Opening" policy, to the end of 2018, the total number of Chinese international students has climbed to 5,857,100 (MoE<sup>3</sup>, 2019). Among these students, 3,651,400 have returned to China after graduation, accounting for 84.46% of the 4,323,200 students who have completed their overseas studies (MoE, 2019). The large wave of Chinese international returnees emerged from 2009, when the Wall Street financial crisis

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<sup>3</sup> MoE: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China.

made the Global North universities a less attractive workplace for Chinese academics, and the Chinese government enacted a series of preferential policies for high-level internationally educated Chinese, with the number of returnees exceeding 100,000 for the first time (Zhang, 2010); since 2012, the annual rates of returnees have remained above 70% (Liu et al., 2017).

Many Chinese students regard receiving HE abroad as a significant stepping stone towards better career prospects (Willis, 2004; Zhu and Reeves, 2019), because the quality of education in developed countries is considered to be particularly valued by Chinese employers (Liu, 2013; Chen et al., 2017). However due to the large number of Chinese international students and the quite drastic increase in returnees, competitiveness in the graduate employment market has been exacerbated, indeed further so by local HE expansion in China (Wang and Miao, 2017).

Among all Chinese international students, UK-educated Chinese students on taught Master's programmes constitute a special group. The UK is a traditional destination for international students, notwithstanding the fact that its position as the second-largest recruiter of mobile students globally, behind only the US, is likely to be replaced by Australia in 2019 (Marginson, 2018). The UK, with its reputation for high-quality education still enjoying a particular preference among Chinese students (Davey, 2005; Rudd et al., 2012; Huang, 2013), who accordingly account for more than one-third of UK-educated non-EU students (HESA, 2019). Moreover, the one-year taught Master's programmes are extremely popular compared to the analogous two-year programmes in the US and three-year programmes in China (Rudd, et al., 2012; Bamber, 2014; Wu, 2014), which is largely due to the fact that students can then start their career one or two years ahead of their peers. On the other hand, considering the short length of overseas experience, both the value of this degree and to some extent the abilities of such graduates are regarded with some suspicion by Chinese domestic employers (Hao and Welch, 2012; Liu et al., 2017). This area therefore requires in-depth research on how much UK-educated

Chinese students actually do benefit from the UK's taught Master's programmes in terms of their employability in the Chinese local labour market.

A good number of studies (e.g., McMahon, 2011; Leong; 2015; Yu and Wright, 2016) have investigated Chinese international students' learning and living experiences in various host countries, with some (e.g., Bamber, 2014; Quan et al., 2016) specifically focusing on UK-educated Chinese students on taught Master's programmes. The majority of existing research on Chinese international students has explored their language proficiency (Chen et al., 2017; Gu, 2009; Zhou and Todman, 2008), academic performance (Quan et al., 2016; Wang, 2018; Wu, 2015) and sociocultural adaptation (Bamber, 2014; Owen et al., 2017; Yu and Moskal, 2019). These issues play significant roles in Chinese international returnees' employability and long-term career development, as current Chinese employers value these employees' ability to work in a multilinguistic and intercultural context. However, few studies have attempted to interpret Chinese students' overseas experience from the lens of employability management, let alone attempting a specific focus on students on one-year taught Master's programmes in social sciences disciplines. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to addressing this apparent gap, exploring how Chinese international students manage their employability while receiving HE in the UK, and how the overseas experience might, or might not, work in favour of enhancing their subsequent employability.

### 1.3. Graduate employability

Graduate employability is not a new topic. The discussion of the term employability can be traced from the beginning of the 20th century, with the emphasis on stakeholders transferring from government to employers/organizations in the 1980s (Berntson and Marklund, 2007) and then to individuals since the 1990s (Nauta et al., 2009). From the late 1990s, nations across the world have, to various extents, drawn significant attention to the employability of individuals in formal education; and from the start of the 21st century, owing to the expansion of HE in a global sense, graduate employability has become a heated topic (Rothwell et al.,

2009; Moore and Morton, 2017). HEIs bear the responsibility for promoting employability of graduates, not only for responding to governmental demand but also to meet both employers' demand to minimize the mismatch between what the workplace needs and what graduates can provide (Prinsley and Baranyai, 2015), and students' requirement of achieving a form of employment appropriate to their qualifications (Rothwell et al., 2008).

It is reasonable for different stakeholders to interpret employability from different perspectives and with different foci. There is, as such, no unanimous definition of "employability" in academia. From the individual students' perspective, the stakeholders focused on in this research, employability can be defined along two axes (Guilbert et al., 2016). Horizontally, it refers to a dynamic interaction among individual characteristics, personal circumstances and external factors which impact on one's role in the labour market (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). Over the longer time, employability represents the abilities of different kinds of labour force to establish themselves in the labour market, maintain attractiveness to employers, and pursue further development of career prospects (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). In terms of graduate employability, it is widely accepted to be understood as

a set of achievements — skills, understandings and personal attributes — that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (Yorke, 2006:13)

However, this definition overemphasizes supply-side factors whilst overlooking the relational and contextual factors impacting graduate employability. This research, in line with McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) understanding of the employability in a general sense, agrees more with Brown et al.'s (2003) argument, which interpreted graduate employability from both the "absolute" (individual attributes can be improved by HE) and "relative" (external factors) dimensions.

Graduate employability in China, is a fiercely discussed topic both in current academia and society. Since the end of the 20th century, the implementation of a large-scale expansion of university admission has resulted in the loss of the absolute connection between HE and elite employment in earlier times, with the problem of graduate employment emerging and growing (Yao, 2008). Chinese researchers thus made efforts to explore graduate employability from the dimensions of graduates (Jiang et al., 2013; Ren, 2005; Xie, 2005; Li, 2015), employers (Luo and Lu, 2016; Zhu, 2009), universities (Liu and Zhang, 2016; Tang et al., 2015) and governments (Cui, 2015; Qing, 2015), as well as social factors beyond the immediate stakeholders such as traditional culture (Shi, 2005), “*guanxi*”<sup>4</sup> (Wang, 2007) and economic conditions (Zhao, 2015).

Although many studies relating to graduate employability have been undertaken in Chinese academia, the majority have focused on Chinese domestic students. There have been few explorations of the employability of Chinese international students, notwithstanding the efforts of some researchers who have considered the employment outcomes of international returnees (e.g., Shi et al., 2015). It is understandable that Chinese international students have been explored to a lesser extent by Chinese domestic researchers due to their geographical inaccessibility. It is thus the responsibility of Chinese researchers studying or working overseas to keep a watchful eye on Chinese international students’ conditions in various aspects, and ultimately to ensure that their voice is heard.

With regard to the literature on graduate employability, it is not difficult to find that in almost all countries researchers tend to work on domestic students instead of international students, even though, in our instance, Chinese international students were arguably worthy of additional investigation in various HE settings based on sheer numbers. Researchers in host countries apparently showing less interest in the employability of Chinese international students may be due to their

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<sup>4</sup> *Guanxi*: similar to social networks and social capitals, but implies preferential treatment during the recruitment process.

lack of familiarity with the Chinese labour market. This significant research gap needs to be addressed, considering the increasingly international characteristics of HE globally and the influence this exerts on graduate employability.

As a Chinese researcher studying in the UK, I enjoyed the convenience of being able to access a substantial number of Chinese international students and to work with them during their overseas time. This research takes this invaluable opportunity to explore how Chinese international students manage their employability whilst receiving HE abroad, how their employability-related perceptions and overseas experiences coincide, and how they reflect on the impact of internationalized HE on their employability in the Chinese labour market.

#### 1.4. Capabilities approach (CA)

This research employed the capabilities approach (CA) as its theoretical framework. CA is not a widely used theory in the area of graduate employability research, but is adopted herein due primarily to its emphasis on the human freedom to make choices and pursue their own wellbeing. Capability was defined by Sen (1993:30) as “a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being; [it] represents the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be”. CA, therefore, regards each person “as an end” rather than “a means to economic growth or social stability” (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007:2), emphasizing individuals’ freedom to engage in activities they value, and become the kind of person they aspire to become. From the lens of CA, the end of employability enhancement is to achieve personal development and life wellbeing, while obtaining economic rewards by employment is only the means. Employability, as such, is not only related to whether a person can find employment for the purposes of economic gain, but more significantly as to whether a person can be intrinsically well-developed in a valued area of work and achieve a high quality of life and wellbeing in their broader lives. CA challenges the traditionally understood relationship between employability and employment, highlighting the necessity of

exploring *employability management*, which is not a linear but an iterative process by which individuals position work with their lives.

CA specifically discusses the interactions among *resources*, *capabilities* and *functionings* in terms of the realization of personal development, with the concepts of *conversion factors*, *agency* and *adaptive preferences* engaged in the interpretation. Conversion factors (internal and external) influence whether resources or inputs can produce capabilities (the possibilities of realizing achievements), and whether capabilities can be successfully converted into functionings (realized achievements). People's agency can be improved by the fact that education exerts essential impacts on the intrinsic freedom of a person to realize the resource-capability-functioning conversion, and thus increased possibilities for wellbeing (Sen, 1999). Individuals' choices are also likely to be shaped by external circumstances, with adaptive preferences forming when people have to lower their expectations due to the lack of opportunities available to them.

This research, informed by CA, understands graduate employability as a form of "combined capabilit[y]", described by Nussbaum (2011, p.21) to constitute internal capabilities (e.g., knowledge, skills, traits), which can be enhanced by HE together with the external conditions affecting one's freedom to realize career-related desires (Walker and Fongwa, 2017). Employability management is thus the practices by which people enhance their internal capabilities and interact with external conditions. The concept of employability management is missing in the literature on graduate employability, though Huang (2013:91) used a similar wording – 'career management' to describe the activities conducted by students to benefit their careers. This thesis coins the term 'employability management' (EM) to highlight the *process* through which students make efforts to achieve self-improvement of their abilities and negotiate with external factors throughout their overseas HE journeys to prepare themselves as employable. HE, as a functioning achieved by making use of the public good and personal resources, is in itself a capability which impacts upon the expansion of other capabilities and the fulfilment of other functionings. Moreover, HE also equips students with better agency to

practice their capabilities and freedoms in an appropriate way. This research explores students' EM in the context of receiving HE abroad to determine how international HE instils intrinsic, instrumental and positional values into one's life.

Previous research on graduate employability was less integrated with students' long-term learning (and other) experiences, either directed at graduate employment outcomes, or gathering graduates' perceptions from single-round data collection. This research, informed by CA, provides a broader scope for graduate employability, weakening its traditional absolute connection with economic returns, avoiding taking employment outcomes as either the entire purpose or the only end of students' EM. Instead, this research has centred each and every participant within the operation of international HE and their own story of EM, demonstrating how HE impacts on international students' EM, and further on their personal, career and life development, in a longitudinal manner.

### 1.5. This research

This research fits into a longitudinal qualitative research design which constructs knowledge by focusing on a relatively small number of participants, entering their real lives, and exploring their understanding in depth. The target population is Chinese students who completed their undergraduate studies in China, and were studying taught Master's programmes in social sciences disciplines in the UK. This cohort was chosen because of the popularity of taught Master's courses provided by UK universities among Chinese students, and the under-exploration of Chinese international students in social sciences areas. Participants were recruited from one research-based university in England by criteria and convenience sampling, with snowball sampling used to enlarge the sample size. In total, 33 participants from five different social sciences disciplines were recruited, only one of whom withdrew midway through the study.

In terms of the methodology, diary-interview methodology, pioneered by Zimmerman and Wieder (1977), is employed by this research, which requires

participants to keep diaries for a certain period of time and hold interviews with the researcher to elaborate on their entries (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This methodology is not widely used in HE research, but it fits the nature of this study, which explores the overarching research question: how Chinese international students carried out employability management during their one-year Master's course in the UK. This overarching research question was specified into three sub-questions: 1) what are the initial motivations of Chinese students in social sciences in choosing to receive HE abroad, and how are their expectations regarding employability enhancement situated in their motivation set; 2) what practices were undertaken by these students to manage their employability while receiving their overseas education; and 3) what factors influence these students' understanding of and approaches to EM? It is manifest that this research relies heavily on participants' detailed self-reporting on their experiences and perceptions during a period of time. The diary-interview methodology enables participants to express their ideas in both written and verbal forms, produce data close to the occurrence of relevant events, reflect on personal changes across time, and decide the quantity and intimacy of the data provided with a low level of researcher intervention. Moreover, from a theoretical perspective, CA enlightens the research in terms of participants' employability by locating it in the holistic life context, exploring how employability interacts with other issues. The diary-interview methodology, especially the diary-keeping part, provides participants with flexibility for data generating, opening a path for the researcher to access their broader lives so as to go in depth into how participants' EM was embedded into their daily lives overseas.

Guided by the methodology, semi-structured interviews and solicited diaries were adopted as the methods for data collection. Before collecting data from participants, two rounds of pilot study were conducted (April-June 2017) to improve the research design. This research finally applied diary-interview methodology in the form of "interview-diary-interview". Specifically, two rounds of semi-structured interviews were undertaken at the beginning and the end of the 2017-2018 academic year, with a nine-month diary study between them. The first-round interview collected participants' demographic information and previous

experiences, and particularly explored their motivations to receive HE abroad and expectations regarding subsequent employability. The diary study asked participants to record their employability-related experiences in diaries for a selected week each month. The second-round interview, with diaries as prompts, required participants to review their experiences of studying abroad from an EM perspective, and to update their understanding of employability and their plans for their future careers.

The rich data collected by this research were analysed using three approaches. Data from the first-round interviews, as directed at the first sub-question, were analysed thematically to showcase the motivation set of the participants in terms of receiving an overseas education in the UK, their initial understanding of the concept of employability, and their expectations of the enhancement in employability gained by receiving HE abroad. A CA-informed analysis was conducted based on the combination of diary and second-round interview data, using CA to interpret how participants were able/unable to convert overseas HE resources into their capabilities for employability development, which employability functionings they were able to realize, and which conversion factors impacted their EM-related freedoms. Additionally, a narrative analysis was given for four selected participants' longitudinal stories, that is, on the entire dataset they provided in the two rounds of interviews and diary entries. This analysis set out to gain a comprehensive picture of these participants' experiences, including how their motivations to study abroad and initial career plan guided their EM practices, what conversion factors impacted their EM, how they interacted with conversion factors, and how the EM during the overseas year in turn affected their career plans. The longitudinal in-depth narrative analysis challenged the stereotypes of Chinese international students, and discussed the (in)effectiveness of CA in theorizing full of Chinese students in an international context.

This research contributes to research areas related to international HE, graduate employability and Chinese international students from three perspectives. Empirically, it draws attention to the increasingly international and transitional

dimensions of HE and graduate employability, whereas existing studies tend to have a strong national focus. Moreover, it explores the experiences of Chinese international students in social sciences, a group which is underexplored by previous studies. Methodologically, adopting the diary-interview methodology to enter participants' everyday lives enriches the practices of this underused methodology in the HE domain, injecting vitality into the methodological repertoire for HE research. Theoretically, using CA brings a new angle to this area; more importantly, theorizing about the EM of international graduates showcases how this theory is open to being applied to issues across contexts.

### 1.6. Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of eight chapters. Following the introduction, chapter two reviews the literature related to the research topic, which contributes to an understanding of the history of overseas education in China, demonstrating the characteristics of Chinese international students and foreign study policies in four historical stages. It then focuses on the research conducted over the latest two decades exploring the “push and pull” factors motivating Chinese students to study abroad, and specific considerations regarding the choice of destination country and institution. The third section looks at Chinese students' experiences of receiving HE overseas, with the majority of existing studies focusing on linguistic, academic and intercultural aspects. The final section reviews the expanding concepts of employability and graduate employability, together with empirical research on the employability of Chinese domestic and international students. The literature review demonstrates that employability enhancement, an essential component of the motivation set to receive HE abroad, is a missing lens in the exploration of current Chinese students' holistic experiences overseas, with the voices of those in social sciences much less heard.

Chapter three focuses on the theoretical framework adopted by this research. It starts with a discussion of the nature of CA, including the key arguments and concepts proposed by Sen and Nussbaum. Then, the application of CA in the area of

education is discussed. Following that, how CA can be used to conceptualise graduate employability and employability management is explained. A review of how CA has been adopted by research on graduate employability is then conducted, with the comparison between CA and skills/competencies approach indicating the stronger ability of CA to allow for the conceptualization and measurement of graduate employability. Moreover, this chapter also reviews Chinese researchers' understanding of CA and its application in Chinese-based empirical studies. The chapter ends with a discussion on why CA was chosen as the theoretical framework of this research. The core argument of this chapter is that CA gives employability a more insightful conceptualisation by directing it at human development and wellbeing of one's holistic life; CA also leads the research focus to the *process* of EM, locating the freedom of individuals at the centre of what is to be chosen and valued regarding their employability.

Chapter four explains the methodology and methods of this longitudinal qualitative study. It first introduces the philosophical position held by the researcher in understanding the nature of this research and the adoption of the diary-interview methodology. The methods of sampling and data collection are then reported in detail, together with ethical considerations taken throughout the research process. After that, the data management and analysis are elaborated, with the reliability and validity of the findings achieved by this research being reflected on. This chapter ends with a section discussing how the researcher's positionality and reflexivity impacted on the research practices. The main argument of this chapter is that the longitudinal diary-interview methodology enables the researcher to enter into the holistic lives of participants which were permeated by their EM practices, with the dynamics of their perceptions and behaviour being traced. These invaluable data cannot be achieved by other single-occurrence retrospective methods of data collection.

Chapters five to seven present and discuss the findings of this research using three different data analysis approaches.

Chapter five shows the outcomes of thematic analysis in relation to the first sub-question, namely, the reasons for participants choosing to receive HE abroad, their understanding of employability and their expectations regarding the improvement in employability associated with receiving HE in the UK. Specifically, chapter five first demonstrates the intrinsic and instrumental motivations for participants' choices for receiving HE abroad, with a unique situation of "no motivation" explained in particular. Then participants' interpretations of employability are thematically classified into hard currencies, soft currencies, and social factors. Moreover, chapter five also reports on participants' expectations regarding employability enhancement as situated in the value of overseas degrees, English proficiency enhancement, academic/professional advancement, international awareness and intercultural abilities development, independence improvement and long-term personal development. The findings of the thematic analysis strongly suggest that employability advancement is one of the main motivations amongst participants to receive HE abroad, and their expectations regarding employability enhancement are not only in terms of immediate graduate employment, but also long-term personal development.

Chapter six reports the outcomes of CA-informed analysis regarding the second and third sub-questions. It first demonstrates how participants' EM practices were conducted via specific events (including curriculum learning, extra academic activities, career-related activities, part-time jobs, volunteer activities and travel), and how EM permeated into their daily lives overseas. Following that, influential people (including new acquaintances, old acquaintances, partners and parents) as a distinctive group of conversion factors are discussed with regard to their engagement in participants' EM. Chapter six also articulates the changes brought about by receiving HE abroad on participants' ideas about their career, with their job-seeking stages, self-evaluation of EM, updated understanding of employability and current career plans being presented in detail. The outcomes of CA-informed analysis provide a key argument that EM practices are embedded in participants' daily lives overseas in addition to via specific events, and participants manage their

employability not only by improving personal abilities but also by interacting with external factors which impact their employability and career choice.

Where chapters five and six analyse data across persons, chapter seven shows the results of a narrative analysis of four participants' stories, bringing their motivations for receiving HE abroad, career plans, EM practices and influential factors of EM together to gain a comprehensive picture of their experiences. Through telling four individual stories separately, chapter seven merges them together to manifest how previous experience, important "others" and individual agency affect one's EM during the overseas year and how family background, relationship (or marital) status, financial condition and gender impact one's subsequent employability and career choice. This chapter, connecting the three sub-questions together, is significant in dehomogenizing the cohort of Chinese international students, challenging their associated stereotypes, and proposing an imperative to explore the complicated personal circumstances behind the seemingly similar choices made by Chinese international students.

Chapter eight summarises this research by first re-emphasising the necessity and purpose of conducting this research and articulating the key arguments of this research and the empirical contributions that the thesis makes to the knowledge of Chinese students' employability-related experiences during their one-year UK HE experience. It then presents how this research has benefited from, and in turn contributes to CA and diary-interview methods, providing suggestions for the development of the theory and the methodology. Following this, the practical implications of the research are also demonstrated, primarily regarding the strategies for HEIs to provide Chinese international students with improved service in their employability-related experience. This thesis concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this research, and suggestions for future work relating to the employability issues of Chinese international students.

## Chapter Two Literature Review

### 2.1. Introduction

This research focuses on Chinese international students' EM, and the literature review, as such, embraces two themes. Regarding Chinese international students, this chapter first sets out four historical stages of overseas education development in China, articulating national policies for studying abroad and characteristics of Chinese international students in each period. Following that, with regard to Chinese international students in the 21st Century, I discuss their motivations to study abroad under the current contexts of HE development in China and the Global North, together with their decision-making process regarding choice of destination country and specific institution. Moreover, literature on Chinese students' experiences whilst receiving overseas HE was also reviewed to identify the foci of the existing literature and determine any missing points.

In terms of graduate employability, this chapter first discusses the complexity of the term "employability", which involves various stakeholders, and specifically demonstrates its conceptualization in this study. Then, specifically graduate employability is discussed from theoretical, political and practical perspectives. The chapter then contributes to the knowledge of how graduate employability is perceived in the Chinese social and academic contexts, reviewing how problems of graduate employment emerged and were exacerbated in China, and how China-based researchers have worked on these issues. Finally, the employability of Chinese international graduates is discussed, even though existing literature on this topic is limited, with three representative studies reviewed in detail. Based on the knowledge from previous studies, this chapter determines the research gaps that need to be addressed and proposes the research questions that form the focus of this research.

### 2.2. History of overseas education in China

China has a long history of overseas education. However, the Chinese government officially began formulating policies and dispatching students abroad in the late 19<sup>th</sup>

century. From 1872 to 1875, the Qing Imperial government (1644-1911) sent 120 young children in four instalments to the US (Feng and Chen, 2011). They are regarded as the first generation of government-sponsored international students in modern China (Yan and Berliner, 2011). Since 1894, the year that the Qing government suffered a defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, there was a dramatic increase in the number of Chinese who were sent to Japan to learn new ideas of politics and law, rising in number from 13 in 1896 to 12,000 in 1906 (Jiang and Xu, 2007). After 1908, the main destination of Chinese students studying abroad switched from Japan to the US because Theodore Roosevelt<sup>5</sup> decided to refund half of the Gengzi (1900) Reparations<sup>6</sup> to the Qing government in order to send Chinese students to study in the US. During 1909-1911, there were 196 Chinese students studying in the US supported by the refunded Gengzi Reparations (Jiang and Xu, 2007). In the period of the late Qing dynasty, the goal of the government sending students abroad was to equip them with advanced knowledge and techniques so as to realize national salvation.

After the Xinhai Revolution overthrew the Qing Imperial government in 1911, overseas education in China experienced a steady growth period, which lasted until 1937 when the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) erupted. Many Chinese international students, exposed to communist ideology in France and the former Soviet Union, became the leaders of the subsequent Chinese revolution (Jiang and Xu, 2007). Nevertheless, influenced by the Second World War (1939-1945) and the Second Chinese Civil War (1945-1950), the number of government-sponsored overseas students greatly decreased; self-funded individuals from rich family backgrounds gradually became the norm for students pursuing a foreign education, with the motivations for studying abroad switching from saving the country to personal development (Yan, 2017).

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<sup>5</sup> Theodore Roosevelt: US president from 1901 to 1909.

<sup>6</sup> Gengzi Reparations: the compensation stipulated in the "Boxer Protocol" signed by the Qing government of China on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1901 and 11 other countries related to the "Gengzi Incident".

Since 1949 when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was officially established, the Chinese government has considered overseas education an important part of the entire education system. The historically developing process of New China's overseas education has witnessed four main phases, which were before "The Great Cultural Revolution" (1949-1966), between "The Great Cultural Revolution" and "The Reform and Opening" (1967-1977), after "The Reform and Opening" but before the 21<sup>st</sup> century (1978-1999), and after the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2000-present). The features of each phase will be reviewed in detail, because they set the scene for present day student mobility.

### 2.2.1. Phase 1 before "The Great Cultural Revolution" (1949-1966)

In the early period of New China, the government faced significant difficulties in the reconstruction of almost all aspects of society, and a serious shortage of all types of personnel. The government made every effort to attract any of its international students who were still abroad (around 5,600) to return home (Liu, 2016), whilst sending new students abroad to receive better education. At that time, government policy sought for potential Chinese international students to be selected according to strict requirements so as to ensure good-quality returnees. Moreover, due to the urgent need for economic and industrial development, students in scientific areas were in particular encouraged to study abroad (Liu, 2013). In the 1950s, the Chinese authorities held a positive attitude towards sending students abroad, especially to the former Soviet Union and a few other socialist countries (Zhang, 2010). However, since 1961, the number of students allowed to learn abroad reduced with the deterioration of the relationship between China and the former Soviet Union, while from 1964 China began to send students to more Western countries, instead of solely to the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries (Miao and Cheng, 2010).

Another point of note is that undergraduate students and students in short-term programmes have been allowed to study abroad since 1959, while only postgraduates had been permitted to do so beforehand (Miao and Cheng, 2010). According to the data published by MoE, there were 10,698 Chinese people

studying abroad between 1950 and 1965. Among them, 6,834 were undergraduates, accounting for 63.88% of the total, with 2,525 being postgraduates which made up 23.61%, with 1,116 (10.43%) and 222 (2.08%) being further education students and short-term students, respectively. In 1958, China sent around 6,000 technology interns to the Soviet Union to prepare talents for the Soviet-aided industrial project in China (Wang and Guo, 2012). Additionally, approximately 800 Chinese military students were sent to the Soviet Union during this period (Cheng and Miao, 2010). To summarize, in total China sent around 16,000 international students over those 15 years (Wang and Guo, 2012).

The majority of Chinese international students during this historical stage were government funded and shouldered the duty of contributing to the construction of New China. Therefore, the majority (more than 90%) came back to China after graduation (Qu and Chen, 2006). Those talents obeyed government employment arrangements and worked in the field matching the study courses they followed abroad (Zhang, 2010).

#### 2.2.2. Phase 2 between “The Great Cultural Revolution” and “The Reform and Opening” (1967-1977)

With the start of The Great Cultural Revolution, China completely stopped sending students to foreign countries since the Chinese government imposed strict ideological control over its people. China was essentially isolated from the rest of the world. Until 1972, with the resumption of university admission and the need for foreign language talents in diplomatic fields, the government resumed sending students to learn abroad, but only on a small scale (Liu, 2016). Between 1972-1978, China sent a total of only 1,977 government-sponsored students overseas, at less than 300 on average per year (Yang, 2015). The majority of these students were taking linguistic and foreign language studies, with only a very small number learning technology-related disciplines (Jiang and Xu, 2007). The limited quantity of students notwithstanding, the destinations they were sent to expanded to various developed countries (Cheng and Miao, 2010).

The Great Cultural Revolution catastrophically damaged overseas education in China. It not only stopped the flow of international students but also persecuted many talents returning from overseas. During this period, learning abroad was regarded as the “worship” of Capitalism. Many people with overseas learning experiences were allocated to remote regions to do low-skill work, representing a significant loss of talent (Liu, 2016). Worse still, because of the inhospitable political and economic environment, the return rate dropped significantly during this period. 963 out of 1,977 students came back to China, or only 48.7% of the total (Miao and Cheng, 2010). Most returnees worked in the fields of foreign language teaching and translation, contributing to Chinese diplomatic activities.

### 2.2.3. Phase 3 after “The Reform and Opening” but before the 21st century (1978-1999)

1978 was a year of significant changes in Chinese society because of the enactment of “The Reform and Opening” policy, that is, “reforming the domestic system and opening up to the outside world”. It was the first national policy advocating opening up to the outside world since the founding of the PRC, which reversed the situation in mainland China that had gradually closed down since 1949, and stimulated the Chinese economy into a period of rapid development. Under the political background of “Opening”, the Chinese government made significant effort to enlarge the scale of government-sponsored international students. The number in 1978 reached 860, showing a 2.5-fold increase compared to that in 1977 (Yang, 2015). The majority of government-sponsored students were doing Master’s courses and lifelong learning programmes, and the policy for international doctoral students was under development (Liu, 2016a). Meanwhile, state-owned research institutions began to be allowed to send their staff abroad. International students working in areas with a general lack of talent in China (e.g., natural sciences and engineering) were more likely to access the opportunity to learn overseas (Zhang, 2010). By contrast, self-funded international students, treated equally as government-sponsored students from the political perspective, were limited by additional application conditions until the mid-1980s (Chen, 2007; Liu et al., 2012).

In December 1984, the Chinese State Council promulgated the “Interim Provisions on Studying Abroad at Their Own Expense”, stipulating that Chinese citizens who obtained foreign exchange subsidies or foreign scholarships through lawful procedures and were qualified for admission could study at their own expense without limitation of academic qualifications, age or work duration (Liu, 2016b). Since then, China has officially opened the path for self-funded study abroad. In 1986, the Chinese government published the “Provisional Regulations on the Work of Overseas Students” (also known as the 107<sup>th</sup> document), the first publicly published regulatory document in China which comprehensively expounded the education policy regarding studying abroad, which marked the legalization of Chinese studying abroad policies (Chen, 2007; Yang, 2015). The document further affirmed the importance of studying abroad at one’s own expense for personal training. Furthermore, the document proposed that overseas education should be closely integrated with the needs of domestic production and scientific research, so more opportunities to learn abroad should be given to students in applied science disciplines. The document also suggested dispatching more doctoral students and visiting scholars, but limited the scale of students pursuing Master’s degrees abroad so as to enhance the quality of Chinese international students. Therefore, the total number of government-funded students experienced a decline from 4,676 in 1986 to 2,900 in 1991 (Chen, 2015). Nonetheless, the scale of self-funded students expanded considerably, with more than 35,000 people going abroad to study at their own expense between 1988-1990 (Miao, 2013). Since 1992, with the socialist market economic system being formally established in China, the Chinese government put forward the general guideline for studying abroad, “supporting studying abroad, encouraging return to China, allowing to stay or return freely” (Zhu and Zhang, 2017). Since then, China has witnessed a constant increase in the scale of international students (especially self-funded students), with the number climbing to 83,973 in 1998 (Yang, 2015). The surge in the quantity of self-funded students was also stimulated by the development of study abroad agencies, who provided potential international students with counselling services in terms of the studying abroad policy and information about foreign universities (Liu, 2016a). In

total more than 300,000 Chinese students studied in more than 80 different countries between 1978-2000 (Wang and Guo, 2012; Miao, 2013).

With the surge in the number and the diversification of sending channels, the management of international students became more difficult. A vast number of Chinese students overstayed in host countries after graduation. From 1978 to 1989, China dispatched 96,101 students, with only 39,183 coming back (Cui and Zhang, 2017). To be specific, during this period, 38,223 of 73,424 students sponsored by the government or other state-owned institutions returned after graduation, with 960 of 22,677 self-funded students also doing so (Cui and Zhang, 2017). In order to avoid brain drain, the Chinese government published a series of policies to manage the return of international students. For government-sponsored students, relatively strict regulations were put in place to demand their return. From 1986 to 1989, government-sponsored students were asked to sign the “Studying Abroad Agreement”, which stipulated their duty to return to China immediately after graduation (Feng and Chen, 2012). This was relaxed to an extent until 1996 when the China Scholarship Council (CSC) was established, which marks the legalization of the process of sending students abroad. All students funded by CSC are required to return after graduation, or otherwise have to refund their scholarship fee and pay a fine. These measures vastly increased the return rate of government-funded students. During 1978-1996, the return rate of government-sponsored students was 84%, increasing to more than 90% post-1996 (Cao, 2009). Despite the forcible methods, the Chinese government also tried to attract a variety of international students to return by providing advantaged service and preferential policies. For example, in May 1990 (Chen, 2007), a “Returned Overseas Students Research Fund” project was set up; and since 1994, Overseas Students Pioneer Park has been established and has constantly developed since (Miao, 2013), which facilitates international returnees to set up their own businesses through tax breaks (Pan, 2011).

It is evident that the Chinese government made great efforts to induce international students to return, but the return rate of self-funded students

remained extremely low, at 3% between 1978-1996 (Cao, 2009). Influenced by this, the return rate amongst all Chinese international students was merely 30% until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Yang, 2015). There are three main reasons why these students preferred to remain in the host countries. Firstly, international students experienced a huge disparity in the economy and education between China and developed countries (Li, 2004). They preferred to develop their careers in the host countries under advanced technological and economic conditions. Secondly, although the government took a series of measures to attract international students, the coverage and strength of the preferential policies were still limited (Zhang, 2010). Thirdly, the motivations of students studying abroad were not limited to serving the motherland, but became various in nature (Chen and Yan, 2009). The enhancement of the individual subjective consciousness stimulated the utilitarianism and global consciousness of Chinese international students (Zhang, 2010).

#### 2.2.4. Phase 4 after the 21st Century (2000-present)

With the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China has taken further action to develop overseas education. For government-sponsored students, the “Triple First-Class” policy (2003) has been proposed and enacted, which requires the selection of first-class students to study for the first-class disciplines under the supervision of first-class professors in foreign countries. Since 2007, CSC has set up the “National Construction of High-Level Government-Sponsored Graduate” Programmes, dispatching increasing numbers of postgraduates, especially doctoral students, to study abroad. The numbers of CSC-sponsored students have increased from around 5,000 per year during 2007-2011 to more than 10,000 per year in 2017 (Luo et al., 2017). Notably, CSC has made constant efforts to expand the types of scholarship projects, covering as many disciplines as possible, with the subjects to be selected also extending to Master’s and undergraduate students intending to pursue an international education. For self-funded students, the government completely abolished the “Examination and Verification of Qualification” policy (2003), which means self-sponsored study abroad has become a completely personal choice that is not subject to governmental control. Additionally, the government set up the

national scholarship for outstanding self-funded international students in 2003 (Liu et al., 2012), with more than 1,100 students benefitting from it until 2008 (Cheng, 2009). In 2008, MoE published the data regarding Chinese study abroad between 1978-2007. During these three decades, 1,211,700 students from mainland China studied abroad through government-sponsored (7.30%), institution-sponsored (12.02%) and self-sponsored (80.69%) patterns (Miao and Cheng, 2010). Among them, approximately 70% studied abroad after 2000 (Liu, 2016), with more than 91% being self-funded since 2009 (Liu, 2016). The destinations chosen by Chinese students studying abroad have included 109 countries, and their chosen disciplines have extended to almost all existing disciplines (Li, 2007).

Over the last decade, the number of Chinese international students has kept increasing, with the cumulative number between 1978-2018 being 5,857,100 (MoE, 2019). Among 662,100 Chinese international students in 2018, 596,300 (90.06%) were self-funded (MoE, 2019). China still serves as the largest source of international students for the main receiving countries. In the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, more than 30% of all international students came from China; in South Korea and Japan, rates have been as high as 57.3% and 49.3%, respectively (Wang and Miao, 2017). As for European countries, in the UK, the number of students from China each year has exceeded that from all EU countries combined since 2012/13, with 31% of first-year non-UK domiciled students in 2018/19 being from China (HESA, 2019). In Sweden and Switzerland, although the proportions of Chinese students are less than 10%, they constituted the largest group of international students (Wang and Miao, 2017). Moreover, the diversity of destinations has become more manifest. Despite lots of students conducting “vertical mobility” (Rivza and Teichler, 2007:63) to seek a better standard of education in highly developed countries, an increasing number of students have kept an eye on “horizontal mobility” (ibid:62) to seek different and contrasting experiences in more peripheral countries (e.g., Ireland, the Netherlands) and developing countries (e.g., Thailand, India). Through the popularization of studying abroad, the group of Chinese international students has become increasingly diverse in terms of their financial, geographical, academic and experiential

backgrounds (New Oriental, 2019). Studying abroad is no longer a choice that is only open to students from rich families or large cities or with outstanding academic records. The age range of Chinese international students has also been extended, as more and more Chinese students prefer to study abroad at a younger age (Education online<sup>7</sup>, 2017). Meanwhile, the concept of lifelong learning – which can be represented by adult education but more significantly demonstrates “a mindset and a habit” for people to acquire knowledge (Kommers and Fischer, 2000:3) – encourages people in older age groups to pursue overseas HE (Zhou, 2010).

Notably, the increasing scale of international returnees, together with the trend of younger Chinese international students (Wang and Miao, 2016), the growth of transnational higher education (Montgomery, 2016) and China as a receiving country of international HE (Ma, 2017), constitute four significant phenomena in the current Chinese international HE industry. In 2009, the number of Chinese international returnees exceeded 100,000 for the first time, doubling in number compared to 2008 (Zhang, 2010), with the number climbing to 519,400 in 2018 (MoE, 2019). According to the latest data, from 1978-2018, 84.46% of Chinese students who completed overseas studies have returned to China (MoE, 2019), with the return rates each year being greater than 70% since 2012 (Liu et al, 2017). Moreover, the majority of those students returned with a high degree level, with more than 90% achieving a Master’s (81.45%) or PhD (11.09%) (Education Online, 2017).

This situation has been triggered both by increased “push” factors operating in China which attracted students to come back and reduced the apparent “pull” factors that made remaining in host countries so attractive (Altbach, 2004; Li and Bray, 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Some traditional host countries have been experiencing economic decline, having reduced ability to provide sufficient employment opportunities for international graduates. Those countries have

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<sup>7</sup> Education Online: China’s largest comprehensive education website.

strengthened the requirements for international students to obtain work visas and jobs, so many international students have to return to their own country after graduation. By contrast, China, as one of the countries enjoying the fastest development in the world, is providing substantial opportunities for individuals to pursue their careers. Moreover, the Chinese government has introduced a series of policies which enable people with overseas learning and work experience, especially highly-skilled talent, to enjoy certain advantages with regard to “*hukou*” (the household registration system in China), financial treatment, medical security, social security and venture capital funding when back to China (Tharenou and Seet, 2014; Wang et al., 2006). At the end of 2008, the state formulated the “Thousand Talents Plan” which aimed to introduce elite overseas talents back into China, providing them with housing, living allowances and competitive salaries equivalent to those of an international standard (Miao and Cheng, 2010). Until 2011, 2,264 individuals had returned through the national-level Thousand Talents Plan, with more than 10,000 returning through the provincial-level Thousand Talents Plan.

The Chinese government provides many preferential policies for international returnees. However, compared to the huge number of Chinese international students, the strength and coverage of those policies is still limited. Many Chinese international students do not see those policies as the main factors attracting them to return. Based on an investigation among 1,821 returnees in 2017 conducted by CCG (2017), only 21.8% of investigated students seriously considering governmental policies for returnees and clearly knew the content, while 56.4% had only heard of the policies but knew little of the detail. Another 21.8% knew almost nothing about the related policies. Due to the lack of understanding of the policy, only 8.8% of investigated students reported that they would choose to return because they were attracted by preferential policies. Instead, Chinese international students were most importantly attracted to come back by “Reuniting with family” and “Emotional and cultural factors” (see also, Wei, 2016). The majority of the current generation of Chinese international students are the only children in their families because of the “One Child Policy” implemented between 1978-2015 in mainland China. Moreover, “*xiaoxin*” (孝心, filial piety) is a significant concept in

Chinese traditional culture which requires children to be responsible for supporting their parents in later life (Chen and Yan, 2009). Therefore, familial duty, to a large extent, induces Chinese international students to return. Besides, economic growth and political stability in China (Wadhwa, 2009), greater employment opportunities (Guo et al., 2013; Cheung and Xu, 2015; Yang, 2015), the Chinese socio-cultural environment (Yang, 2015), disadvantages of foreign economic conditions (CCG, 2017) or the sense of not belonging in the host country (Tung, 2007; Guo et al., 2013) also serve as reasons for Chinese international students returning after graduation.

One problem brought about by the increasing scale of Chinese international student numbers and the huge wave of returnees is the difficulty in graduate employment in China. Nowadays, an increasing number of Chinese domestic employers are taking a more skeptical attitude to recruiting international returnees (Zweig and Han, 2010). With the popularization of studying abroad, Chinese international students have become diverse and various. Some from better-off families go abroad to “gild” their resumes but did not to learn any real knowledge or skills (Zhou, 2004). Furthermore, with the development of Chinese HE, the privileges of international returnees have been reduced compared to local Chinese graduates, especially those from top-tier universities, in terms of both academic and employment abilities. In particular, students with a short-term overseas education are less likely to be valued by employers because they had limited time to adapt to foreign learning and living environment so that they are less likely to develop excellent professional abilities. Some students who have graduated with a one-year Master’s degree from the UK or Australia have been criticized for having a sense of superiority as international returnees but are actually less competitive in the labour market (Hao and Welch, 2012; Liu et al., 2017). An overseas degree itself is not currently effective in making a person attractive to Chinese employers. International returnees need to attract employers by showing how their overseas experience has made them more capable than others in conducting certain jobs.

During these seven decades, the policy of Chinese studying abroad has experienced several significantly strategic changes. Policies over different historical stages have influenced the development of the Chinese studying abroad industry; in turn, the development of this industry has helped to improve related policies. Currently, China is playing a more important role in global HE through participating in educational mobilities in various ways. Chinese students are therefore given more choice in their educational trajectories. Considerable diversity can be found in Chinese international students' backgrounds (familial and academic), and in their motivations and expectations regarding international HE. In addition, with the popularization of studying abroad, the employment of Chinese international returnees has transferred from "Golden Age" to "Bronze Age" (Wang and Miao, 2017). It is worthwhile discussing how international HE can benefit Chinese students' learning experiences and career development under such competitive employment conditions.

### 2.3. Motivations and decision-making process of Chinese students receiving HE abroad

Owing to China's sustained economic accomplishments in the past decades, international education has become more affordable for more Chinese families (Rudd et al., 2012; Yang, 2011). The strong growth in income has laid the foundation for Chinese parents to invest considerable sums of money into sending their child/children to receive HE in foreign universities (Ashley and Jiang, 2000). Moreover, the "One Child Policy" has also accelerated this behaviour (Chao et al., 2017; Li and Bray, 2007). A survey conducted by China's National Bureau of Statistics revealed that more than 60% of Chinese families invested one-third of their income on children's education (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002), with this expenditure becoming the second-largest part of a family's consumption, with only food expenses being larger in mainland China (Bodycott, 2009).

Since the 1980s, studying abroad for a Master's degree has become the preferred choice for many Chinese undergraduates in a trend that has lasted nearly 40 years

(Shen, 2017). Although the trend of younger Chinese students studying abroad has become increasingly obvious in recent years, the number of students pursuing Master's degrees overseas still accounts for a large proportion (Lu et al., 2014). Among the universities governed by MoE, more than 60% noted that over 10% of students studied abroad after their undergraduate studies, with the rates being higher than 30% in some top-tier Chinese universities (e.g., 36.53% in University of International Business and Economics; 33.60% in Fudan University; 31.86% in Peking University) (Education Online, 2017).

The decision-making process of studying abroad includes three stages: developing predispositions to study abroad, choosing a destination country, and choosing a specific university (Lu et al., 2014). At each stage, the choice is impacted by an interaction between students themselves and external circumstances, as constituted by push and pull factors (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). In the case of Chinese students, the most significant push factor is the relatively immature nature of the Chinese HE system (Li, 2007; Yan, 2015). Universities in mainland China are considered to run inadequate courses (both undergraduate and postgraduate) for students seeking high-quality HE (Zheng and Dai, 2006). Although the expansion of HE started from 1998, China is providing more opportunities for students to enter universities, which also brings about credential inflation. Nowadays, a degree from an "ordinary" Chinese university is no longer seen as a badge of distinction for graduates pursuing career development (Li, 2013; Li and Zhang, 2017). Therefore, the intensity of competition to get into top-tier Chinese universities through "*gaokao*"<sup>8</sup> and "*kaoyan*"<sup>9</sup> has not reduced (Chan, 1999; Lowe, 2007). In order to escape from the high competition for HE places in China, many students try to find opportunities in foreign universities.

The second important factor pushing Chinese students to study abroad is the dissatisfaction with the quality of Chinese HE (Lu et al., 2014). The teaching-learning

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<sup>8</sup> Gaokao: National College Entrance Examination in China.

<sup>9</sup> Kaoyan: National Entrance Examination for Postgraduates in China.

styles and assessment system in Chinese universities are criticized for their inflexibility. It is argued that the classroom is usually dominated by teachers but lacks a learner focus, so that students' critical thinking and innovative spirit are insufficiently encouraged (Henze and Zhu, 2012; Liu and Fang, 2011; Liu et al., 2012). Moreover, students tend to be evaluated by examination outcomes (Chao and Hegarty, 2014; Li, 2013). Under these circumstances, a good number of Chinese students prefer to study abroad to access higher-quality education in countries with more learner-centred pedagogical approaches.

Another push factor that cannot be overlooked is that overseas degrees and experiences are to some extent still considered to facilitate better career prospects (Willis, 2004; Huang, 2013). Compared to Chinese domestic students, international students are more likely to access employment opportunities in the host country (Zhou et al., 2013). Those who choose to pursue their career back in China also have a better future because overseas learning experiences, especially from developed countries such as the US and the UK, are still valued by the Chinese labour market (Chen et al., 2017; Li and Zhang, 2017; Liu, 2013). Furthermore, some students regard studying abroad as an invaluable chance to access different business operations and ideas, which can lay the foundation for their entrepreneurship (Li, 2013).

In addition to these macro-level push factors, Chinese students' choice of studying abroad is also stimulated by individual-level conditions. For example, some students study abroad to meet their parents' expectations, considering a good number of Chinese parents are proud of their child/children receiving HE in foreign universities (Li and Zhang, 2017; Liu, 2013). Some students decide to study abroad since they admire their acquaintances' achievements in the aspects of ability, personality and temperament owing to overseas experiences (Li, 2013; Liu and Fang, 2011). There are also some students who make this choice due to crowd psychology. These students usually have no clear plan for their future education and career, so they involve themselves in the trend of studying abroad (Xie, 2012).

In terms of the pull factors, numerous aspects are considered by Chinese students when they choose a destination country and institution, with their parents also playing an important role during the decision-making process, and sometimes the final choice can be a fusion of suggestions from many people (e.g., other family members, relatives, teachers, friends and study abroad agencies) (Stewart, 2017). In general, the excellent academic reputation of host countries attracts Chinese people the most. Many studies report that Chinese students regarded achieving high-quality educations (Liu and Fang, 2011) or the high reputation of the institution (Chao et al., 2017) as the most significant reason why they chose a certain destination country or university. Chinese students believed that developed countries usually have relatively mature HE systems and rich academic resources (Li and Zhang, 2017), and their universities provide students with a wide range of programmes (Zhou et al., 2013), advanced facilities and equipment (e.g. libraries, laboratories, dormitories) (Liu and Fang, 2011), and student-centred service in students' lives (Bodycott, 2009). Having been "trapped" in the traditional mode of Chinese education for a long time, Chinese students look forward to a flexible educational environment, which may provide them better learning experiences and academic rewards.

Another frequently proposed reason for learning abroad is related to the socio-cultural attractiveness of host countries. International or intercultural experiences are widely perceived as invaluable in broadening horizons and making people more open-minded (Xie, 2012; Zheng and Dai, 2006). Many Chinese students choose their destination country because they expect to gain a further understanding of its language, history, culture, customs and lifestyle (Geng, 2017; Li, 2007; Sánchez, 2006). Students develop a curiosity about a country in different ways, with some of them travelling there before (Li, 2013), some hearing of it from their friends who visited or lived there (Zhou et al., 2013), with others obtaining information from books, movies and social media (Su, 2013; Stewart, 2017).

In the third place, Chinese students also study abroad for personal development. They believe that, compared to studying in a Chinese university, overseas learning

represents a greater challenge for their overall abilities, in addition to academic achievements (Sánchez et al., 2006; Chao et al., 2017), since they need to manage all aspects of their lives in an unfamiliar environment without much, if any, familial and social support. Although many Chinese students may receive undergraduate education in cities far away from their hometowns, living overseas alone is yet another story. For Chinese students, especially the generation under the “One Child Policy”, who were typically the focus of attention of their family members, it is a challenge but also a temptation to leave their comfort zone to develop their independence and adaptability (Li, 2013; Xie, 2012).

Chinese students and parents also take geographical, political and economic issues into consideration. Geographically, they care about the climate of the destination country (Bodycott, 2009) and its distance from China (Liu et al., 2012). Out of a political concern, Chinese people think highly of the political stability and social harmony of the destination country (Wang and Miao, 2017). Referring to specific policies, countries providing work visas for international students are more attractive, though in more recent times migration opportunities have become less valued than before (Su, 2013). From an economic perspective, although previous research suggested that Chinese international students had few financial concerns (Sánchez et al., 2006), Yan (2014) reported that due to financial considerations, some of her interviewees had to give up their offers from top-tier universities overseas, and chose other universities abroad with relatively low reputations but that provided scholarships (Yan, 2014). Furthermore, many studies suggested that Chinese students’ economic considerations of studying abroad also reflected their high expectations regarding employment with better salaries and opportunities for promotion (Liu and Fang, 2011; Ortiz et al., 2015; Geng, 2017).

Among the influential “pull” factors, students are thought to care more about academic conditions and personal growth, while parents are more likely to make a choice based on a combination of political, economic, geographic, cultural, and social factors (Bodycott, 2009). Of note is the fact that the benefits of studying abroad in terms of career development are highly valued by both Chinese students

and parents (Yan, 2014), and this factor has acted as a constant influence on students' choice of studying abroad.

It is clear that different destination countries have different characteristics. The UK, as a traditionally popular destination for Chinese international students, has both advantages and disadvantages as an international HE provider. With regard to advantages, the priority should be given to the outstanding reputation of UK HE (Huang, 2013). It is widely considered in China that UK HE is amongst the best in the world (Zheng and Dai, 2006). Several studies have confirmed that the reputation of high-quality education serves as the most important motivation for Chinese students to study in the UK (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Davey, 2005; Cubillo et al., 2006; Rudd et al., 2012). The second most influential factor motivating Chinese students to receive HE in the UK is the attraction of Western culture (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Huang, 2005; Rudd et al., 2012). The UK is seen as a good destination for Chinese students to gain an understanding of Western values and systems so as to support their career aspirations in an increasingly globalized marketplace (Davey, 2005). In addition, Chinese students also consider the length of time to completion, which explains why one-year taught postgraduate programmes in the UK are extremely popular among Chinese students (UCAS 2011; Rudd, et al., 2012; Bamber, 2014; Wu, 2014). Compared to two-year programmes in the US, postgraduate studies in the UK have a relatively low total cost in terms of tuition fees and living expenses, which is an advantage to Chinese students as they are generally self-funded (Li, 2013). It also means students can proceed to the next step (employment or further study) ahead of their peers. Besides, Chinese students learning in the UK can enjoy the convenience of traveling across Europe during out-of-semester periods to develop their multicultural understanding (Davey, 2005; Zheng and Dai, 2006; Bamber, 2014). Despite the benefits, there are some drawbacks to studying in the UK. One of the most significant reasons is that the UK has highly restricted conditions for work visas and immigration for non-EU students, which negatively impact the sense of belonging of international students and their experiences in the UK (Montgomery and Nada, 2019).

There has been considerable research into why Chinese students choose to study abroad and how they decided on destination country and university. However, little research exists about the motivations of students specially enrolling on one-year Master's programmes. Despite the above-mentioned benefits, these students have to meet the challenges that they have only a short time to adjust to the overseas education context, enhance their academic abilities, and gain a deeper understanding of the host country's culture. Moreover, the value of their overseas degrees and experiences is becoming the object of increasing scepticism amongst domestic employers. Moreover, students learning social sciences disciplines may be more likely to gain little, if any, economic reward. It is worth exploring why, under these foreseeable risks, Chinese students still wish to study one-year Master's degrees overseas, and how these students estimate the associated value of studying abroad.

#### 2.4. Chinese students' experiences during receiving HE abroad

There is little doubt that overseas learning is an experience which is accompanied by both excitement and challenges. In fact, neither international students nor domestic students can escape from the difficulties of adaptation when entering a new stage of education; however, because of the greater changes of the learning and living environment, international students suffer more difficulties in adjustment compared to their domestic counterparts (Ward and Rana-Deuba, 1999; Mori, 2000; Tung, 2011). Many studies have explored the overseas experience of Chinese students, with the majority focusing on linguistic, academic and intercultural aspects.

Language competence is a concern amongst a vast majority of Chinese international students, because it determines the extent to which they are able to realize their academic goals and adjust to the sociocultural aspects of their host country (Badur, 2003; Zhou and Todman, 2009). In a considerable number of studies (e.g., Tian and Lowe, 2009; Gu, 2009; Chen et al., 2017), English proficiency is highlighted as the greatest barrier to Chinese international students, especially early on in their

studies in an English-speaking country, with writing and speaking causing the most problems (Zhou and Todman, 2009). There is an assumption that one's English competency could be automatically improved by immersion in an English-speaking environment (Benzie, 2010); however, this expectation has proved to be somewhat naïve (Zhou and Todman, 2009; Wu and Hammond, 2011). Previous literature (Wu, 2002) proposed that Chinese overseas students often cannot catch what native speakers are discussing due to the rapidity at which they speak, use of colloquialism and the variety of local accents. Moreover, it is noticeable that some Chinese students who had participated in pre-sessional language courses before they worked for formal modules believed that the daily use of English was more diverse than that which they had learnt in the language sessions (Edwards and Ran, 2006). As their overseas studies continued, the majority of Chinese students' language proficiency progressed, though they still suggested additional language support should be provided by overseas HEIs because advanced English competency is one of the most attractive aspects of returnees amongst Chinese employers (ibid).

In addition to the lower language proficiency compared to domestic students, Chinese international students are also criticized for their general lack of interaction in the classroom. It is true that classrooms in China are highly formal, teacher-focused, highly disciplined environments with large numbers of students (e.g. 50–60 pupils per class in state-owned primary and secondary schools) (Su et al., 1994; Gao and Watkins, 2001; Gu and Maley, 2008). Chinese students are encouraged to follow information in their books and from their teachers rather than interrupt to ask questions or express their own ideas (Wu and Hammond, 2011). Chinese international students are often regarded as silent or passive learners who learn by rote, and who lack creativity, flexibility and original thinking (Samuelowicz, 1987; Su et al, 1994). Besides, the group work format is rarely used in primary or secondary schools and only sometimes used in universities in China (Turner, 2006), so that Chinese students are likely to be ill-equipped to participate in group work, let alone take a leading role in the group (Li and Campbell, 2008). However, McMahon (2011) noted that it is wise to consider this phenomenon as connected to the Chinese traditional teaching-learning pattern, to avoid cultural bias. Bailey (2005:14) agreed

with this view, stating, “the perceived difference is one of classroom etiquette in the respective cultures rather than a deeper issue of approaches to learning”. Chinese students tending to keep silent in class may not mean that they are not interested or engaged in the sessions. It is common to see them clustering round the teacher with questions during break time or after the lesson has finished (Tiong and Yong, 2004). Similarly, Chinese students who seem to be passive in group discussions are not necessarily unwilling to contribute to the group. They are usually well-prepared before group activities, listening to group members’ ideas carefully, and then try to contribute effectively to group tasks (Wang, 2012a).

Indeed, the majority of Chinese students respond to the teaching and learning methods in host countries in an active manner (Liu, 2009). For instance, Chinese students who are criticized for learning by rote and relying on last-minute strategies before examinations, in fact read the extensive sources suggested by the teacher throughout the course, and attempt to improve their critical thinking abilities (Wu, 2015). Due to insufficient criteria being given, Chinese students learn new strategies by observing how their domestic peers perform, and benefit from doing group work with local and other international students (Tian and Lowe, 2009; Charlesworth, 2007; Wang, 2012a; Trahar and Hyland, 2011). Additionally, teachers’ feedback is considered of great value in supporting Chinese international students’ progress. Formative feedback not only helps them understand the criteria of academic success, but also helps change their learning behaviour accordingly (Tian and Lowe, 2009). Despite help from teachers and peers, Chinese international students also take advantage of social media and other alternative online learning systems to reduce the initial frustration and stress of the transition to the new academic context (Wu, 2015). Accordingly, a large proportion of Chinese overseas students gradually develop greater awareness of the complexity of intercultural learning and begin to strategically select their learning techniques as appropriate at various times. Moreover, in overcoming the potential “danger” of losing face in front of their peers, Chinese students become more active in the classroom and make more contributions to cooperative work (Gu and Maley, 2008).

Previous research has presented evidence that Chinese students feel increasingly confident in exchanging ideas, cooperative work and independent thinking as their studies progressed (Bailey, 2005). These abilities, which are difficult to develop in the Chinese education system, are highly valued by Chinese employers, who are becoming increasingly connected to the international market. Moreover, for students who expect to work in overseas-funded enterprises, being familiar with Western modes of thinking and working styles is a particular advantage (Liu and Fang, 2011; Li, 2013). Nevertheless, there are a certain number of Chinese students, especially Master's students, who resist adapting to the changed learning environment. Students in one-year Master's programmes have only a short time to try out different learning approaches. Due to the anxiety of failing exams, some students lack the courage to take the risk of losing marks when facing the demand to develop new learning skills. They chose to play safe, lowering their academic expectations, and relying on luck, even having recognized the inherent limitations of their habitual study strategies (Wu, 2015).

In addition to studying goals, Chinese students also look for international networking during their overseas HE period, in order to get a deeper understanding of the culture in their host countries and build their abilities to think outside their own cultural standpoint (Fang and Wang, 2014; Li and Zhang, 2017). The notion of intercultural experiences, differing from cross-cultural experiences which inherently emphasize differences and diversities, implies the coexistence of and interactions between both international and domestic culture (Gu, 2009). Chinese students maintain contact with home relations and build up new connections in their host countries at the same time. Many use the internet to get the latest news and to hold on to existing networks of friends and relatives in their home country throughout the course of their studies in foreign countries, which provides them emotional support, understanding and reassurance (Gill, 2007). With regard to social activities in the host country, accommodation is regarded as an important venue, providing opportunities to communicate (Gu, 2016). Many Chinese students living on campus share accommodation with other international students, sometimes with co-nationals, and at times with local students. Except for among

co-nationals, English is generally used to communicate in public environments, so that the residential unit acts as a focus not only for social activity, but also for academic and language support. There is evidence to show that students using English extensively in residential settings gain better language proficiency than others (Wu and Hammond, 2011). Some students establish close connections with flatmates; they share cooking, going to parties or simply chatting together to enhance intercultural interactions (Cao, 2015). However, some Chinese students express a preference for living with co-nationals rather than other international students, the reasons for which include different lifestyles and inconvenience when seeking help (Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006). In addition to the network within accommodation, many Chinese students engage in campus societies, some for national groupings or for overseas students in general. Furthermore, they enjoy trips, parties and other events organized by universities (Cao, 2015). During these activities, they gain the opportunity to practice English and to share cultural diversity with various people (Wu and Hammond, 2011).

Nonetheless, although Chinese international students try different ways to increase their networking and enhance their socio-cultural understanding of host countries, they are frequently somehow dissatisfied with their social experiences. Several researchers have indicated that the relationship between teachers and students is closer in China than in Western countries (Bailey 2005; Bamber 2014). Academic teachers in Western countries seldom have extra-curricular connections with students, so that it is nearly impossible to build a close connection with them (Bamber, 2014). Similarly, there are also weak links between Chinese and local students. Previous research (e.g., Bailey 2005; Wu and Hammond, 2011) has offered four main reasons for this: 1) language difficulties and cultural differences alienate these two groups; 2) Chinese students have a relatively large community and tend to stay with compatriots for emotional support; 3) local students are unenthusiastic to befriend Chinese students, who need to be proactive to establish friendships; and 4) some courses recruit large numbers of Chinese students, giving them few opportunities to socialize with local and other international students. Many Chinese students hope their overseas experiences will provide them with

enhanced communication skills through interactions with people from different countries, which might make them more employable (Li, 2013). Furthermore, they also see studying abroad as a means to accumulate social capital, hoping to set up international networks in the host country so as to have access additional resources and opportunities with regard to their career development (Guo et al., 2014). However, these expectations seem to be overly difficult to achieve, especially over the course of a one-year's Master's degree, with its intensive course schedule and heavy study loads. It is dubious as to whether Chinese international students can successfully accumulate cultural and social capital to match their initial expectations, or worse that they are unable to build a new network and additionally lost connections with their previous networks in mainland China (Xu, 2015).

A large number of studies have investigated Chinese international students' learning and living experiences in the host countries, from language, academic, socio-cultural and more recently from mental health (Han et al., 2013; Lu et al., 2014; Liu, 2019) perspectives, but as a corpus these are not sufficiently comprehensive to picture the whole journey. Some activities, such as travel, volunteer work and part-time employment, were not specifically discussed. More importantly, all kinds of achievements including language improvement, academic progress, intercultural abilities and personal growth that acquired by Chinese international students can impact on their graduate employment and long-term career development. However, there are few studies revealing the connections between these achievements and graduate employability. Therefore, further research is required to explore Chinese students' international education experiences in more detail, and to link these experiences to their future career prospects. In addition, when exploring Chinese students' experiences in the host countries, researchers have tended to regard them as a homogeneous group, with little effort having been made to challenge the stereotypes of Chinese international students; and worse still, researchers have sometimes reproduced the stereotypes of this group of students for example as a wealthy group (Wang, 2012b) or as silent/passive learners (Tran, 2013). Chinese international students need to be

explored based on their individual circumstances, considering their diverse backgrounds, complicated experiences during receiving overseas HE and personalised plans for post-graduation lives.

## 2.5. Employability of Chinese graduates

With the higher employment pressure and fierce employment competition in the Chinese labour market, researchers in China or abroad have given ample consideration to the employability of Chinese graduates. Some have taken theoretical approaches to clarify the nature of graduate employability in the Chinese context, while others have contributed empirically to what has become a rather heated topic. Chinese researchers working abroad have attempted to explore the employability of Chinese international students so as to respond to the increasingly international trend of HE. In this section, I review the various research on the employability of Chinese graduates to illuminate both research achievements and gaps in this area.

### 2.5.1. The concept of employability

Employability is a complex concept whose meaning has changed over time. Its origins, however, can be found in Western knowledge production, first appearing around the beginning of the 20th century and proposed on the basis of the dichotomy between “employable” (those willing and able to work) versus “unemployable” individuals (those incapable of work and in need of support) (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). From the outset, then, employability was a pure economic notion indicative of how governments needed to take or adopt measures to facilitate people accordingly – and the most underprivileged people in particular – to realize as full employment as possible in the labour market. From the 1970s, while the main purpose of promoting employability was still to stimulate employment, its emphasis began to change from one of employees’ self-image and work attitudes to their knowledge and abilities (Guilbert et al., 2016).

In the 1980s, the scope of employability expanded to include the organizational level, with a focus on developing employees' transferable skills to optimize their flexibility (Forrier and Sels, 2003). Until the 1990s, individual initiatives in gaining, maintaining and developing employability during a transition in the internal or external labour market were considered part of the concept of employability, accompanied by a shift in attention from people deemed "needy" to the entire population. In other words, employees were then expected to take responsibility for their own career development (Fugate, 2006; Nauta et al., 2009). Today, in the 21st century, with the expansion of global HE, graduate employability has become a popular topic, with the connection between employability and HE a subject of particular emphasis (Rae, 2007; Smith et al., 2000; Moore and Morton, 2017).

Based on the historical development of the concept of employability, it is understandable that this term can be interpreted differently from the perspectives of different stakeholders. In general, three main stakeholders who were independent but complementary were identified: government, organizations and individuals. Employability plays a central role in the governmental policies in many countries, with the aim of reaching full national employment. Governmental interventions are expected to improve the employability of various vulnerable populations, for example people with physical and mental disabilities, women, young NEETs<sup>10</sup> and minorities (Nauta et al., 2009). Moreover, governments also intend to help with the deployment of professional skills of people who are unemployed or faced with occupational transition (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). More recently, the European Employment Strategy (EES) indicated that it remains an essential goal of the authorities to promote employability among people who are potentially excluded from the workplace (European Union, 2010). In general, employability-related considerations from a government perspective highlight three dominant objectives: fulfilling full employment, enhancing quality and productivity at work, and building an inclusive labour market.

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<sup>10</sup> NEETs: Not in Education, Employment and Training.

From the organizational perspective, employability represents organizations' ambition to gain functional flexibility. With the increasing internationalization of the past decades, organizations are under increasingly heated competitive pressure to meet all forms of new challenges. In order to maximize operating efficiency and economic benefit, employers expect their workers to be fully competent and to freely adapt to a positional transition. In other words, organizations focus more on enhancing employees' employability orientation by equipping them with broader skill sets and up-to-date knowledge (Guest, 1987; Sparrow, 1998; Van Dam, 2005). However, the risk of organizations employing people with employability orientation is that these employees pay more attention to their own career development than organizational improvement (McArdle et al., 2007), which can ultimately lead to them pursuing alternative employment as a better platform for their personal careers. This inference has been confirmed by Van Dam (2005), who suggested a positive correlation between employees' willingness to adopt task changes and staff turnover. As a result, decision makers in organizations may have the dilemma of recruiting employability-oriented workers with flexibility or avoiding the risk of employee flight. In this sense, employability within the organizational perspective acts as a managerial concept that points to organizations' ability to employ an appropriate quantity of employees with adequate competence, achieving the balance between supply and demand in their labour force at any given time (Berntson and Marklund, 2007).

In addition to the governmental and organizational perspectives, the term employability can also serve an individual purpose. Berntson and Marklund (2007:281-283) held that employability is related to an "individual's perception of his or her possibilities of getting new employment", explaining their views further in terms of, "perceived skills, experience, network, personal traits, and knowledge of the labour market". Van der Heijden et al. (2009:453) defined employability more with regard to employers' skills, believing a potential labour force needed to continuously acquire, create or fulfil their employment through "the optimal use of competences". Besides, some other researchers considered employability as

personal traits in reference to employees' adaptability and career success. Fugate (2006:2) stated that employability is a

multidimensional constellation of individual characteristics that predispose employees to (pro)actively adapt to their work and career environments. Employability facilitates the identification and realization of job and career opportunities both within and between organizations. (see also McArdle, et al., 2007; Rothwell and Arnold, 2007)

This dimension emphasizes that the concept of employability can be discussed from aspects of "openness to changes at work, work and career resilience, work and career proactivity, career motivation, and work identity" (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008:506). McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), however, debunked the limitation of employability being only connected to employees' subjective factors by taking objective factors that may affect employment results into consideration. They suggested that employability

should be understood as being derived from, and affected by, individual characteristics and circumstances and broader, external (social, institutional and economic) factors that influence a person's ability to get a job. (ibid:206)

This definition built a "dynamic interaction of individual attributes, personal circumstances, labour market conditions and other 'context' factors", concluding that there were three interacting dimensions: "individual factors" (e.g., demographic characteristics, personal attributes, employability skills, adaptability and mobility), "personal circumstances" (e.g., household background, financial and social capital, work culture), and "external factors" (e.g., macroeconomic conditions, employment policy, recruitment factors) (ibid:207).

In addition to those researchers who have examined employability at a horizontal level, others have considered a longitudinal approach. Finn (2000) interpreted

employability as the abilities of different kinds of labour force to not only acquire but also maintain employment. In line with this, Hillage and Pollard (1998) divided employability into three different stages. The first was that people seek a job as the start of their career and thus enter the labour market. Employability during this period is focused on how unemployed people establish themselves in the labour market. Related studies have tended to discuss vulnerable groups such as disabled people and recent graduates (Finn, 2000; Bricout and Bentley, 2000; Harvey, 2001). In the second phase, people endeavoured to maintain their attractive qualities to their employers so as to retain their employment. Accordingly, several studies have explored the connection between employees' self-actualization (or individualization) and the risk of being unemployable in the labour market (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004). In the third stage, pursuing the further development of one's career prospects (for example, promotion or salary increase) becomes the most significant goal amongst employees, with the relationship between employee flexibility and loyalty being emphasized. In addition, some other possible reasons for job changes and talent mobility such as organizational changes and family situations have also been discussed (Berntson and Marklund, 2007).

On the basis of the above, it is reasonable to believe that the concept of employability can be interpreted subjectively and is not limited to a list of dimensions. Guilbert et al. (2016) believed it is wise to consider employability along two axes: firstly, to investigate perspectives from a macro-vision centred on society to a micro-vision centred on individuals; secondly, to explore the changing nature of the term as a series of traits or as a dynamic process. In line with this viewpoint, Forrier and Sels (2003:107) conceptualized employability as a "process that influences an individual's chances of a job and steps in the internal and external labour market", which keeps changing and is difficult to measure.

### 2.5.2. Graduate employability

The linkage between social economy and HE is long-standing. The UK Dearing Report (NCIHE<sup>11</sup>, 1997: para 1.11) argued that “education and training [should] enable people in an advanced society to compete with the best in the world”, which emphasized the crucial role of HE in the modern economy. Similarly, the European Commission (2003, 2005, 2011) also urged HEIs to contribute to the fulfilment of economic and societal demands. Since the late 1990s, nations all around the world have, to various extents, drawn attention to the employability of individuals in formal education, especially university graduates, so as to respond to today’s knowledge-driven economy and society (Rothwell et al., 2009; Gedye et al., 2004; Rothwell et al., 2008). In Australia and New Zealand, various measurements, for example the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), have been taken to stimulate and assess the cultivation of graduate employability (Barrie, 2006; Kalfa and Taksa, 2015). In Canada and America, several universities have chosen to assess students via work-related learning criteria (Cranmer, 2006). In the UK, the ESECT<sup>12</sup> encouraged employment-relevant learning to improve students’ employability (Yorke and Knight, 2003; Yorke, 2006). In Finland, students are given access to both separate employability skills modules and work-based training, as embedded into their curriculum (Cai, 2014). In Denmark, the Qualifications Framework requires a competence profile be completed (Cranmer, 2006). Moreover, the European Council (2012) set a benchmark for graduates’ employability; the proportion of graduates (in the 20-34 age group) being employed within three years of completing their education or training should be at least 82% by 2020. In South Africa, the NQF includes two sets of outcomes, the “critical and specific”, which contribute to graduates’ personal development and the economic development of society (Harvey and Bowers-Brown, 2004).

In Asia, Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2013) requires that university graduates possess “*Syugyoryoku*” (based on the

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<sup>11</sup> NCIHE: National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education.

<sup>12</sup> ESECT: Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team.

Seven Survival Skills proposed by Wagner in 2008) as a preliminary to becoming socially and professionally independent (Ito, 2014). The Malaysian government and related departments conduct a number of surveys into graduate employability and labour market conditions, which indicated that Malaysian graduates are failing to gain employment not because they are unintelligent but rather because of their general lack of “soft skills” (Singh and Singh, 2008). In the Philippines, as one of the most prolific labour-exporting countries, the purpose of HE is for the most part to ensure that student consumers are able to access the most lucrative opportunities in the job market (Ortiga, 2015). From this perspective, colleges and universities should not only enhance human capital from a national perspective, but also to allow their export to other countries.

In addition to being subject to governmental directives, HEIs take responsibility for promoting employability of graduates due to the requirements of employers and students. Employers have long criticized graduates’ abilities to contribute effectively in the workplace (ACCI<sup>13</sup>, 2002), expecting HEIs to equip new graduates with knowledge and skills to minimize the mismatch between what they need and what graduates can provide (Mason et al., 2003; Prinsley and Baranyai, 2015). Meanwhile, few students receive HE without an eye to subsequent employment (Yorke, 2006). As suggested by Rothwell et al. (2008:2), employability is the “perceived ability to attain sustainable employment appropriate to one’s qualification level”. Students reasonably expect what they obtain through HE to benefit their career prospects. Therefore, it is understandable that HE is considered vital to full employment and national economic well-being.

For graduates, employability may be regarded as

a set of achievements—skills, understandings and personal attributes—  
that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful

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<sup>13</sup> ACCI: Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy". (Yorke, 2006:8)

Within this definition, four inter-related dimensions were suggested – “a mix of personal qualities and beliefs, understandings, skilful practices and the ability to reflect productively on experience” (ibid:13). Individuals invest significant money, time and effort into the development of these traits in order that they better meet the demands of the labour market (Tomlinson, 2010). However, this approach has been criticized for its apparent lack of concern for demand-side external factors and the fact that employability is a relational and contextual issue rather than an individual consensual and empowering one (Tholen, 2015). Owing to the limitations of the labour market and the effects of national differences on skill development, graduate employability to a certain extent cannot serve as an absolute notion of individual attributes, but rather is a relative term, encompassing opportunities and inequalities that allow the contrast and comparison between peers (Brown et al., 2004). By taking both the supply-side and demand-side dimensions into consideration, Brown et al. (2003:9) dichotomized graduate employability into the “absolute” and “relative” dimensions. On the one hand, they acknowledged that employability is a set of individual attributes that should and can be improved through education and training; on the other, they acknowledged that one’s employability is also influenced by external factors such as the material, social and cultural resources that individuals are able to access and utilize (Tomlinson, 2008). Furthermore, Brown et al. (2004) specified the package of ‘absolute’ graduate employability as a combination of *hard currencies* including credentials, work experience and profession-specific abilities, and *soft currencies* including interpersonal skills, charisma and other qualities. Generally speaking, their interpretation of graduate employability is in line with that of McQuaid and Lindsay (2005).

### 2.5.3. Employability of Chinese domestic graduates

When New China implemented its “Command Economy”, the current challenge posed by graduate employment was non-existent because the government was

responsible for allocating appropriate jobs to the entire labour force (Ren et al., 2011); furthermore, graduates were then seen as a valuable human resource because HE in China was relatively poorly developed. As such, once people entered the university system, they were essentially guaranteed elite employment in later life (Cao, 2017). In the 1980s-1990s, “The Reform and Opening” policy saw the rapid development of the Chinese economy; while the demand for graduates increased accordingly, rates of university student enrolment and graduation did not greatly increase (Cao, 2017). As the government was still in charge of graduate job allocation, all graduates could succeed in entering the labour market (Yao, 2008). Since the late 1990s, however, this practice was discontinued and graduate employment began to be decided instead by market regulation. The dramatic development of the knowledge-driven economy provided a wealth of opportunities for graduates to attain high achievements. From 1999, in order to guarantee the supply of talent needed to ensure economic development and the national desire to access HE, China implemented a large-scale expansion of university enrolment, which within two years saw the number of university students in China rise such that it was second only to the United States, accounting for one in seven students worldwide (Yao, 2008). In 2002, the first generation of students to benefit from the enrolment expansion were due to graduate; the total number of students graduating from universities that year reached 1,450,000; an increase of 23.9% on the previous year’s figures (Yao, 2008). The year of 2002 is thus held to be the turning point for the Chinese graduate labour market, and the date from which the graduate employment “problem” emerged – indeed has become increasingly serious each subsequent year (Cao, 2017). In 2014, the number of graduates in China exceeded 7,000,000 (Wang, 2015; Li, 2017), and further increased to 8,198,200 in 2018 (MoE, 2019).

Driven by the problem of graduate employment due to this sharp increase in numbers, many Chinese researchers have devoted their research to exploring the issues related to graduate employability. Many Chinese researchers define graduate employability in terms of the abilities and attributes that make graduates more employable (e.g., Huang and Yang, 2016; Zhao, 2015). Yan (2007) argues that

employability is a set of comprehensive abilities related to occupations, including knowledge, skills, attitude, personality, mental endurance and social adaptability. Xie (2005) demonstrates that employability is comprised of basic abilities (e.g., communication, motivation and adaptability), professional abilities (e.g. academic performance and professional skills) and otherness abilities (individuation, innovativeness and creativeness). Ren (2005) proposes that graduate employability includes basic work abilities (e.g., IT skills, foreign language), professional skills (e.g., problem solving, innovation capability and job-hunting skills (e.g., information collection, presentation skills). Jiang et al. (2013) suggest that graduate employability is a combination of personal achievements of graduates through accumulating knowledge, skills and personality traits, which allow them to meet the requirements of employment, gain employment faster and succeed in their chosen occupation. They specify employability-related abilities as professional, interdisciplinary and generic work abilities, and personality traits. Summarizing the ideas of Chinese researchers who have emphasised graduates' abilities and attributes for graduate employability, there are four main aspects to this term: professional knowledge, generic work skills, personal characteristics and job-finding skills (see also, Luo and Lu, 2015). It is apparent that, from this body of work, employability represents one's comprehensive quality to adapt to the work context.

In addition to individual issues, a few Chinese researchers have suggested that graduate employability is shaped by several external factors. Cheng (2014) reveals the influence of family background on graduate employability. She compared the employability of students from families with monthly incomes over and below CNY 3000, finding that students from better-off families had stronger practical and adaptation abilities than their counterparts from families with in poorer financial circumstances (see also, Li, 2015). In addition, her research also demonstrated that students from single-parent families had higher expectations but lower confidence in their career development possibilities than students from double-parent families. Wan (2012) found that graduates whose parents were well-educated usually had better employability. She also suggested the positive correlation between a given

university's reputation and its graduates' employability (see also, Li, 2012). Gender difference has also been analysed in terms of employability. Li (2016) reports that women students in her study were better at observation, memory and language skills than men, and women were more conscientious, compassionate and consciously self-disciplined (see also, Li et al., 2009). On the other hand, Liu (2011) presented that women students lacked clear career values and plans, flexibility and innovation. Concerningly, women tended to have low expectations and confidence in their career prospects, which was closely related to the identification of women as being more family-oriented in traditional Chinese culture (Shi, 2005). Another external factor influencing graduate employability is "*guanxi*" (Wang, 2007). Yan's (2014) research among 700 graduates showed only 14.4% found jobs by themselves, while others took advantages of national allocation (35.6%), university recommendation (37.6%) and familial social ties (12.4%). Researchers have also discussed macro factors influencing graduate employability, such as economic conditions (Sun, 2009; Wen, 2015; Zhao, 2015) and government policies (Zhang and Jiang, 2009; Cui, 2015).

Along with the above research, Chinese researchers have also conducted empirical studies on graduate employability which compared employers' and employees' perceptions. Chen and Li (2013) studied 25 large- or medium-scale enterprises in Guangxi province, reporting that the mismatch between graduate employability and employers' requirements was an important reason for the difficulties with graduate employment (see also, Wang, 2007; Wang, 2012c; Yan, 2014). In line with this, more recent research (Luo and Lu, 2016) on 599 students from seven universities and 287 employers in China found that employers value graduates' personal traits and transferable skills the most, while graduates themselves focused more on job-seeking skills. Moreover, graduates' self-assessed employability is often higher than employers' perceptions. Xiao et al. (2007), based on a survey among 1600 graduates and 272 employers in Chongqing Province, reported that employers particularly valued basic practice, knowledge expansion and innovative abilities, but it was clear that graduates barely met the requirements of employers in all three of these aspects.

In response to the mismatch between graduate employability and employers' needs, many researchers have made the attempt to understand how Chinese HE could better facilitate graduate employability. Zhang and Zhu (2012) have analysed the disadvantages of talent-cultivating systems in Chinese universities. Firstly, Chinese universities emphasize knowledge instillation but overlook psychological development of students, so that many graduates were psychologically immature, with non-intellectual factors becoming a significant barrier to their successful employment (See also, Huang, 2015). Secondly, Chinese universities focus on professional education but neglect liberal education, so that many graduates lack critical-thinking abilities, interdisciplinary awareness, practical abilities and transferable skills (see also, Tang et al., 2015). Thirdly, Chinese universities tend to equip students with professional skills but overlook vocational values, so that only a limited number of graduates meet employers' expectations with regard to loyalty, responsibility, resilience and initiative (see also, Wang, 2015). With the purpose of improving these shortcomings, it was suggested that Chinese universities provide students with a career service in order to establish occupational values, clarify career targets, and make comprehensive career plans, so as to further guide their university studies (Liu and Zhang, 2016). Moreover, many Chinese universities have tried to build multi-dimensional curriculum systems with employability training embedded into the curriculum design (Zhang and Zhu, 2012; Tang et al., 2015). Some universities have sought cooperation with enterprises to provide students with more practical opportunities and updated information about the labour market (Huang, 2015). In addition to the efforts made by universities, researchers have also appealed for more comprehensive support for graduate employability from government and, indeed, the entire society as a whole (Qing, 2015; Wang, 2015).

Reviewing the research conducted by China-based researchers on graduate employability, I consulted Master's and PhD theses in addition to published literature, as the literature in this area is nascent. The theoretical understanding of graduate employability among Chinese researchers is relatively mature. They have

realized that employability does not equate to employment; the process of developing employability is not the same as the process of finding employment (Jiang et al., 2013). One's employability is related to whether a person can find a job, adjust themselves to that work, and acquire desired career development (Wang, 2015). In addition, Chinese researchers also acknowledge that one's employability is not fixed; instead, it can be developed during academic study and work practice (Cheng, 2014). However, the empirical research on graduate employability is still insufficient, with the majority of existing studies targeted at undergraduates (e.g., Zhang, 2014; Zhan, 2016), with few studies on postgraduates. Furthermore, while a number of studies discuss how to enhance the employability of students in Science (Liu et al. 2015; Ran and Ma, 2017) and Business disciplines (Lv, 2016; Wang and Wu, 2015; Wang et al., 2018), very few studies focus on students in the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities (Wang, 2016). Another research gap that should be noted is that previous studies tend to explore the employability of graduates from the perspectives of employers and universities, instead of the graduates themselves. Further research is needed to discuss how graduates manage their employability during HE.

#### 2.5.4. Employability of Chinese international graduates

China-based researchers focusing on the employment-related issues of Chinese international students usually concentrate on their employment conditions and results after their return to China (e.g., Shi et al., 2015; Feng and Fan, 2017; Zhang and Yao, 2014), but seldom explored their EM process during their overseas education, because China-based researchers struggle to access international students' international journey in real time. Foreign researchers in the area of graduate employability usually conduct research on domestic students, and few have concentrated on the increasingly international and transnational dimensions of HE and the influence this has exerted on graduate employability (Waters, 2009). In terms of Chinese researchers overseas, as reviewed in section 2.4., more attention has been given to exploring Chinese international students' linguistic and cognitive improvement, social integration and intercultural competences (e.g., Wei et al., 2007; Zhang and Goodson, 2011; Guo et al., 2014; Meng et al., 2018).

However, few researchers have considered how these students take advantage of learning abroad to advance their employability. I now review in detail three representative studies on the employability of Chinese international students to illustrate what has been achieved and what needs to be improved in this area.

#### Huang et al.'s research

Huang et al. (2014) conducted a quantitative study among 440 students from Mainland China studying in 25 British universities as to how they perceived their employability and how they prepared for their careers whilst studying in the UK. Among all participants, 41.6% of them were Master's students, and 37.2% were in their last year of undergraduate study. A questionnaire containing four main themes, including demographic information, perceptions of employability, influential factors of employability, and likelihood to adopt various activities to enhance employability, was designed to collect appropriate data.

The results of this research suggested that the majority of students (60.4%) understood employability as a set of knowledge, skills and understandings that they possessed, with fewer students (32.7%) believing that employability was more relevant to their work experiences, and only 6.9% regarding employability enhancement as an approach to social mobility. In terms of the influential factors of employability, responders made personal abilities the most significant followed by the conditions of labour market and culture of work context, while individual characteristics such as gender, age and family background were considered the least influential. With regard to the different activities while studying overseas, participants valued internships and part-time jobs and getting information about the Chinese labour market on advancing their employability, while they were less enthusiastic about taking university-related responsibilities such as being course representatives or peer mentors.

This research made efforts to understand how mainland Chinese students understand and manage their employability whilst studying in the UK. However, more than half (66.2%) of the participants were from business departments, which

resulted in the limited generalizability of the results to other disciplines. Furthermore, the results of this quantitative study can be viewed as somewhat superficial, with subsequent qualitative methods required to explore Chinese students' perceptions and experiences relating to their EM in more depth.

### Li's research

Li's research (2013) considered the employability construction of mainland Chinese postgraduate students studying in the UK. The researcher recruited 10 men and 13 women participants in taught Master's programmes at a UK university from seven disciplines, covering Natural Sciences, Engineering, Social Sciences and Arts at a UK university. She conducted a small-scale, longitudinal, qualitative case study.

Data collection was achieved via in-depth semi-structured individual interviews six months before the 23 participants' graduation, 20 (the other three were lost) of whom were interviewed again six months afterwards. In the first-round interviews, participants shared their career-related ideas including employment aspiration, their understanding of the labour market and preparations for future employment. In the follow-up stage, the researcher focused more on interviewees' experiences of learning in the UK and returning to China, investigating the changes of their initial employment expectations, the development of their career plans, and the actions they took to achieve their employment goals.

This research found that, compared to the "hard currencies" represented by the overseas degree, participants considered "soft currencies" brought by overseas experiences could give them a degree of priority in the labour market. Although participants acknowledged the positive impacts of overseas education on their future career, they did not have the desire to enter the global labour market, but rather wished to come back to the Chinese local work environment. In line with Huang et al.'s (2014) findings, the majority of participants in this research also suggested that enhancing their own knowledge and skills was important if they wanted to be more competitive in the job market. Meanwhile, they realized that

*“guanxi”* possibly exerted influence on their employment outcome but was not a decisive factor.

This research made an important attempt to contribute to the discourse of the employability of Chinese international students: to bridge students’ different backgrounds and overseas experiences to their employment results. However, this study omitted to fully explore the diversity of students’ real-world experiences while learning and living in the UK, and how this diversity shaped their employment results and sustainable employability.

### Huang’s research

Huang’s (2013) research was also qualitative in nature, with the purpose of understanding Chinese international students’ career intentions and strategies as they were used to develop employability. In-depth semi-structured interviews were employed as the data collection tool, with data gathered from Chinese students studying tourism-related programmes in a post-1992 UK university. Specifically, this research explored participants’ initial motivations to study abroad and the significance of employability enhancement that resulted in such decisions, participants’ understanding of their future careers, and their approaches to managing employability.

Adopting theoretical sampling to recruit nine participants sequentially, this research found that high-quality education was the most important motivation behind mainland Chinese students’ decision to study in the UK, with many interviewees reporting that international experiences would benefit their career. In terms of career intentions, the majority of participants recognized the heated competition in the Chinese labour market. Referring to how participants managed their employability while studying in the UK, a good number of narratives were related to skills, with soft skills emphasized in particular. Moreover, participants also argued that their employability was not strongly enhanced by classroom learning, but rather by extra-curricular activities, and by seeking additional support from career services.

This research provided rich empirical data about mainland Chinese students' understandings of their overseas learning, career intentions and EM. Nevertheless, this research only considered nine students in the same discipline from one UK university as its sample, so the results are likely to be somewhat limited.

Chinese researchers working overseas who enjoy the convenience of accessing Chinese international students have contributed to the knowledge of graduate employability in transnational HE. The quantitative studies provided the overview of what skills and activities were valued by Chinese international students in terms of their employability development, while qualitative studies reached students' perception and evaluation of their employability in more depth. Nonetheless, as shown above, limitations existed in both quantitative and qualitative research in this area. Previous studies either saw Chinese international students as a homogenous group (Li, 2013) or focused on limited numbers and types of students (Huang, 2013). Moreover, employability was given a relatively narrow conceptualization from a skill-related perspective, with the discussions showing insufficient attention to integrating international HE, graduate employability and Chinese students' individual differences. In the last three years, the employability of international students has received more attention from researchers. Huang (2018) furthered her research on Chinese international students' graduate employability by investigating the related initiatives taken by UK universities; Mok et al.'s (2017) research focused more on how international or transnational HE affects Chinese undergraduates' and postgraduates' employment outcomes; Tu and Nehring (2019) explored UK-educated Chinese students' study-to-employment transition. However, there is still considerable room for researchers to further explore graduate employability of Chinese international students.

Considering the broader discourse of employability-related research, a significant gap remains with respect to *employability management*. Focusing on employability management, rather than employability, per se, is important in order to do justice to the dynamic nature of the concept. That is to say, employability keeps changing

during one's education and work journeys (Finn, 2000); individuals are therefore constantly engaged in the *process* of establishing, maintaining, sometimes losing, and then reproducing appropriate employability sets. Huang (2013:91) used a similar wording – 'career management' to describe the activities undertaken by students to benefit their careers. However this concept was insufficiently developed and discussed as Huang's research adopted a relatively narrow conceptualisation of employability and did not involve real-time data collection of students' career management, with Huang's retrospective interview data being less capable of exploring and explaining the holistic picture and changing nature of process that students worked with their career-related issues. This research utilises a more comprehensive conceptualisation of employability theorised by capabilities approach and a longitudinal in-depth research design. This has facilitated a wider and more thorough exploration of employability management, as the next chapter will demonstrate.

## 2.6. Summary

During the long history of China's participation in international HE, each historical stage has witnessed different characteristics of Chinese international students in terms of their dispatch channels, funding patterns, destination countries, disciplines studied, degrees pursued, study-abroad motivations, return-or-stay choices, and post-study-abroad employment. Current Chinese international students, the majority of whom are self-funded, have considerable flexibility in deciding when, where and what to learn, based on their motivations to study abroad and plans for their post-graduation lives. Among the push and pull factors motivating Chinese students to study abroad, career-related considerations are worthy of note, especially when one-year taught Master's students are researched. Under an apparent contradiction between learning abroad to enhance career prospects, and being criticized by employers as merely gilding one's CV, how this type of Chinese international student might interpret their choice of studying abroad and future career needs to be explored further. More importantly, few studies have investigated Chinese students' overseas experiences from the perspective of

employability, on indeed how the language, academic, and socio-cultural issues that form the focus of the existing literature can be connected with their future careers.

Employability is a complicated concept, integrating multiple stakeholders. Since the 1990s, when the dominant stakeholder in this regard shifted to employees, researchers have expended considerable effort on conceptualizing this term from the individual's perspective, as the development of HE and graduate employability has received more focus politically, societally and academically in a global sense. Nevertheless, the literature review has found that almost all existing studies on graduate employability have strong national foci, and that there is a dearth of studies concentrating on the increasingly international and transnational dimensions of HE and graduate employability. Even for Chinese international students, who form the largest group of international students worldwide, their employability issues are underexplored, with the voices of students in the social sciences being particularly underrepresented. Moreover, researching the employability issues of Chinese international students needs to consider their individual differences, instead of indiscriminately regarding this cohort as a homogenous entity, since one's employability and EM is shaped by both internal and external factors.

To address the research gaps so found, this research explores how Chinese international students carried out employability management during their one-year Master's course in the UK, and this overarching question is specified through following three sub-questions:

- What are the initial motivations of Chinese students in social sciences in choosing to receive HE abroad; and what are their expectations of receiving HE abroad in terms of their employability enhancement?
- What practices were undertaken by these students to manage their employability while receiving their overseas education?
- What factors influence these students' understanding of and approaches

towards employability management?

The following chapter will discuss the theoretical framework adopted by this research.

## Chapter Three Theoretical Framework

### 3.1. Introduction

As discussed in chapter two, employability is a complicated concept. This research conceptualized graduate employability from students' perspective as comprehensively as possible, so as to achieve a deep understanding of Chinese international students' EM during their year in the UK. Moreover, this research, with its purpose of dehomogenizing Chinese international students, emphasizes the central role of each and every student in interpreting their employability and conducting their employability-related activities. Capabilities Approach (CA) is considered appropriate for this research, as it provides a broader conceptualization of graduate employability by connecting employability with human freedom, human development and life wellbeing. CA also combines personal and contextual factors in the discussion of graduate employability, enlightening this research not to overlook external factors which affect students' EM. Meanwhile, CA centres human beings in the operation of activities, which fits in with this research study's purpose to explore how students managed their employability in their individualized contexts.

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum are considered the founders of the CA. Sen has worked on the development and amendment of traditional frameworks for evaluating people's quality of life and wellbeing as adopted in microeconomics since the 1970s, with the concept of "capabilities" introduced for the first time in his article "Equality of What?" in 1979. In Sen's view, it is human capabilities that should be equalized, which he considers "the freedoms [individuals] actually enjoy to choose the lives that they have reason to value" (Sen, 1992:81). Sen systematically articulated the nature of this theory and gave explicit interpretations of its core concepts (will be discussed later). The initial version of Sen's CA, however, is an abstract theory. Sen opposed an approach that would pre-specify a list of goods that all kinds of societies should target, due to the inherent supposition of a universal agreement on human nature (Sen, 1993). Instead, he proposed a more flexible method that left the possibility open to each society,

through a process of public deliberation, to decide on specific goods based on their own contexts (Unterhalter, 2003a). Nonetheless, since he did not link the associated abstract terms to real contexts to understand these issues, the controversy over how Sen's CA can be operationalized or put into practice has remained for some considerable time thereafter (Gasper, 1997; Roemer, 1996).

Nussbaum has made considerable effort to provide a more substantive version of CA, which is established from the Aristotelian tradition, going beyond Sen's insights and moving on to a model which could be deployed to picture broader dimensions of human development. Aristotelianism evaluated "the good life" in terms of the possession and adequate utility of powers, enlightening people to think about how to realize powers from potentials, and make use of them in an appropriate way (Gasper, 1997:282).

Nussbaum (2011:33-34) created a specific list of ten "central capabilities" that a decent society should vest to each and every citizen to secure their lives with human dignity at some minimum threshold level: 1) life; 2) bodily health; 3) bodily integrity; 4) senses, imagination, and thought; 5) emotions; 6) practical reason; 7) affiliation; 8) other species; 9) play; and 10) control over one's environment. Nussbaum suggested that a truly fair and just society needs to locate citizens above the threshold of all ten central capabilities and provide them with a tragedy-free future. In other words, these central capabilities should not be interpreted as discrete criteria but as a whole, since the whole is greater than the sum of each individual capability (Lloyd-Sherlock, 2002). Nussbaum (2000) believed that this list is universal, which could then enable the authority in each and every country to specify further in accordance with specific national contexts. Though the universality of Nussbaum's central capabilities list was challenged by other researchers (e.g., Gasper, 1997; Lloyd-Sherlock, 2002), her research practices have developed CA into a more "full-blooded" theory in terms of human development and social justice (Gasper, 1997:281).

Before CA came into being, the conceptualizations of wellbeing dominantly followed the commodity or income and utility approaches. The commodity or income approach evaluates social development in terms of economic growth, expansion of goods, and increasing quantities of income or commodities that people own (Saito, 2003). In line with this, human capital theory (HCT), pioneered by Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961) in the 1960s, has become one of the most important theories on economic growth and development in modern neo-classical economics. HCT regards human beings as providers of economic productivity and believes that every human behaviour can be interpreted in an economic way. Education is seen as a type of investment in human capital, whose outcomes can therefore be reasonably evaluated in terms of the extent to which educated people can contribute to economic growth, with their contributions believed to be visibly reflected by employment and income (Becker, 1993; Aliaga, 2001). In other words, HCT in its simplest form believes that, the more education people receive, the better work opportunities and higher incomes they will possess, and that the employment outcomes and incomes then equate to the employability of graduates. Nonetheless, this metric of educational outcomes and graduate employability has been critiqued since it constructs the value of education and work as only serving an instrumental purpose (Robeyns, 2006). Furthermore, HCT has also been criticized regarding its assessment of life quality being solely concerned with how much resources – commodities and incomes – a person possesses, and its understanding of education and work as tools of resource accumulation (Fitzsimons, 2017). Besides, HCT is disadvantaged in neglecting the impacts of factors such as gender, policy and culture on individuals' choices in education, employment and beyond (Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash, 2014).

CA, on the contrary, gives an appropriate response to the points for which HCT was critiqued. First, without denying the significance of material possession, CA locates human development instead of economic growth at the centre, intimately connecting education and employability to human freedom rather than human productivity. Education and employability, as capabilities in themselves, also promotes further capabilities and functionings in terms of not only economic-

oriented competencies, but also life-oriented ones. CA directs people towards broader dimensions, considering the influence of education and employability on human quality of life and wellbeing. Second, by receiving education and conducting work practices, people can benefit in communicating, cooperating and arguing, “in being able to choose in a more informed way, in being taken more seriously by others and so on” (Sen, 1999:294). CA, therefore, acknowledges the multidimensional roles that education and work play that bring about intrinsic (e.g., enhanced agency), instrumental (e.g., achieved degrees and incomes) and positional (e.g., established social connections) values in people’s lives (Lanzi, 2007).

Compared to HCT, CA provides a more well-rounded evaluation framework for measuring the values of education and work on people’s life quality and wellbeing. Some researchers (e.g., Wigley and Akkoyunlu, 2006) have shown a preference for CA to HCT in the exploration of educational and employability-related issues, while others (e.g., Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash, 2014) have suggested combining these two theories, since human capital and human capabilities reciprocally intertwined, and HCT has more advantages than CA in terms of the operability, empirical verifiability and being politically consistent with market reforms (Lanzi, 2007).

Notwithstanding having employed some concepts of human capital which are not excluded by CA in data collection, this research adopted CA as the dominant theoretical framework, since CA resonates more with this study’s focus on the *process* of employability *management* during receiving HE overseas, rather than the employment *outcomes* achieved after studying abroad. The following texts articulate the nature of CA, discussing how it has been applied to the research areas of education and graduate employability, exploring how it has been understood and adopted by researchers applying CA to the Chinese context. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the application of CA in this study.

## 3.2. Nature of the CA

### 3.2.1. Key arguments of CA

As defined by Sen (1993:30), a capability is “a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being; [it] represents the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be”. CA emphasizes the distinction between the ends and means of human wellbeing, proposing that only the ends possess intrinsic significance while means merely have instrumental value on enhancing wellbeing (Robeyns, 2011). Individuals’ capabilities, that is, their freedoms to engage in the activities that they value and to become a kind of person who they hope to, are the actual ends of human wellbeing. Nevertheless, the incomes, commodities and expenditures used as evaluative criteria by utilitarian and commodity-centred theorists are the means supporting the enhancement of individuals’ capabilities (Saito, 2003).

Another distinction of CA is that, as an egalitarian theory, it offers a justification of social redistribution according to criteria of social justice and equality. Capabilities theorists critique the evaluation of what is fair or just through the assessment of distributed resources or inputs. They believe that what should be evaluated are the capabilities available to individuals to lead flourishing lives, rather than the resources that are provided or the outcomes that have been achieved (Robeyns, 2005). Too much attention on resources and outcomes entrap people within the utilitarianism which regards people as “a means to economic growth or social stability”, whereas CA advocates that each person should be considered “as an end” (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007:2).

Moreover, CA does not discuss the total or average wellbeing of society, but assesses whether each individual is given equal opportunity to lead the life that she or he has reason to value (Nussbaum, 2011). Thus, CA puts people at the centre of the human development, stressing the necessity of removing obstacles to people’s freedom to make decisions regarding what they value doing or being. However, what needs to be noted is that CA does not serve as an individualistic framework

placing self-actualization over all other issues; instead, it echoes “ethical individualism” (Robeyns, 2005:108), advocating that the value of particular actions needs to be assessed by its impact on individual human beings (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). Therefore, in this study which explores the employability issues of Chinese international students, the focus was not placed on assessing how international HE worked on Chinese students’ employment outcomes in general; rather, it aimed to investigate how each participant managed their employability during their own overseas journeys, and the extent to which they thought they had the freedom to conduct actions and make choices they valued.

### 3.2.2. Key concepts of CA

CA has specific vocabulary which needs to be explained. The two most important concepts are *capabilities* and *functionings* – they are different, yet intertwined. Functionings are the actual realizations of capabilities, whilst capabilities are the *possibilities* for realizing functionings. Specifically, functionings are what have been successfully achieved by an individual, while capabilities are the potential and opportunities to realize these achievements. For example, in a university, research-related workshops provide students with capabilities to learn more research skills; while the truly enhanced research skills are the functionings achieved by students through participating in these workshops. It is important to differentiate capabilities and functionings as they serve as *possibilities* versus *outcomes*. If only functionings are assessed, people can be easily deceived by what appear to be the same outcomes, but this overlooks the very different *processes* by which outcomes are reached, as well as the various capability sets behind functionings (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). For example, we may imagine two fresh graduates who obtained employment from the same company, with one achieving it by succeeding in three rounds of tests, and the other one by internal referral. If we only assess functionings, we may conclude the same outcomes in term of these two students’ employability, but we overlook the different ways by which these two students obtained the employment, and the different employability sets they possessed. CA diminishes the oversight caused by simply evaluating functionings, and emphasizes

the significance of centralizing individual capabilities as the information base of evaluation.

On the other hand, capabilities and functionings cannot be separated. Functionings, to some extent, provide an endpoint for capabilities, since one's capability set is evaluated ultimately by achieved functionings (Sen, 1999). If capabilities never convert into functionings, capabilities are pointless, while if people have achieved functionings, it seems reasonable to believe that they have been given capabilities, and initially chose those that they thought to be beneficial to themselves.

Moreover, in specific situations, certain functionings are necessary for individuals to nourish further capabilities (Clark, 2005; Wolff and de-Shalit, 2007). For example, children have to achieve a number of functionings during their compulsory education so as to gain more adult capabilities in the future. It is reasonable to believe that "the more crucial a functioning is to attaining and maintaining other capabilities, the more entitled we may be to promote actual functioning in some cases" (Nussbaum, 2000:92). Hence, under some conditions, we need to acknowledge the centrality of both capabilities and at least some particularly vital functionings to the judgement of equality and justice.

CA considers individuals' capabilities as the ends of wellbeing, whilst perceiving resources or inputs as its underpinning (Robeyns, 2011). Whether resources or inputs can produce capabilities is influenced by *conversion factors*. For example for a parent-funded international student, *parents* serve as a conversion factor, who convert the money (resource) to the capabilities of this student to study abroad. For another instance, imagine a part-time job (resource) provided by a company at the outskirts of a town; for a student living in the city centre, *transportation* acts as a conversion factor, which affects whether this job can be an opportunity for the student. Conversion factors, from various angles and to various extents, have certain effects on the extent to which people can transform the provided resources into their capabilities.

As capabilities are considered the “alternative combinations of functionings” (Nussbaum, 2011:20) that are feasible for people to achieve, Nussbaum proposed a concept of “combined capabilit[y]”, which represents a comprehensive set of capabilities, including abilities a person acquires through training or education (*internal capabilities*), and economic, social, political, cultural and familial environments (conversion factors) (ibid:20-23). Both internal capabilities and combined capabilities are mutually influenced by external contexts. However Internal capabilities need to be distinguished from combined capabilities because the differentiation highlights two intertwined but distinct tasks of an ideal society. A society is expected to equip citizens with internal capabilities by, for example, expanding education opportunities and enhancing teaching qualities; and in parallel, a society also needs to create reasonable contexts (namely, positive conversion factors) for options, so that people can actually realize their potentials and freedoms (ibid).

Similar to the transition from resources to capabilities, the extent to which capabilities can be converted into functionings is also shaped by internal and external conversion factors. *Agency* is an important internal conversion factor, which is based on an understanding that human beings can actively plan and conduct their lives, rather than being passive spectators. Agency means

each person is a dignified and responsible human being who shapes her or his own life in the light of goals that matter, rather than simply being shaped or instructed how to think. (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007:5)

In accordance with Sen (1999), agency is significant to people’s intrinsic freedom (but also instrumental in collective action and democratic participation). Agency is also a key dimension of human wellbeing (Alkire, 2002), because the higher the agency a person develops, the more active attempts can be made, the more freedom of choice for a person to convert capabilities into valued functionings, and thus the more possibilities for wellbeing are likely to be achieved.

In recognizing the significance of people's agency, we may reasonably reach the possibility of applying CA to education, which corresponds to the potential of educating people to make personal decisions based on reason and logic. Moreover, because of agency, people are cultivated to improve their capabilities to make critical reflections on themselves and the world, and thus contribute to the social revolution and progress (Lozano et al., 2012). Sen (2003:12) stressed the significance of education on people's capabilities, stating "the ability to exercise freedom may, to a considerable extent, be directly depend on the education we have received". Nussbaum's (2002:290) perspective accords with Sen; she proposed that people, through receiving an education, enhance their capabilities and become "fully human".

On the other hand, the development of one's agency and the freedom to realize capabilities to achieve desired functionings can as easily be negatively influenced by external conversion factors as positively affected. Individuals' choices and preferences tend to be deeply shaped by the opportunities available to them. Whether people can enjoy equal opportunities to choose is determined by whether redistribution and recognition are equal for everyone (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). If social and political contexts are unequal, people, especially disadvantaged groups, tend to adjust their expectations to their perceived possibilities and thus realize low agency and wellbeing in their lives, which is known as *adaptive preference* (Nussbaum, 2000).

Understanding the key concepts of CA conveys the significance of applying CA in this study, which discusses the relationship between receiving HE abroad and managing graduate employability. This research explores how the resources of international HE were (un)successfully converted into the capabilities of enhancing Chinese international students' employability, and then into the specific functionings they achieved. During this process, the researcher investigated the conversion factors from various perspectives, discussed how students' agency produced effects, and explained why adaptive preferences occurred. These

concepts helped the research to understand and present the complexity of Chinese international students' EM during the overseas year.

### 3.3. CA in education

Sen, as an economist, and Nussbaum, as a philosopher, did not construct their capability theories from an education perspective. However, both recognized the importance of education in developing human capabilities, and several implications for education research can be found in their arguments. Nussbaum (2003:19) advocated that freedoms and capabilities were “neutral and trivial in itself, probably bad in use”. Here we may pose a question: what can be done to help people practice their capabilities and freedoms in an appropriate way? Education may be posited as the answer. By receiving education, people may be instilled with appropriate values, guided to realize their capabilities properly and avoid the abuse of freedoms.

Sen (1992:44) stressed the significance of education on human wellbeing, by saying that education is one of “a relatively small number of centrally important beings and doings that are crucial to well-being”. Nussbaum (2006) agreed with Sen and clarified three main capabilities closely connected to education, including abilities for 1) critically assessing oneself and one's traditions; 2) identifying oneself as a world citizen; and 3) building up narrative imagination. Both of these two founders of CA considered education a functioning achieved by making use of public goods, and also in itself as a capability for the expansion of other capabilities and the fulfilment of other functionings. Sen (2003:12) believed “the ability to exercise freedom may, to a considerable extent, be directly dependent on the education we have received”. Sen further argued that education enables people to realize both intrinsic and instrumental values by, on the one hand, leading the lives that they might have reason to value, and on the other playing a social role in interpersonal relationships and making contributions to economic production, social change and democratic development (Saito, 2003; Walker and Unterhalter, 2007).

Sen and Nussbaum have acknowledged the significance of education on individuals' capabilities; both of them nevertheless did not seek to direct CA at the details of educational processes and outcomes (Walker, 2008). Many researchers (e.g., Unterhalter, 2003b; DeJaeghere and Lee, 2011; DeJaeghere and Baxter, 2014; Lambert et al., 2015) have made efforts to fill this gap. Melanie Walker, a scholar who has devoted herself to research into capabilities and HE, pointed out the importance of considering how to produce and normalize equity in everyday teaching and learning (Walker, 2008). She suggested that university students and teachers should "think about valued beings and doings learned in and through higher education, and for revisioning the normative purposes of higher education" (ibid:486). Walker (2006) proposed a theoretical list of eight basic capabilities for HE: (1) practical reason, (2) educational resilience, (3) knowledge and imagination, (4) learning disposition, (5) social relations and social networks, (6) respect, dignity and recognition, (7) emotional integrity, and (8) bodily integrity, as a response to the core functions of universities. The central goal of HE is to produce and disseminate higher knowledge, which is embedded in various aspects of pedagogy, including curriculum design, disciplinary structure, dynamic modes of inquiring, and the ever-changing metric of excellence (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Walker therefore created this capability list more with regard to pedagogy than knowledge, to assess the quality of teaching and learning in HE through the lens of human capabilities. She stressed the incommensurability of the listed eight capabilities and suggested people take them as a totality within which elements support each other, so as to avoid the mistake of inclining a single dimension in implementing and improving pedagogies in HE (Walker, 2005). In addition, Walker's work also reminds people to focus on students' experiences in HE, concerning how HE can enhance the quality of their lives and benefit their lifelong wellbeing, which challenges the contemporary practices in teaching and learning in the primary sense of human capital accumulation (Boni and Walker, 2016).

### 3.4. CA in graduate employability

Employment and employability are usually used as criteria for evaluating HE outcomes (Down, 2006). CA directs our attention to the values of employability on individuals' human rights and wellbeing. As stated by UNDP<sup>14</sup> (1990:1), "People are the real wealth of a nation". A decent society needs to provide as many as freedoms and opportunities as possible for people to be well-developed and to achieve quality and wellbeing in their lives; in turn, people with capabilities are the true force through which to promote social development.

Employability is an essential driver for human development and expansive social wellbeing. From the individual perspective, being employed enables people to "fully participate in society", be "economically secure", acquire "a sense of dignity and worth", accumulate knowledge and skills, and expand networks (UNDP, 2005:1). From the social perspective, work makes contributions to the "public good", society's cohesion and unity, "cultures and civilizations" (ibid). These benefits can extend generation by generation, and ultimately advance the development of the entire human world.

As a complex concept which is influenced by individual, educational, economic, social, political and cultural circumstances, graduate employability can be understood as a kind of "combined capabilit[y]" described by Nussbaum (2011:21), which is constituted of internal capabilities (e.g., knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, traits, attributes) that can be enhanced by receiving HE, together with external conditions affecting one's freedoms to achieve, maintain and progress within employments (Walker and Fongwa, 2017). CA thus provides graduate employability research a framework that unifies multiple factors – including the quality of HE, participation and engagement of students, financial resources, social capital – to demonstrate how these dimensions work together to contribute to the (in)equality and (un)fairness of possibilities and outcomes relating to graduates' agency development, career prospects and lifelong wellbeing.

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<sup>14</sup> UNDP: the Human Development Reports of the United Nations Development Programme.

According to the conceptualisation of graduate employability provided by CA, employability management, a concept coined for this research, is defined as the iterative process in which students develop their employability through their efforts towards self-improvement, and interact with external factors which affect their actions. To be specific, from the perspective of internal capabilities, employability management includes a wide range of activities conducted by students to acquire knowledge, improve skills, abilities and attitudes, cultivate attributes and develop traits, for the purpose of becoming more employable. In this sense, employability management is a process comprising both practical and cognitive efforts made by students to comprehensively understand the labour market, rationally plan their career, and appropriately enrich their employability set.

From the perspective of external conditions, employability management refers to the practices undertaken by students to negotiate with the conversion factors from social, cultural, economic, familial and interpersonal dimensions which can affect their freedoms to proceed towards the employability enhancement that they value. The external perspective emphasizes the notion of employability management as an interactive process during which students' behaviour can be impacted by the environment outside themselves and where students' career-related expectations sometimes have to compromise due to external conditions.

Another point worth mentioning is that the discussion of employability management, a concept defined by this research in terms of HE students and graduate employability, can be extended to individuals in any career stage. It is imperative for people who plan to and/or who have entered the labour market to keep a watchful eye on and actively work on their employability so as to establish, maintain and develop their careers. The notion of employability management stems from the insightful conceptualisation of employability theorised by CA. However employability and employability management need to be differentiated as the former represents the *achievements* and the latter indicates the *process of achieving*; moreover the differentiation highlights two tasks of related research:

exploring what influences people to be employable, and, in parallel, discussing how people make efforts to be employable. Both of these topics are worthy of further attention in research.

CA is a relatively new theory in the discourse of graduate employability. Walker and Fongwa, who are two of the most important researchers in the area of graduate employability in developing countries, adopting CA in a seven-country scoping study in 2011 on how to produce employable graduates in sub-Saharan Africa. A capabilities-based theoretical framework was used to investigate employability as understood by students and teachers; personal and social-university conversion factors impacting students' expansive employability; university practices to help cultivate graduate employability; and employers' expectations of graduates. Outcomes of this research (Walker and Fongwa, 2017) suggested that employment choices and graduate employability were operating under unfair educational and social conditions in the sub-Saharan Africa region, with various factors and stakeholders in relation to family background, historical hierarchy, university conditions, labour market and social arrangements affecting graduate employability. The large majority of South African university students understood graduate employability in the human capital way, regarding receiving higher education as "an immediate panacea" (ibid:106) which would save them from poverty and provide them with social mobility. The researchers therefore argued that, beyond promoting employability of students by providing opportunities for them to improve knowledge and skills, universities were ultimately responsible for what kind of person students will become (see also, Arthur, 2005).

In addition to Walker and Fongwa, a growing body of research (e.g., Flores-Crespo, 2007; Walker and Mclean, 2013) can be found discussing employment and employability issues through the lens of CA. Orton's (2011) work examined whether CA can offer a new angle through which to consider social policy on employment, work and welfare in the UK after the 2008-2009 economic downturn. The researcher argued it was not sufficient to focus on enhancing jobseekers' employability; policy makers also needed to think about how to build up an

inclusive social context which maximized employment opportunities and minimized the negative conversion factors preventing people from gaining their desired jobs (see also, Bonvin and Farvaque, 2006). Robertson (2015) analysed the commonalities between CA and other career theories in considering social identity, agency, self-realization, lifestyle and an individual's role in a wider economic, political and social circumstances. He suggested that, combined with lifespan development psychology, CA can be used as an effective framework for career conceptualization and career guidance. Sandri et al. (2018) explored the measurements of graduate sustainability capabilities in Australia, comparing the differences between assessing students' learning outcomes in terms of skills, competencies and capabilities, emphasizing the necessity for the capability measurement in terms of equipping graduates with capabilities to deal with sustainability challenges in their future careers. Flores-Crespo (2007) conducted a case study in a technological university in a relatively poor region of Mexico to investigate how HE influenced graduates' capabilities in terms of seven selected functionings (based on Sen's (1999) instrumental freedoms and Nussbaum's (1995) central capabilities). The results suggested that the university positively contributed to enlarging graduates' capabilities to realize functionings relating to employment and beyond. On the other hand, the research also showed that a further expansion of students' capabilities in terms of employment and employability was constrained by insufficient economic, social and educational resources and faculties.

A few researchers have attempted to adopt CA in their research projects on graduate employability, but this theory is still relatively marginal in this area. Current discourse in evaluating graduate employability is almost entirely dominated by a skills/competencies approach, with several associated theoretical frameworks established (e.g., Fugate et al., 2004; Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). These frameworks are of great value in standardizing how student performance is examined, but have their limitations due to their focus on further achievements (functionings) rather than opportunities (capabilities) in terms of the graduates' EM. Comparing the competencies approach and CA, I now explore the

differences and connections between these two theories, and how CA can complement the shortcomings of the competencies approach.

The competencies approach and CA have a similar objective with regard to HE. The competencies approach indicates that HE aims to build up “a successful life and well-functioning society” (Rychen and Salganik, 2003:3). CA holds that HE ought to cultivate human beings “for the functions of citizenship and life generally” (Nussbaum, 1997: 9). Both statements recognize that HE needs to take wider responsibilities beyond an economic-utilitarian dimension, including a concern for building a society with justice and efficiency. In addition, both approaches acknowledge that an ideal personal life is constituted by multidimensional elements. The DeSeCo<sup>15</sup> project, in adopting the competencies approach, proposed eight dimensions relating to the quality of life including the economic, political, intellectual, infrastructural, physical, social, cultural and spiritual (Rychen and Salganik, 2003). Similarly, CA holds that a decent life enables a broad range of substantial freedoms available to individuals. Based on the arguments made by these two approaches to HE, successful personal life, and decent human society, it is reasonable to deduce that they have a similar basic view on advancing graduate employability, that is, to comprehensively cultivate students so that they can lead desired personal lives and also positively contribute to a well-functioning society.

On the other hand, there are some significant differences between the competencies approach and CA in terms of graduate employability issues. Generally speaking, the competences approach follows “an instrumental logic”, while CA has “an essentialist logic” (Lozano et al., 2012). Specifically, competences refer to one’s “ability to successfully meet complex demands in a particular context through the mobilization of psychosocial prerequisites” (Rychen and Salganik, 2003:43). Competences embracing knowledge, abilities and predispositions, are directed at the outcomes (similar to functionings) achieved by one’s actions or options. Moreover, competences are oriented towards solving problems that arise from

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<sup>15</sup> DeSeCo: Definition and Selection of Competencies.

outside, requiring people to master desired skills to correspond to external demands. Therefore, when the competencies approach is applied to examine graduate employability, it pays more attention to what achievements are appropriate to HE graduates, so that they can better meet the demands of specific employers and the entire labour market. Capabilities approach does not stress the *outcomes* of one's behaviour but instead from on whether a person has sufficient *freedoms and opportunities* to choose what she/he wants to achieve. Capabilities hence respond to people's internal demands to opt for certain functionings rather than others. So, by adopting CA for graduate employability research, researchers expect to focus more on how HEIs can facilitate their graduates to access more freedoms and possibilities to achieve the functionings they value, and how graduates' agency can be empowered to the greatest extent possible in terms of acquiring more capabilities.

From another perspective, assessing graduate employability following a competencies approach completely situates the responsibility of employability enhancement on the supply side. CA, however, involves a collective logic for social arrangements beyond the hope for people to improve knowledge and skills by themselves, emphasizing the political and socio-economic duties for policy makers to remove barriers that may damage people's freedoms for employment choices and maintenance, requiring society to build a healthy context for its potential labour market participants (Zimmerman, 2006).

Considering the differences between these two theories, it is clear to see that the competencies approach is geared towards tackling specific problems resulting from specific demands, whilst CA is concerned with how individuals, in their own circumstances, can lead lives that they have reason to value. Arguably, compared to the skills/competencies approach, CA provides broader and more holistic dimensions to understanding the interaction between HE and graduate employability in terms of the conceptualization of employability, policy making and measurement.

### 3.5. CA in Chinese contexts

Although it is a relatively new theory, the influence of CA has become widespread around the world. CA, on a relatively small scale, has been adopted by a number of Chinese researchers or for research into Chinese issues. Theoretical investigators have introduced CA to Chinese academia in various ways, for example by articulating the nature of CA (Wang, 2006), comparing it to neo-classical thought (Hu, 2010), and particularly by explicating related concepts such as freedoms (Deng, 2014), justice (Wang, 2014), equality (Fan, 2015), and ethics (Hu, 2006). The common shortcoming of these theoretical works is that nearly all writers focus merely on Sen's arguments, whilst very few (Wang, 2006; Dong, 2017) involve the wider range of insights that other important scholars have injected into CA.

More researchers have tried to use CA to explore problems in Chinese society and to seek the associated feasible solutions. Poverty issues have been the focus of most such research. For example, Yang and Zhang (2016) reviewed the CA-informed poverty alleviation policies in 15 countries in Latin America, and determined certain implications for tackling poverty problems in China. Zhang (2011) combined CA and happiness theory to investigate the wellbeing of peasant-workers in China, revealing a positive correlation between their happiness and capabilities. While many researchers have focused on people from rural areas (e.g., Shen, 2017, Wei, 2016), Liu (2013) noted that poverty issues also exist in urban areas of China, and suggested improving the social welfare security system under the guidance of CA on a national scale. In agreement with Liu, a few researchers (Yang and Song, 2012; Wu and Wang, 2016), as guided by CA, made empirical contributions to the measurement of social welfare conditions in China.

Education is considered as one of the vital solutions to poverty in accordance with CA (Alkire, 2013). Liu (2017) explored the correlation between social factors and poverty levels from a capabilities perspective, providing suggestions taken from education, employment and public health services for poverty alleviation in China. Wang (2014) focused on university students in poverty, arguing that the substance of poverty is the deprivation of one's capabilities rather than merely barriers to

income. Seeberg (2011) conducted an ethnographic study among 58 Chinese women resident in the mountain districts, finding that receiving an education enhanced these Chinese rural women's capabilities of self-expression, self-confidence, imagination and rational thinking to make strategic life choices.

CA also inspires Chinese researchers to consider how to improve vocational education and graduate employment. Qin et al. (2017) revealed that, compared to competency-based education that aims to meet the requirements of the labour market, capabilities-based education emphasizes both intrinsic and instrumental values of knowledge and skills, encourages students' agency development in learning and enables them to achieve the real freedom to choose what they value doing and being. Guo (2015) notes that the majority of research on graduate employment in China is focused on employment rates, but neglects employment quality. Addressing this gap, she conducted a CA-informed quantitative study (n = 4,035) in order to assess the employment quality of Chinese graduates, in terms of job satisfaction, occupational health and capabilities (whether the job benefited their expected lifestyle). The results showed that the employment quality of over half of graduates was low, which means their employment conditions to various extents negatively impacted their wellbeing. Fang and Li (2012), who also explored graduate employment issues, discovered the value of CA by considering employment issues from a human-oriented angle instead of the mere increase of GDP or GNP, providing suggestions for the formulation of an employment protection system for Chinese university students.

Numerous attempts have been made by researchers to adopt CA to theorize their research on Chinese issues. However, limitations can be found in their application of CA. First, researchers tend to use the singular form "capability approach" rather than the plural form "capabilities approach", which reflects an inadequate understanding of the plurality of capabilities that people should possess. Second, the interpretations of CA made by these researchers overwhelmingly depend on Sen's earlier statements, which reflects the fact that they do not have access to the comprehensive discourse which has been enriched by many other capabilities

theorists. Third, the scope of application of CA in Chinese contexts is still limited. For a developing country with numerous social problems that desperately need to be solved, CA has potential for more widespread application.

### 3.6. Application of CA in this thesis

This thesis focuses on how Chinese international students manage their employability while studying on a one-year Master's course in the UK. I have adopted CA to discuss the connections between international HE, graduate employability and human development for the following five reasons.

First, CA provides a broader conceptualization of graduate employability. Graduate employability is not merely linked to which skills are important in order for graduates to be employable, how long it takes for graduates to get jobs after graduation, or how much income they can earn. Rather, graduate employability from a CA perspective is associated with how many capabilities graduates have to develop skills and abilities for what they want to achieve, how many possibilities are provided for graduates to manage their employability in their desired way, and how many freedoms are available for graduates to choose the certain kinds of jobs they want to do and to lead work-life styles they have reason to value.

Employability, following a capabilities logic, is not solely oriented towards economic returns, but instead serves as an important part of human development and is closely related to one's life quality and wellbeing.

Second, CA centres human beings in the operation of HE and the development of graduate employability. HE is responsible for enlarging the capabilities of graduates to choose what they want to be or do, instead of solely directing them according to the demands from the labour market. Graduates have the right to decide how to manage their employability, based on their intrinsic desires rather than (or in addition to) external requirements. However, what needs to be noted is that CA does not serve as an individualistic framework placing self-actualization over all other issues (Walder and Unterhalter, 2007). By receiving HE, graduates can be

educated to make reasonable decisions regarding their life choices and connect their personal growth to national or even worldwide development.

Third, graduate employability, following a CA perspective, can be seen as a type of “combined capabilit[y]” (Nussbaum, 2011:21) which includes both personal and contextual factors. In this sense, graduate employability is no longer merely attributed to graduates themselves, but to their interactions with the contexts around them. Moreover, while being impacted by external factors, graduates’ internal capabilities may also change external factors. For example, a Chinese student’s freedom to choose the geographical destination of their future employment may be constrained, if their parents wish them to work in their home city, while the student is possibly able to change their parents’ minds by demonstrating an enhanced ability to live independently owing to studying abroad. It is worth exploring how graduate employability is shaped by the dynamic relationship between graduates’ internal capabilities and conversion factors.

Fourth, CA has predominantly been adopted to theorize research about vulnerable groups. Chinese international students, who are usually seen as an economically privileged group, are arguably vulnerable in relation to their overseas journey and employment issues. As shown in Chapter two, Chinese international students studying in the UK confront challenges including language proficiency, academic performance, culture shock, network issues, mental health, negative stereotyping and xenophobia. The negative impact made by these issues may affect both their wellbeing in their overseas lives, and their capabilities regarding future choices. So, this thesis is an attempt to apply CA to research a group that is traditionally recognized as privileged, to explore how their privileges were maintained, lost or recovered in a foreign context.

Fifth, although CA has been adopted by a certain number of researchers in the field of education, the majority of such research is at the regional and national level, with few concentrating on the increasingly international and transnational dimensions of HE. As a theory open to various contexts (Sen, 1993) and with a

universal orientation (Nussbaum, 2000), it is meaningful to see how CA can be applied to a study with international characteristics. This research contributes to addressing this gap.

In addition to theoretical considerations, adopting CA has also influenced my methodological design. To locate each person at the centre of their overseas lives and EM, this research is conducted on the basis of participants' self-reported data on their employability-related experiences. It is with an exploratory orientation and without prediction of what achievements the participants might be expected to reach. In other words, the purpose of this research is not to evaluate graduate employability as directed at demands of specific employers or particular labour markets, but to explore the extent to which internationalized HE benefits or harms the freedom of Chinese international students to realize their employability development. In the second place, CA does not exclude the concepts of human capital and personal competency. It regards them as the *means* instead of the *ends* of human development. Therefore, the terms knowledge, skills, abilities, capitals and personal traits, which may be easier for participants to understand, can still be used in the data collection. Finally, in order to explore the dynamic process by which internal capabilities and conversion factors shape each other and simultaneously influence participants' EM, this thesis avoided the cross-sectional design for data collection, making efforts to trace the entire overseas journey of the participants. More details about the methodological considerations of this research are presented in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four Methodology

### 4.1. Introduction

In chapters two and three, based on the empirical and theoretical review of existing research, I have identified a number of research gaps in the area of Chinese international students' employability, devised appropriate research questions, and discussed how CA fits into this research context. This chapter focuses on the methodology and methods employed by this research, articulating how they worked effectively in addressing the research questions and responding to the theoretical framework. Specifically, this chapter starts by discussing the philosophical position in understanding the nature of this research, followed by a discussion of the adaptation of the diary-interview methodology to this study. It then showcases the methods of sampling and data collection, with ethical considerations taken throughout the research process articulated. Afterwards, this chapter elaborates the process of data management and analysis and reflects on the reliability and validity of the findings achieved by this research. The chapter ends with a section discussing how the researcher's positionality and reflexivity impacted the research process.

### 4.2. Nature of this research

The purpose of this research was to explore how Chinese students managed their employability during their one-year course in the UK, paying particular attention to perceptions, experiences and impacting factors. This research adopted a qualitative approach, aiming to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study – managing employability during overseas studies – “from the interior” (Flick, 2009:65), on the basis of participants' perspectives and interpretations. As a qualitative study following a naturalistic and interpretative approach, this research investigated participants' EM practices in the “natural setting” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011:3) of their overseas lives over a relatively long period of time, trying to make sense of the association between EM and receiving HE abroad based on the meanings participants brought to it. This research, as such, went far beyond determining a snapshot of participants' employability-related behaviour or their

employment outcomes at specific points in time, and showcased how they managed their employability across time and contexts, and why they behaved in this particular manner. The “how” and “why” incorporated participants’ own “motivation, emotions, prejudices and incidents of interpersonal cooperation and conflict” (Gray, 2014:161) in addition to the experience itself.

The choice of research strategy reflects the philosophical position of a researcher regarding the nature of reality (social reality in particular for social sciences researchers) and knowledge production. Ontologically, the core debates are concerned with whether or not there is a reality “out there” independent from individuals (Marsh and Furlong, 2002:17) and, further, whether there is an absolute reality or a reality that can always be negotiated based on specific contexts. This research accords with constructivists, regarding reality as “fundamentally mind-dependent”, which means that reality never exists independently but relies on the “human mind” for its construction (Ormston et al., 2014:5). In its understanding of social reality, constructivism argues that social phenomena are constantly revised by social interactions whose meanings “are continually being accomplished by social actors” involved in specific social and cultural contexts (Bryman, 2012:33). According to this stance, for this study it was imperative to maintain a watchful eye on how people, as social actors, participate in social activities and contribute to the construction of social reality (Burr, 2015).

In terms of the epistemological stance, which concerns the ways in which people examine reality and form knowledge, this research is aligned with interpretivism, arguing that social reality cannot be grasped accurately, and knowledge is generated through exploring the meanings and interpretations that social actors attach to the social world (Ormston et al., 2014). Interpretivists hence suggest that principles and processes of research in social sciences are different from those of the natural sciences, emphasizing the significance for social research to capture the subjective meaning associated with social actions considering the differences between people (Bryman, 2016; Hammond and Wellington, 2013). Moreover, interpretivists (e.g., Ermarth, 1978; Mack, 2010; Prus, 1990) also stress the value of

social research in exploring individuals' lived experiences, so as to comprehensively picture the historical, social and cultural contexts in which particular actions occur.

This research on Chinese students' practices relating to EM in an internationalized HE setting, aims to enrich social knowledge in related areas by not only exhibiting the practices, per se, but also in illuminating the perceptive, interpretive and emotive stories that accompany these practices. Instead of creating a general picture of Chinese international students' EM, this research explores personal versions of this phenomenon, showing individual differences in both experiences and reflections on those experiences. Moreover, this research avoided isolating EM from participants' overseas experiences as a whole, but rather tried to understand how EM interweaves with other activities, and how participants from different social, (regionally) cultural and interpersonal backgrounds interpret receiving HE abroad, regarding EM in particular and as a whole.

#### 4.3. Diary-interview methodology

This research adopted the diary-interview methodology, which requires the participants, as proxy observers, to keep diaries relating to specific topics for a certain period of time, and to have discussions with the researcher in follow-up interviews to elaborate their entries (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The diaries referred to were solicited diaries, i.e. those created and then collected specifically for research purposes, which are different from the intimate diaries spontaneously generated by people for private purposes (Alaszewski, 2006; Bartlett and Milligan, 2015; Hyers, 2018). Pioneered by Zimmerman and Wieder (1977), "diary-interview" was more described as a method (e.g., Bartlett and Milligan, 2015; Hyers, 2018) rather than a methodology. It is understandable that having two specific means for data collection in the name, "diary-interview" appears to be a combined method. However, arguably, it should be understood as a methodology because it in essence contains the *rationale* for applying particular research methods, i.e. reaching research outcomes by understanding participants' written and oral accounts which reflect the perceptions and interpretations of their experiences. "Diary-interview",

as a methodology, provides a *framework* for data collection and analysis. According to the framework, researchers are required to further decide the types and formats of diaries and interviews to be used for data collection, as well as the suitable approach for data analysis. Furthermore, “diary-interview” is a methodology as it aligns with the philosophical underpinnings of constructivism and interpretivism, and implies a participatory element of a study.

Regarding this research, the decision to adopt a diary-interview methodology was based on careful considerations that combined the nature of research questions, features of this methodology, and the requirements of the theoretical framework. The research questions in this study, as presented in chapter two, reflect the fact that this research is focused on participants’ self-reflection on their motivations to and expectations of overseas education, self-reporting of their EM practices, and self-evaluation of factors impacting on their EM practices and results. Diary-interview methodology provides participants with space to express their own ideas in both a written and verbal manner, with the diary method in particular giving more control of data provision to participants (Mackrill, 2008). Moreover, this research, expected to trace the changes in participants’ employability-related experiences and perceptions at different stages of their overseas year. Diary-interview methodology exactly meets this requirement by: (i) asking participants to make real-time records (their diaries) at a time close to the occurrence of the events in question (Bolger et al., 1989), and (ii) enabling the researcher to work with the same group of people across time and across contexts (Milligan et al, 2005), so that the changes can be explored.

In addition, from a theoretical perspective, CA directs employability issues toward people’s life quality and wellbeing, considering EM a relational and contextual process. This research as such did not make employability an isolated topic, but explored how EM was positioned in the holistic lives of participants, how it interacted with other parts of participants’ overseas lives, how it was impacted by individual circumstances, and how it could work on participants’ future lives. Diary-interview methodology, diary method in particular, enabled the researcher to enter

into the everyday lives of participants that the researcher would have been otherwise unable to enter by other methods (Hyers, 2018), so that a wider range of data was reached. The follow-up interview, prompted by diary entries, helped the researcher go into more depth regarding how participants interpreted their EM practices and overall overseas journeys.

Diary-interview methodology has been considered as one of the most effective methodologies in social sciences research as its associated data collection methods complement and support each other (Williams, 2001). In the case of this study, a diary-interview methodology was applied in the form of “interview-diary-interview” during data collection. This will be explained in detail in section 4.4.2.

## 4.4. Methods

### 4.4.1. Sampling

The targeted population in this research was Chinese students who had completed their undergraduate studies in mainland China, and then were studying social sciences taught Master’s programmes in the UK. I focused on this cohort for three reasons. First, the one-year taught Master’s programme provided by UK universities are popular among Chinese students. As discussed in Chapter two, this type of course brings both advantages and disadvantages to Chinese students in terms of their EM and career development. It is worthwhile to explore in depth why Chinese students choose to study for this type of course and how their employability benefits from it. Second, compared to students in natural sciences, business, and engineering disciplines, Chinese international students in social sciences are underexplored in the existing research. Little is known about how these students understand and manage their employability during receiving HE overseas. This research aimed to make these students’ voices heard. Third, the population was limited to those who achieved a Bachelor’s degree from universities in mainland China, in order to avoid the influence of the length of the overseas period on the issues being researched. With regard to the development of international and transnational HE worldwide, students graduated from joint-venture universities in

China and those who had overseas study experience (for example, by participating in exchange programmes, internships, study tours) of less than one year during their undergraduate education, were included in the target population.

This study adopted non-probability sampling strategies to recruit participants who could provide rich, solid and profound data in relation to the issues being researched (Gray, 2014). The sampling process embraced two stages. In the first stage, criterion sampling and convenience sampling were combined to recruit the most easily accessible students who met the pre-determined criteria to participate in the research. The criteria included:

- a. Chinese citizen
- b. Completed undergraduate study in mainland China
- c. Being enrolled in taught Master's programmes in the 2017/18 academic year
- d. From the faculty of Social Sciences

Participants were recruited from one research-based university in England, considering the tight time frame for participant recruitment and longitudinal participant retention. The majority of students enrolled in taught Master's courses in the 2017/18 academic year did not arrive at universities until the end of September 2017, except for those studying for pre-course language sessions. The timeline of this research required the first-round interviews to be completed before November 2017 in order to leave enough time for the longitudinal diary research (to be further explained in section 4.4.2). It would have been very challenging to find participants in different universities across the UK within this tight time frame. In addition, as long-term diary keeping is known to trigger respondent fatigue and participant attrition (Dwyer et al., 2013; Eidse and Turner, 2014), this study targeted participants who were geographically accessible to the researcher during the entire research process, so that the researcher and participants could enhance rapport through face-to-face personal meetings, and participants could feel more included in the research by engaging in some activities shared by the researcher such as careers fairs with Chinese employers.

Participant recruitment started in July 2017. I posted a participant recruiting advertisement with my contact details on an online forum where Chinese (potential) international students in different countries share ideas and information. I was contacted by several students, but the majority of them asked questions about their target UK universities, and did not confirm any willingness to participate in my research, because they had not decided on their destination university. Only three students who had made a final choice of university confirmed that they would engage in the research. All were enrolled in pre-course language sessions for six to ten weeks before the start of the course.

From when the course registration began (at the end of September 2017), this research was advertised in multiple ways. Advertisements were posted on bulletin boards in the library, social sciences buildings, student union and student registration spots, with flyers distributed during orientation events. I also joined a *WeChat* (a widely used Chinese social media app) group for Chinese newcomers at that university, introducing the research and recruiting participants by message. However only two participants were recruited by these methods, probably because new students were busy with settling-in issues at that time.

A boost in participant numbers occurred during the orientation week (first week of October 2017). I gave a speech sharing my educational trajectories to new taught Master's students at a workshop where I was also allowed to advertise participant recruitment for my research. Many Chinese students contacted me after the workshop, with nine of them involved in the participant group. In order to access students in more departments, I asked for help from the administrative officers in five departments of the Social Sciences Faculty who mailed new Chinese taught Master's students about my research. This strategy proved effective, recruiting ten further participants. It is worth noting that these five departments did not cover all departments of the Social Sciences Faculty at the sampled university. Some departments intersecting social sciences with other areas (e.g., business and media)

were excluded, with the selected five authentically recognized solely as social sciences disciplines.

Having 24 participants already, the second stage of sampling further enlarged the sample group by adopting snowball sampling, which is a technique where the researcher asks recruited participants to invite other qualified people whom they know to join in the research (Bryman, 2016). Snowball sampling was suitable for this research, since it was easier for the recruited participants to access other potential participants among their classmates and/or neighbours. Owing to the help of recruited participants, another nine students were introduced to the researcher and all of them joined the research.

This research eventually recruited 33 participants, with one withdrawing from the research midway (see the demographics of the 32 participants in Table 4.1). For in-depth, qualitative research, there is no unanimous criterion for sample size. In general, the sample size is suggested not to be too small to “achieve data saturation, theoretical saturation, or informational redundancy” or too large to “undertake a deep, case-oriented analysis” (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007:289). This research, had a target sample size of 20 to 25. The number of recruited participants was greater than anticipated, but none of them were excluded in case of participant attrition. Among the 32 participants who completed the data provision, 25 were from the 20-25 age group, with five from 25-30, one from 30-35 and one from 35-40. The sample group did not show an equal gender balance (30 females and 3 males) due to the gender structure of students in social sciences.

Code	Gender	Age group	Origin of region <sup>16</sup>	First degree institution <sup>17</sup>	Full-time work experience (years)
P1	Woman	30-35	Northwest	other	5
P2	Woman	20-25	East (CAM <sup>18</sup> )	other	0
P3	Woman	25-30	South (SAR <sup>19</sup> )	other	3
P4	Woman	20-25	North	'211'	0
P5	Woman	20-25	Southwest (CAM)	'985' '211'	1
P6	Woman	20-25	South	Sino-foreign	2
P7	Woman	20-25	Northeast	Sino-foreign	0
P8	Woman	20-25	Northeast	other	0
P9	Woman	20-25	East	other	1
P10	Woman	20-25	Southwest (CAM)	'985' '211'	0
P11	Woman	20-25	North	other	0
P12	Woman	20-25	East	other	0
P13	Woman	20-25	East	'985' '211'	0
P14	Woman	20-25	North	'211'	0
P15	Man	20-25	East	other	0
P16	Woman	20-25	North	'985' '211'	0
P17	Woman	25-30	East	other	3
P18	Woman	20-25	East	'985' '211'	2
P19	Woman	20-25	East	'985' '211'	0
P20	Woman	20-25	Northeast	other	0
P21	Woman	20-25	Southwest	other	0
P22	Woman	20-25	Northwest	'985' '211'	1
P23	Woman	25-30	South	other	2
P24	Woman	35-40	North	'211'	10
P25	Man	25-30	North	other	3
P26	Woman	20-25	South	other	0
P27	Woman	20-25	Central	'985' '211'	0
P28	Woman	20-25	North	'985' '211'	0
P29	Woman	20-25	Central	other	0
P30	Woman	20-25	East	other	1
P31	Man	25-30	Northeast	'985' '211'	3
P32	Woman	20-25	South	Sino-foreign	0

Table 4.1. Demographics of participants

<sup>16</sup> China is geographically divided into Northeast (3 province-level regions), North (5 province-level regions), Central (3 province-level regions), East (8 province-level regions), South (5 province-level regions), Northwest (5 province-level regions) and Southwest (5 province-level regions).

<sup>17</sup> The first degree institutions of participants were categorised into universities sponsor by '985' project (39 top-tier universities in China), universities sponsor by '211' (100 high-quality universities in China), Sino-foreign universities and other universities.

<sup>18</sup> CAM: centrally-administered municipality. China has four centrally-administered municipalities – Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing.

<sup>19</sup> SAR: special administrative region. China has two special administrative regions – Hongkong and Macau.

#### 4.4.2. Data collection

Guided by the diary-interview methodology, semi-structured interviews and solicited diaries were adopted to collect data. Following pre-research meetings, the data collection for this research was conducted in three stages: first-round interviews, nine-month diary research, and second-round interviews.

##### Pre-research meetings

As the data collection for this research continued throughout the academic year, and diary keeping required high commitment from participants, it was necessary to establish researcher-participant rapport. Before the first round of interviews, I tried to arrange one-to-one face-to-face meetings with each participant to welcome their participation and gain mutual familiarity in order to relieve their concerns. More importantly, the meetings enabled me to introduce the research in more detail and confirm their understanding of the diary task. It was not surprising that many participants asked about the exact meaning of employability. I, however, held myself back from explaining it, but encouraged participants to define it in the first-round interview, based on their personal understanding. In terms of the diary research, I emphasized the benefits of keeping employability diaries in reflecting one's performance and preparing for job hunting, in order to inspire participants' motivation to complete this task. Due to the time limitation, eight participants recruited late did not have a pre-research meeting with me, but each of them were given a half-hour warm-up chat before the first-round interviews.

##### First-round interviews

The first-round interview was mainly directed towards addressing the first sub-question: what are the participants' initial motivations for studying abroad, and what are their expectations from receiving HE abroad in terms of employability enhancement? It also explored participants' demographics, family background, and previous experiences, which were useful for discussing the third sub-question: what factors would impact participants' EM?

Slightly modified by the pilot study (as further presented in the section *Solicited Diaries*), a schedule (see appendix 1) containing six question groups was used to guide the first-round semi-structured interviews. It started with inquiries about demographic information, including name, date of birth, hometown, first degree institution, discipline of first degree, course currently undertaking, and gap year(s). Following that, the family background topic asked questions about parents' occupations and educational background, family structure, methods of funding, family financial condition, and parents' attitudes to participants studying abroad. Afterwards, the interview continued by talking about participants' previous experiences, with a focus on overseas experiences and work experience. The fourth question group was relevant to participants' motivations for studying in the UK. Every participant reported how they decided to receive HE abroad and how they chose the destination country, university and course. Based on that, further discussion explored, who had been involved in the decision-making process for example, and why some participants chose a different course subject from that of their undergraduate studies. The fifth topic inquired as to participants' experiences of the first few month(s) (without or with pre-session language sessions) in the UK. Conversations mainly focused on how satisfied they were with their overseas lives so far and what the main difficulties they had met were. The last topic was about participants' expectations with regard to their employability development by receiving HE abroad. Participants reported their career plans and understanding of employability at that moment. Based on that, they further talked about how they thought the overseas experience would or would not benefit their employability, what specific employability skills they expected to develop and how they would like to achieve these developments. These six topics were discussed in each interview, but specific questions were changed, added or skipped according to each participant's circumstances. Before the end of each interview, the researcher explained how employability was broadly interpreted by this research and discussed the differences between participant's and researcher's understanding of employability. Articulating the meaning of employability to participants before diary research was suggested by a participant in the pilot study. I adopted this suggestion, but did not do so until participants' own perceptions of employability

had been sufficiently expressed in order to facilitate participants' input into the conceptualization of employability. Each interview ended with an introduction to using recording forms to produce diary data.

Scheduling the one-to-one face-to-face interviews, participants were given the choice to conduct these on campus (27/33) or in their accommodation (6/33). The majority (22/27) of interviews on campus were conducted in meeting rooms for postgraduates, with a few (5/27) in my study room due to the unavailability of meeting rooms. In terms of time, participants who had attended pre-research meetings were given slots of one-and-a-half hours, and those who had not attended pre-research meetings were given slots of two hours to encompass the introductory conversation. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, as preferred by participants. As permitted by the participants, all interviews were audio recorded.

### Solicited diaries

The diary research was mainly targeted at the second sub-question: what practices were undertaken by participants to manage their employability while studying in the UK, with the "impacting factors", the focus of the third sub-question, also partly covered within the diary data. The diary method is underutilized in HE research, and there is a dearth of methodologically-oriented literature on this method (Bartlett and Milligan, 2015; Hyers, 2018). The researcher therefore conducted two rounds of pilot study to improve the methodological rigour of this research.

Solicited diaries adopted by this research were semi-structured, with a recording form in Microsoft Word designed to help with the participants' diary keeping. The first pilot round was specifically for improving the recording form. I invited one of my PhD colleagues to use the first version of the form (see appendix 2) to record her employability-related experiences for two weeks, and also kept diaries myself for two-and-a-half. In the post-pilot meeting, my colleague suggested the form be changed from weekly-use to daily-use in order to make it more structured, and the

prompts shown on the form be clearer and more directly connected to the research questions.

Based on these suggestions, the new recording form (see appendix 3) was revised to a weekly format designed for daily use. For each day, four main items were recorded. Firstly, participants described their employability-related experiences. These experiences were categorized into “daily lives”, “curriculum learning”, “extra-curriculum activities” and “others”, in order to remind participants to link EM to various aspects of their experiences. Then participants reflected on who created the opportunities for them to gain these experiences. This question explored the other people engaging in participants’ EM. The third item discussed the gains from the described experiences. Again, the gains were specified as “professional skills”, “generic skills”, “personal attributes”, “employment-specific skills” and “others”. By classifying these different clusters, it was possible to reveal differences between participants, which in turn reflected the personal values and circumstances of different participants. Participants then reflected on how these skills/abilities would benefit their employability. At the end of the form, a “summary of this week” section was included for recording ongoing, regular employability-related actions (e.g., collecting employment information). Participants could also use this section to generally comment on their EM in the week and report notable EM-related events in the non-diary weeks. The semi-structured form left sufficient flexibility for participants to describe and discuss the holistic picture of their employability-related experiences. Therefore, the design of recording form was aligned with a CA-informed understanding of employability as a combined capability, and EM as a contextual phenomenon.

The diary research was conducted for nine months from November 2017 to July 2018. For each month, one week was chosen as the diary week (usually the third week where possible). This design was finalized after the second round pilot study, which was conducted with three Chinese taught Master’s degree students in social sciences in the 2016/17 academic year at the sampled university, with each of them participating in the first-round interview and then keeping diaries for four weeks.

Based on the results of this pilot and participants' feedback, no significant revisions were felt necessary for the interview method design, except for the addition of some further questions (e.g. are you the only child in your family?). However, for the diary method, a significant change was made for the frequency of diary recording. All pilot participants reported that it would be impossible to persist in keeping diaries every day for a whole academic year. Moreover, there was repetitive information in these pilot study diaries. Considering the longitudinal nature of this research, I finally decided to require the diary recording for one full week of each month. The maintained total length of time for the diary research ensured that participants' experiences could still be traced longitudinally, while the reduced frequency of diary entries occupied less of the participants' time. Furthermore, participants were not required to write entries every day, but rather they generated a record when each EM experience took place in the given week. Both Chinese and English were accepted for the diaries.

The recording form was sent and collected by email. I sent the recording form to each participant separately on the Sunday prior to each diary week, and informed them on WeChat in case of a problem with the email or the internet. Alongside the recording form, participants also received a sample entry (see also Bartlett, 2012) which demonstrated the format of diary keeping in the recording form. Although providing sample entries has been criticized for perceived intervention in participants' diary-keeping (e.g., Kenten, 2010), this strategy was suggested by pilot participants to guide participants on the use of the recording form. Participants were asked to return the completed diaries on the Sunday of each diary week, and the researcher reminded participants of the importance of creating diary entries close to relevant events and submitting entries on time. However, delays still sometimes occurred for reasons such as being busy with the exam preparation, travelling, and laptop breakdown.

The design of the sampled diary week enabled me to read participants' entries in non-diary weeks, so that I could familiarize myself with the data as it was collected, and discover any issues (regarding format, not content) with participants' diary

keeping. I interacted with participants by offering feedback (see also Boz and Okumus, 2017; Monrouxe, 2009; Travers, 2011) based on their entries (which was also suggested by pilot participants). Some feedback was relatively formal regarding their use of the recording form (especially in the first diary week), while some was informal, for instance when they mentioned experiences that interested me. Before the final diary week, I sent a file containing the first eight diary entries to each participant, so they could look back to what they had written and give some reflections on entries for the last diary week. This diary study was highly successful in terms of participant retention, with only one participant leaving the study after the first diary week (without giving a reason). All other 32 diarists persisted in the diary keeping for nine months, providing 288 (32x9) completed diary entries in total.

### Second-round interviews

Following the diary study, the second round of interviews was conducted with the 32 participants who were still involved in the research. These interviews were important for three reasons. First, participants were given opportunities to review their studying abroad experiences and to evaluate the extent to which their expectations had been realized. Second, diary data could be discussed with participants to clarify any context which had not been clearly described, to further explore notable issues recorded in diary entries, and to acquire any significant information missed from the diary entries in non-diary weeks. Third, data collected by two methods could explain and complement each other, so that the trustworthiness of this research could be improved.

Before the second round of interviews, I printed out each participant's diary entries, reading them through and making notes alongside the recordings. As the follow-up to the diary study, questions for each participant in the second-round interview were highly individualized. However, in general, four core topics were discussed (see the schedule in appendix 4). We started with participants' general satisfaction with their overseas lives. Participants were asked to evaluate their experiences relating to course learning, social activities, travel, friendship,

relationships and any other issues worth mentioning. Speaking to the first research question, participants then evaluated whether and how their expectations of studying abroad had been fulfilled. Afterwards, they further shared the most important and indeed unexpected achievements they had made during this year. Following a general evaluation, the conversations considered participants' employability-specific experiences in depth, as based on their diary entries. Prompted by the researcher's notes on the diary data, participants reviewed significant events/moments related to their EM, shared ideas about which aspects of employability had been developed in this year and which had not, and reflected on how their teachers, course mates, roommates, friends, parents, partners, employers and other important people had positively or negatively engaged in their EM. Many implications about how participants' EM, as shaped by their individual circumstances, were contained in these conversations, which contributed to the exploration of the third research question. The third topic focused on participants' current job-hunting processes, their updated plan for their career and their understanding of employability. Again, questions relating to these topics were personalized, as participants were at different stages of seeking employment at that time. In general, we mainly talked about whether there had been any changes to their career plans, and if any why this had happened. We also discussed the Chinese labour market for international graduates, including its preferential policies, competition, starting salary and "*guanxi*". Moreover, participants shared what they most valued when choosing an employer, and what personal factors may be influencing their choice of employment. In addition to the three topics closely connected to the research questions, the final part of interview enquired as to participants' behaviour and feelings regarding their participation in the diary research. These discussions enabled me to better understand the context in which participants had generated diary data, and the extent to which the quality of diary data was impacted by participants' diary-keeping behaviour.

All interviews (one-and-a-half hours each) were successfully conducted during August-September 2018. 24 out of 32 interviews were conducted face-to-face, with four in participants' accommodation and others in meeting rooms on campus. Eight

participants were interviewed online because they had returned to China before the scheduled interview time. The online interviews were conducted on “Zoom”<sup>20</sup>, which is easy to operate and allows screen sharing and video recording. I asked participants to review their diary entries before the second-round interview. For participants interviewed face-to-face, I brought printed entries to the interviews so that we could easily reference the entries while discussing related issues. For participants interviewed online, we used the screen sharing function to support the interviews. Permitted by participants, face-to-face interviews were audio recorded, and online interviews were video recorded using the appropriate functions in Zoom.

#### 4.5. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations should be at the core of any research that embraces data collection from people (or animals) throughout the entire research process (Gray, 2014). Ethical research requires not only that potential ethical risks be anticipated, but also that there is an appropriate response to unexpected ethical issues (Webster, et al., 2014). This research therefore was subject to careful ethical consideration from the early design phase, paying particular attention to ethical principles surrounding voluntary participation, informed consent, right to withdraw, confidentiality and data protection. Moreover, the researcher kept a sensitive eye on ethical issues that arose whilst working with the participants, in order to protect them from harm due to their participation in the research.

##### 4.5.1. Voluntary and informed consent

Participants voluntarily made the choice to join this study. In the pre-diary meetings, participants were informed of the research topic, research purpose, target participants, research instruments and data collection process. I gained participants’ oral consent to participate in this research during these meetings. The participant information sheet (see appendix 5) and participant consent form (see appendix 6), as approved by the Centre for Education Studies, University of

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<sup>20</sup> Zoom: a reliable cloud platform for video communications.

Warwick ethical approval process, were read and signed by each participant prior to data collection. Before each interview, the participant was clearly informed that she/he had the right not to answer questions they considered unacceptable. Each face-to-face interview, when permitted by participants, was audio recorded. For online interviews, video recordings were made with participants' permission. In terms of the diary research, owing to the inherent characteristic that control over data is partly decided by the diarists (Hyers, 2018), participants could decide the content, length and intimacy of the data they provided. In terms of the right to withdraw, participants were always assured that they could withdraw from the research at any stage for any or even no reason, and if they did so that all the data they had provided up to that point would be destroyed immediately.

#### 4.5.2. Privacy and confidentiality

Participants were informed at the beginning, and it was reaffirmed on occasion throughout the research, that all data collected from interviews and diaries would be used with the strict assurance of anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for transcripts, diaries, thesis, publications and any other instances where data were stored or referred to. The name of the university and departments that participants came from were anonymized.

In terms of the data security, recordings and transcripts of interviews and diaries were securely stored, with the printed version stored in a locked location and the electronic version password-protected and stored on a safe server. I was the only person who could access the original data; my supervisors accessed some anonymized data that I shared with them for guidance. Participants were assured that all information gathered from them would not be used for any other purposes except for the research.

#### 4.5.3. Ethical issues specific to this research

Considering the sensitivity of the research topic and target population, this research is a low-risk project which was not anticipated to trigger serious ethical concerns.

However, during the research process, some unexpected ethical issues occurred. The researcher dealt with them as appropriate and ensured that participants' rights and wellbeing were protected at all times.

Participants in this research were from the same university, with some knowing each other, especially those from the two departments contributing the largest number of participants. As suggested by Malone (2003), protecting the identity of the participants within the local setting can be one of the largest challenges for qualitative researchers. In presenting research findings, I used ambiguous descriptions when demographic information needed to be mentioned in data presentation and discussion, e.g., a southeast province of China, and entirely removed information that it was felt could reveal the identity of a participant.

Secondly, as the research progressed, some participants gradually exposed increasingly intimate information to the researcher via both diaries and informal conversations. I was conscious of distinguishing between the data participants officially provided for the research and the stories they shared with me personally. When intimacy concerns occurred during the data analysis, I double-checked with them to ensure that they were happy with the data being presented as part of the research findings.

Thirdly, many participants asked emotional support from me, especially in the early stages of data collection, which was also the initial period of participants' overseas lives. Since all of my participants had no or very limited previous overseas experience, connecting with me, an experienced senior who shared the same nationality with them, gave them a sense of security in an unfamiliar environment. I often received "seek for help" messages or phone calls from my participants, talking about their disorientation with regard to academic learning, loneliness, and homesickness. This situation was considered as an ethical issue, as it is risky for both participants and the researcher when participants rely on the researcher's emotional support with psychological problems. Responding to this, I on the one hand lent these participants a listening ear and provided support where possible;

on the other hand, I reminded these participants to keep a watchful eye on their mental health and suggested they to seek professional help if they felt they were at risk.

Another issue that occurred during this research was that one of participants mentioned in a personal meeting with me that he sometimes prioritized the diary above his assignments when the diary week coincided with a deadline. This was something of an ethical problem, in that participation in the research may potentially negatively influenced participants' studies. I expressed my appreciation to the participant about his dedication to providing the data, but strongly suggested he prioritize his academic tasks over the diary without hesitation if he was on a tight schedule.

Ethical considerations of this research were mainly guided by the ESRC (2015) core ethical principles and BERA (2019) ethical guidelines. Based on the real context and participant circumstances, this research intentionally protected the dignity, rights, safety and wellbeing of each participant.

#### 4.6. Data analysis

Collecting data by interview-diary-interview method, this research required the data from first-round interviews and diaries to be managed and initially analysed to determine further questions for use in guiding the second-round interviews. Therefore, data analysis was carried out throughout the research rather than just at the conclusion of data collection, albeit that a more in-depth and systematic analysis of the entire dataset was conducted after the data collection had been completed. Considering the nature of research questions, I used three approaches to analyse my data: thematic, CA-informed, and narrative analyses.

To explore the first sub-question about participants' motivations for studying abroad and expectations regarding employability enhancement, I conducted a thematic analysis of the data from the first-round interviews. As a theoretically-

flexible method (Ryan and Bernard, 2000) for qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis was adopted by this research for its ability to capture key features of a large dataset and provide a “thick description” of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006:97). All recorded first-round interviews were transcribed by *iflyrec*<sup>21</sup>. The coding process included listening to the voice recording of each interview with the software-aided transcription in hand. Rather than a mechanical act of converting verbal texts into written form (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999), this step allowed me to familiarize myself with the data (Riessman, 1993) while proofreading transcriptions, which was also the starting phase of the data interpretation (Bird, 2005). Following that, I read each proofread version of the transcription again, highlighting important remarks and taking notes about the key words in a separate file. Moreover, relevant thoughts relating to the meanings of the data were also recorded during this phase. The highlighted remarks and keywords were then marked in four different colours in accordance with the three sub-questions that the first research question had been categorized into during the interview, i.e., (i) Why study abroad? (ii) How is employability understood? (iii) What aspects of employability enhancement were expected? Codes were achieved by managing the keywords, and unifying keywords indicating the same phenomenon or similar ideas. During this phase, I intentionally maintained important “surrounding data” (Gary, 2014:610) to avoid loss of context. Afterwards, I reviewed the codes relating to each sub-question and generated a thematic map of code clusters. In addition to letting the themes emerge from the data, I reviewed them by examining how the identified themes fitted into or deviated from the conceptual and theoretical understanding of motivation and employability, which were discussed in chapter two and three. The themes were then finalized.

Regarding the second and third sub-questions on participants’ EM and its impacting factors, I made sense of the diary data and the second-round interview data through the lens of CA’s theoretical perspective, which is a method referred to by Jackson and Mazzei (2012:717) as “thinking with theory”. In other words, I explored

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<sup>21</sup> Iflyrec: a reliable platform for transcribing in Chinese.

how participants' EM experiences converged on the key concepts of CA (i.e., capabilities, functionings, conversion factors and agency) and, more importantly, how these data reflected the central tenets of CA related to human freedom, development and wellbeing. As introduced in section 4.4.2, participants kept diaries only in the sample diary week of each month, with non-diary weeks enabling me to read participants' entries. Put another way, I monitored how the data interacted with the adopted theory throughout the diary research process. In contrast to the first sub-question exploring participants' previous ideas which could be concluded into stable themes, the second and third sub-questions focused on dynamic processes and emerging factors, which required a data analysis approach with the ability to highlight nuances, tensions and dissonances among data, not only across participants but also across time and contexts. "Thinking with theory" suggested an analytical process, which exactly fitted with the longitudinal nature of this study.

Specifying my practices of performing data analysis via "thinking with theory", I first "plugged into" (ibid:726) my entire dataset (i.e., transcripts for two interview rounds and diary entries) to see how my data might connect with the key concepts of CA. For example, what opportunities (capabilities) were available for participants to manage their employability, what gains (functionings) were achieved by their EM, what conversion factors impacted participants ability to convert opportunities into real gains, and how did their agency work on EM. As CA is a flexible theory without a closed framework, "plugging into" my data was conducted through discussing how the principles of CA were indicated by the data. I paid particular attention to exploring whether participants had freedom to choose ways to perform EM, how employability-related experiences impacted the wellbeing of participants, and how employability was connected to participants' broader development. "Thinking with theory" enabled me to continually foreground the theoretical framework during data analysis. The findings of this research were, as such, able to show a participant-centred picture (emphasized by CA) about their EM as carried out in both generic and specialized ways, considering their shared identity as Chinese international students and unique individuals.

While thematic analysis and CA-informed analysis almost achieved the goal of answering all research questions, I conducted the third-round data analysis using narrative analysis method, in order to integrate all sub-topics focused on by this research and showcase how they were interwoven in the selected participants' life stories. Narratives are considered to contain "wider accounts of social life that are drawn upon to tell a story" (Wong and Breheny, 2018). Narrative analysis is therefore argued to place more weight on "how do people make sense of what happened?" to "what actually happened?" (Bryman, 2016:589; see also, Bamberg, 2012). The idea of performing narrative analysis arose at a moment during the diary research process when I had read a certain number of entries and was impressed by some of the participants' narratives. Reviewing the demographic information and previous experiences of those participants, I started to understand from where their unique stories of EM (and beyond) were derived. As such, I realized that it was worthwhile analysing some the participants' stories in a longitudinal dimension, in addition to the horizontal comparison between different participants. The potential of this idea was confirmed after the second-round interviews, when participants interpreted the recorded EM practices by describing their previous experiences, goals they wanted to achieve by receiving HE abroad, personal circumstances and plans for their future lives.

I reviewed the notes that I had made for each participant when performing the thematic and CA-informed analysis, and selected four participants whose identities, previous experiences and EM stories were the most intriguing. These four participants were finally chosen also because the connection between their EM and personal circumstances was narrated by participants themselves. Narrative analysis demonstrated these participants' perceptions of how their EM was conducted whilst receiving HE abroad in their specific situations; meanwhile, it illuminated the key factors in common that impacted participants' EM and career choices. The selected four participants were different in some ways compared to the "typical Chinese international students". Telling their stories, this research addressed an imperative to avoid grouping international students by nationality (Montgomery and Nada, 2019) and to "dehomogenize" Chinese international students, exploring

the very different processes behind the seemingly similar choices they have made. The adopting of narrative analysis was in line with the philosophical stance of this research, constructing the knowledge of Chinese students' EM during studying abroad by capturing how the real actors of this social phenomenon interpreted their experiences. Also, the narrative analysis was guided by the tenets of CA, paying particular attention to how each participant exercised EM to pursue personal development and wellbeing, and how the freedom of choice was shaped by different conversion factors in each participant's context.

Data analysis of this research was not a linear but rather an iterative process alongside the data collection. All the data were analysed in the language they were provided (the majority in Chinese, though with six participants' diary entries in English). However, I translated two participants' first-round interview transcripts and diary entries into English for discussion with my supervisors in order to create a guideline for the second-round interviews. Also, to discuss the data analysis methods with my supervisors, another two participants' entire datasets were translated into English and then analysed by the adopted three approaches.

#### 4.7. Reliability and validity of this research

Whether reliability is worthwhile to discuss in qualitative research is a controversial subject, considering that reliability concerns the replicability of research outcomes, while qualitative studies are dynamic and cannot be replicated (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). This research, from a constructivist perspective, asserts that there is no single social reality to be captured and then repeatedly tested (Marshall and Tossman, 1999), but that it is possible to discuss the reliability of a qualitative study regarding how the research process has "led to a particular set of conclusions" (Seale, 1999:158), what "collective nature of the phenomena" might be replicable, and how "context-bound" or "time-bound" factors might impact the replication (Lewis et al., 2014:356). In terms of the validity referring to the "correctness" or "precision" of research (ibid), some qualitative researchers (e.g., Silverman, 1972; Guba and Lincoln, 1994) radically reject these criteria as conceived in the

quantitative tradition. Nonetheless, others (e.g., Altheide and Johnson, 2011; Seale, 2012) suggest the possibility of examining the validity of qualitative research using the notions of internal validity: “the correspondence between researchers’ observations and the theoretical ideas they develop” (Bryman, 2016:384) and external validity: “the degree to which the findings in one study are generalizable to other contexts” (Hammond and Wellington, 2013:151). Putting reliability and validity together, they essentially concern whether research findings are well-founded and can be transferable to broader or other research contexts.

In the case of this research, as presented above, data collection methods were chosen in alignment with the exploratory and explanatory nature of the research questions and the philosophical, theoretical and methodological position the study adopted. Two rounds of pilot study were conducted to improve the research design, not only in terms of the data collection tools but also in the ways the researcher cooperated with participants. Moreover, pre-research meetings helped with participants’ understanding of the nature and process of the research, enabling them to produce data for the research in an appropriate way. Regarding sampling, although this research only recruited participants from a single university for reasons of practical convenience, the researcher gained participants from every target department, even from a department with only one Chinese student qualifying as a participant. More importantly, this research achieved almost complete participant retention, achieving complete data from 32 participants, which was not a small number for a one-year qualitative research effort. In addition, data analysis of this research was carried out via three approaches throughout the entire process of data collection, during which the former data analysis supporting the later data collection and different analysis methods complemented each other with regard to exploring and interpreting the researched phenomena. An issue which might be criticized during the research process was that the data collection was almost entirely conducted in Chinese while the findings were presented in English, with the translation resulting in the potential distortion or loss of some meanings in the data (Smith et al., 2008; Van Nes et al., 2010). Chinese was adopted as the main language in data provision because the majority

of participants showed a preference for being interviewed and keeping their diary entries in Chinese, which enabled them to express ideas accurately. The translation issue was minimized as much as possible by consulting a bilingual friend about the best way to translate some Chinese words that do not have direct translations into English (see also, Smith et al., 2008) and then reconfirming the translated version with the participants. This research achieved validity and reliability from the internal perspective through well-designed and well-performed research procedures, having achieved trustworthiness of the research findings.

External validity and reliability were not the objectives of this study, as it was actually intended to provide a longitudinal exploration and in-depth discussion on the EM of participants based on their individual circumstances, rather than to make the findings generalizable to all Chinese international students. This generalization would actually be the opposite to the dehomogenization of Chinese international students which is strongly advocated in this research. A finding was that participants' EM was impacted by losing their "privileges" in China and becoming somehow "vulnerable" in the UK, which challenges both the stereotype of Chinese international students as privileged; and also the traditional criteria for a "vulnerable group", which is based merely on socio-economic background. In this way, this research could be used to inform a higher-order theory about how people's experiences can be shaped by the identity transformation from an elite to a vulnerable group. In this sense, there is scope, albeit to debatable extent, that exists for the theoretical generalizability of this research.

#### 4.8. Positionality and reflexivity

Constructionist, interpretivist research produces knowledge based on not only participants' but also the researcher's understanding and interpretation of the social phenomenon being researched (Ormston et al., 2014). It is, as such, worthwhile to discuss the researcher's positionality and reflexivity during the research process. In this longitudinal study, I acted as an insider with multiple roles

throughout the research process, with the position impacting my research in different ways.

As presented in section 4.4.1., the target population of this research was Chinese students who completed their undergraduate studies in mainland China and then studied social sciences taught Master's programmes in the UK. I myself had been a member of this group. It was hence inevitable that my own experiences left me with some assumptions about what my participants' lives might be like. Also, since I had work experience before and after receiving HE abroad, I had certain personal reflections on the relationship between overseas HE and employability. These presuppositions could have affected my interpretation of the data. Accordingly, I consciously reminded myself to be as neutral as possible in interpreting my data. The diary-interview methodology positively contributed to minimizing researcher bias, as diaries usually generated surprising data, and the follow-up interview enabled the researcher's interpretation to be corrected by the participants as appropriate. My position also allowed for certain advantages as my previous experiences made it easier for me to empathize with my participants, which not only helped me to understand the data in more depth but also enabled me to build up considerable rapport with my participants.

As diary-interview method has been found to easily trigger respondent fatigue and participant attrition (Dwyer et al., 2013; Eidse and Turner, 2014), I prepared myself to dedicate time and vigour to maintaining participant numbers during the longitudinal research process. As a researcher, but also a senior student, participants regarded me as an information provider about issues relating to daily life (e.g., where to buy Chinese ingredients) and an advisor for study (e.g., module selection, PhD application). I responded to their enquiries on WeChat and sometimes had personal meetings with them if they required. Moreover, I proactively shared employment information and interesting events with my participants on WeChat to make them feel more included in the research. This information and activities might be seen as intervening in participants' EM practices, but there was no real concern that they would have any serious impact,

since participants were flexible in terms of choosing whether they managed their employability via these activities.

More important than being an information provider, as discussed in 4.5.3., many participants also treated me as an emotional supporter. Although the number of participants who frequently contacted me for emotional support declined as time passed, possibly because they had built social connections with more people, which reduced their dependence on me, I became good friends with some participants. Many participants reported in the second-round interviews that they never thought about dropping out of this research. They had a sense of responsibility to help me complete my PhD research, because I was a friend, a listener, an advisor, and offered emotional support during their very difficult time in the UK. I found myself sometimes being “too good at fitting in” to my participants’ lives, which meant my identity as a researcher was frequently overlooked by the participants (Berbary, 2014:1205). Moreover, I experienced “research forgetfulness” myself when, on occasion, I became too immersed in the stories told by the data (ibid:1212). Realising the potential problems brought by fitting in too well, I consciously stepped back when conducting data management and analysis. My theoretical framework set the boundary as to how the data spoke to the research topic, and strongly supported me in understanding and presenting my data.

In the following three chapters, I discuss the data analysis of this research via three approaches.

## Chapter Five A Complicated Relationship between Motivations to Receive HE Abroad and Expectations of Employability Enhancement

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of this study in relation to the first sub-question: what are the motivations of Chinese students to receive HE abroad, and how do their expectations on employability enhancement fit into the motivation set? The findings reported in this chapter are based on the data from first-round interviews, which were conducted during the initial stage of participants' overseas Master's studies, where they reviewed their decision-making process of studying abroad and forecast the impact of their one-year overseas education on their career development. Thematic analysis was employed in this phase of data analysis, categorizing participants' motivations as intrinsic or instrumental, with the "no motivation" situation discussed in particular. Participants' motivations for receiving HE abroad were further explained from the perspective of *agency* – a key concept of CA, which represented by the self-autonomy behind motivations. Participants were considered as highly autonomous, i.e. with high level of agency, when their motivations were closely connected with their intrinsic willingness to receive HE abroad and/or their self-recognition of the value of this course of action on their personal development. In contrast, participants were considered as less autonomous, i.e. with low level of agency, when they were motivated to receive HE abroad in response to external demands or as a compromise. Moreover, this chapter also thematically interprets how participants defined the term "employability" and how they expected their employability to be enhanced. Speaking to sections 2.3 (Motivations and decision-making process of Chinese students studying abroad) and 2.5 (Employability of Chinese graduates) of the literature review, the findings presented in this chapter seek to draw a more comprehensive picture of current Chinese students' motivations to study abroad, and to add Chinese international students' voice to the discourse on graduate employability.

## 5.2. Why receive HE abroad?

The decision to receive HE abroad can be influenced by multiple factors. Are employability-related considerations involved in the motivation set of current Chinese students in social sciences regarding studying abroad? Why these students choose to receive HE abroad hence became the first sub-question to be explored by this research. Many existing studies (e.g., Wu, 2014; Bamber, 2014) have attempted to build a motivation set to explain Chinese students' decisions regarding receiving HE abroad, but few have systematically analysed those motivations according to the different levels of individual autonomy. CA suggests that choice making is determined by individuals' agency and the opportunities available to them. Put another way, people sometimes make decisions out of an intrinsic willingness, sometimes driven by instrumental benefits, and sometimes as a compromise. This research discussed how participants were motivated to study abroad, paying particular attention to clarifying the individual agency attached to different instrumental motivations. Moreover, the data beyond the scope of motivation triggered a further discussion on how studying abroad was understood by current Chinese students.

### 5.2.1. Intrinsically motivated

As a core argument of CA suggests, the actual end of human wellbeing is the freedom to engage in those activities that the individual values, and to become the kind of person they hopes to be, and that only the ends possess any intrinsic significance (Sen, 1993). Accordingly, I considered that students were intrinsically motivated to study abroad when they regarded such a course of action as an attractive activity, and self-satisfaction could be achieved by doing so. Both of these two dimensions were indicated by the interview data.

The majority of participants described receiving HE abroad as attractive, since "it gives [them] an opportunity to lead a life totally different from the previous one"

(P2<sup>22</sup>). Students were highly attracted by the novelty of overseas experiences and even excited about unexpected challenges. Meanwhile, receiving HE abroad was also considered a good way to expand their horizons. The ideas about expanding horizons were broad, including, but not limited to, gaining a “better understanding of Western culture” (P4), “being involved in an international environment” (P26), “working with people from different backgrounds” (P1) and “learning customs and lifestyles of local people” (P3). The explanations of expanding horizons provided by the participants in this research were not as superficial as seeing a wider world, but actually were relatively profound. This was possibly because the majority of participants had had overseas experiences before studying in the UK, so that they now had higher expectations of exploring the Western world in more depth. Moreover, the attractiveness of receiving HE abroad was also reflected in participants’ interests in their destination country, the UK. More than half mentioned that the history, culture, Anglophone environment and reputation of excellent educational quality in the UK appealed to them. These advantages made studying in the UK an activity that was highly valued by Chinese students.

From the dimension of self-satisfaction, many participants, especially those who had obtained their first degrees in English-related subjects, reported that they were highly interested in the English language and Western culture, and studying abroad enabling them to get closer to what they had a passion for. In addition, other participants believed that they gained a certain sense of achievement by going abroad. Many participants reported that they had “instilled an idea of studying abroad someday since [they were] young” (P3). For some participants, seed of studying abroad had been sown when they met certain people with overseas experience. As P18 narrated:

I participated in a Mainland-Taiwan Youth Leadership Camp in my first working year, where I met many excellent people. I found all of them had

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<sup>22</sup> P2: refers to participant 2.

studied abroad. I think this experience significantly impacted my decision to study abroad.

Also, some students initiated receiving HE overseas when they saw the improvements in abilities, personalities and temperaments in their peers who had graduated from foreign universities, which echoed the findings of Li's (2013) and Liu and Fang's (2011) research. No matter which case, a sense of self-actualization motivated participants to study abroad.

This research found that receiving HE abroad, to some extent, was regarded as an intrinsically motivated activity that fulfilled participants' satisfaction and enjoyment. Participants' choice of studying abroad in this sense represents the highest level of individual agency which enabled them to engage in the activity they valued. Nevertheless, it was not the whole picture. There were several instrumental motivations that had an effect during the decision-making process. Moreover, for a certain number of participants, these instrumental motivations were stronger than the intrinsic ones in motivating them to receive an overseas education.

#### 5.2.2. Instrumentally motivated

Although CA places an increased emphasis on the intrinsic freedom of making choices as individuals might wish to, it does not deny the instrumental significance attached to choice. Regarding the choice of receiving HE abroad, this means that people might make the decision to receive HE abroad out of instrumental considerations rather than (or in addition to) an intrinsic interest in this activity. Instrumental considerations about a choice can be complicated in terms of the different levels of individual agency that they represent.

#### Career development

"To benefit career development" was proposed by the largest number (15/32) of participants as one of their instrumental motivations to receive HE abroad, which echoed the previous literature (Ashley and Jiang, 2000; Gareth, 2005, Teichler,

2007) which had reported that a graduate returning to China with overseas learning experience was believed to have better career prospects. The strong attention attached to career development may be due to the fact that students in Master's programmes are closer to the stage of entering the labour market than undergraduates, and moreover nearly half (13/32) of participants in this study had returned to university from full-time jobs.

To what extent did career development, as an instrumental motivation to receive HE abroad, reflect individual agency? This was dependent on how participants interpreted the relationship between receiving HE abroad and career development. For some participants, who stressed the significance of achieving an overseas Master's degree on meeting the requirements of some employment positions, this instrumental motivation represented low agency since students performed the action of receiving HE abroad to satisfy an external demand. For other participants who graduated from lower status Chinese universities, obtaining an overseas Master's degree could be representative of a decision with higher agency. As P29 reported,

It [receiving HE abroad] is a leap for me. I will become an international returnee from such an excellent university. It [the overseas Master's degree] will make up for the shortcoming of my first degree. I will have better job opportunities, and I, myself, will be more confident when competing with others.

In this case, the decision was still externally controlled because students sought a higher qualification to gain better employment opportunities; it was nevertheless somewhat internally regulated as they pursued this course of action to enhance their self-esteem and thus to "be more confident when competing with others" (P29).

Some other participants hoped to develop professional knowledge, skills and international awareness through receiving overseas HE so that they would be

better qualified for their target jobs, and potentially gain more promising long-term career development prospects. These instrumental motivations represented more agency since participants connected an act to their personal significance. Likewise, participants who took advantage of receiving HE abroad to realize a career transition also demonstrated relatively high agency. In addition, there were also some ideas expressed by participants that career development constituted the most autonomous form of instrumental motivation to receive HE abroad. Receiving HE abroad was believed to shape a person from an all-round perspective, preparing him/her as a better employee for the workplace and, more importantly, as a more mature individual in broader life scopes. Participants with these ideas integrated career development into their life-long and life-wide needs and values as CA has suggested. In this sense, although career development was still instrumental in terms of the act of receiving HE abroad, it shared many qualities with an intrinsic motivation, entailing personal agency and autonomy.

#### Academic enhancement

Another instrumental motivation for receiving HE abroad proposed by participants was that of academic enhancement, though it did not appear to be a strong factor, with only six participants mentioning it. This was in line with the findings of Wu (2014) which stated that Chinese international students at the Master's level were more strongly driven by overseas experiences and potential career advancement than academic rewards, which were more highly valued by younger students.

Among these six students, four transferred to a different Master's course from the subject of their first degree, and another two were returning to university from the labour market because they had realized their career development was limited by a lack of academic knowledge. For these students, making academic improvements tended to represent a kind of instrumental motivation, which in turn represented high human agency. Students valued academic achievements since they connected the course they were studying with the job they would like to do in the future. Receiving HE abroad, accordingly, became the action that was identified as having

the most significance to their employment outcomes and development. As P7 stated,

I chose to study abroad in the UK because the education system here is more friendly to students who want to transfer to a Master's course different from the one for Bachelor's. ... I would love to work in this area [her Master's course was in a related area]. I did two related internships before but still need to learn the knowledge systematically.

Moreover, P24 contributed an interesting point by saying,

I was really excited when I found this course. I think it implies a promising area for entrepreneurship... but even if I cannot realize it, I can use what I learnt here to teach my own child. That can be also meaningful for me.

For this participant, the academic achievements that might possibly arise from receiving HE abroad was not only an instrumental reward to her career but also carried significant value for her broader life. This idea coincided with CA's argument that the value of an activity needs to be connected with the wellbeing of one's life.

#### Alternative and "shelter"

Compared to career development and academic enhancement which were predominantly positive, some participants proposed neutral (or perhaps even negative) motivations for receiving HE, when they said that studying for a Master's degree in a foreign university was an alternative to their initial plan after achieving a Bachelor's degree, or as a form of "shelter" delaying them from having to start a career.

While the majority of participants already had planned to study abroad at the Master's stage when they were doing undergraduate studies, some students made this decision quite quickly in response to the failure of their initial plan. Four participants planned to pursue a Master's degree in China but failed in *kaoyan* (the

entrance exam). Receiving HE abroad gave them another opportunity to pursue their degree. This situation reflects the inadequate supply of places in Chinese universities, as stated by many existing studies (Zheng and Dai, 2006; Lowe, 2007). For these participants, the choice of receiving HE abroad was less autonomously motivated, especially when they were pushed by their parents or when they thought they needed to get a Master's degree somewhere so as to avoid guilt and anxiety.

Another interesting phenomenon that emerged from the data was that for the participants (17/32) who had just completed their undergraduate studies, almost all (16/17) did not want to enter the labour market directly because they "could not see any competitiveness in [the] current Chinese labour market as a local undergraduate" (P8). Credential inflation was more strongly stressed by students from lower status Chinese universities. As P26 said,

My university is not the one in [the] '985' or '211' project. I am not that excellent. If I were an employer, I would have no reason to recruit me instead of others.

Some participants were demotivated to work because of bad experiences in placements or internships. As P29 reported,

I was given lots of trivial and low-level tasks to do, such as printing documents, when I did an internship. I don't think this is a graduate job. But my experienced colleagues told me that [this] is the exact job for an ordinary freshman. I think I need to fight for a higher starting point.

Some other participants refused to work simply because they preferred doing something else when they did not have to work. For these students, receiving HE abroad became a plausible alternative, acting as a "shelter" that helped delay them from having to work immediately after achieving their Bachelor's degrees. Their motivations to receive HE abroad were as such less autonomous. However, these

participants reported that, although they did not want to work at the current point in time, they knew they would eventually have to enter the labour market.

Receiving HE abroad was hence, in an objective sense, a choice they made to attain more time and space to prepare themselves as employees both professionally and psychologically.

Compared to intrinsic motivations, the instrumental motivations for Chinese students to receive HE abroad were more complicated in terms of the different levels of agency being reflected. What is worth more attention is that students who were receiving HE abroad out of instrumental motivations with less autonomy gradually found intrinsically interesting properties of receiving HE abroad during the overseas journey, and realized an orientation shift in pursuing this course of action. Likewise, students' instrumental motivations with high-level agency were in some cases undermined because of undesirable experiences. These changes hence illustrated the value of conducting longitudinal research to understand the dynamics of participants' EM and associated reflections.

### 5.2.3. No motivations?

When motivations to receive HE abroad were discussed, an interesting answer emerged: "I do not have a particular motivation". This answer came from two participants who had studied in international secondary schools and another two who had achieved bachelor's degrees from joint venture universities. They said it was "natural" to further their study overseas, and almost all of their classmates made the same choice. Moreover, the similar feeling of "no specific motivation" was also found from some of students who had studied English language-related courses in their undergraduate studies. They were more likely to take receiving HE abroad for granted, since they believed that it was necessary to involve themselves in an Anglophone environment and Western culture.

It is worth mentioning that the "no motivation" is different from "amotivation". Rather, "No motivation" was interpreted as having attained some motivation to receive HE abroad in the earlier stages of educational trajectories, which had

therefore become embedded as an expectation. P7 from a joint venture university said,

I thought about studying abroad after secondary school. However, my grandparents strongly disagreed at that time, because they thought I was too immature to live overseas alone. So, I entered a joint venture university as a compromise choice.

Similarly, P14 who studied business interpretation for a bachelor's degree stated,

I had chances to study abroad earlier, but I achieved admission to a postgraduate course in my Chinese university. I thought I would have other opportunities to study abroad, but this was the only opportunity to be a Master's student in my Chinese university without an examination.

Although these students said they were not particularly motivated to receive HE abroad by one or a number of factor(s), they gave specific thoughts about how receiving HE abroad would benefit their futures, especially from a career dimension, which will be presented in detail in the next section.

In summary, participants were motivated to receive HE abroad both intrinsically and instrumentally. From the intrinsic perspective, studying abroad, in itself, was regarded as an activity with enjoyment and attractiveness, with students being able to satisfy their curiosity and interest in overseas lives and acquire a sense of achievement from fulfilling their dream of receiving HE abroad. The intrinsic motivations indicated the highest level of individual agency behind the choice. From the instrumental perspective, students who made this choice more consciously tended to stress the benefits of receiving HE abroad on their career development and academic enhancement, with the instrumental motivations representing high levels of agency. Some other students who made this choice more passively considered receiving HE abroad at the Master's level as an

alternative to their initial plan after undergraduate studies, or as a “shelter”, delaying them from working directly as a local fresh undergraduates. These participants` motivations reflected low levels of agency. As for students who had no specific motivation for receiving overseas HE, their act of studying abroad was interpreted as being encouraged by pre-existing motivations stemming from their particular educational backgrounds.

Among the complex set of participants` motivations for receiving HE abroad, career development stood out, not only because it was proposed as a significant motivation by the largest number of participants, but also because various other motivations such as academic enhancement and expanding horizons were also indirectly linked to equipping students with stronger competitiveness in the labour market. Moreover, career-related motivations suggested different levels of human agency behind the choice, which provided an interesting angle by which to explore how different types of career-related motivations interrelated and changed during the course of participants` overseas lives. Finally, even for some students for whom career development might not be reported as an essential motivation for receiving HE abroad, they tended to see enhancement of employability as an expected reward from their one-year overseas experiences. Therefore, in the following sections, I will particularly discuss how participants conceptualized the term employability and how they expected their employability to be enhanced by receiving HE overseas.

### 5.3. How was employability understood?

As employability is a complicated concept which not everyone was familiar with, participants were not asked to precisely define it in the first-round interviews, but to give as many personal interpretations about what could be involved in one`s employability as possible. Based on the data, one idea agreed upon by all participants was that working-related *abilities* were significant to one`s employability, which was in line with van der Heijden et al.`s (2009:453) argument that potential employees need to continuously acquire, create and fulfil their

employment through “the optimal use of competences”. More than half of participants (17/32) interpreted employability solely from the perspective of ability, with the remainder considering individual abilities as the most or at least a highly important part of one’s employability. When participants specified what abilities were regarded as essential, their explanations actually went beyond abilities and were closer to broader individual currencies which could be generally divided into *hard currencies* including credentials, work experience and profession-specific abilities and *soft currencies* including interpersonal skills, charisma and other qualities, according to Brown et al.’s (2004) theoretical framework of graduate employability (Li, 2013; Redmond, 2006). Hard currencies and soft currencies comprise the *internal capabilities* suggested by CA in terms of one’s employability.

#### 5.3.1. Hard currencies

The first component of hard currencies is credentials, which refer to the degree and the other the qualifications achieved by potential employees. Nearly all participants agreed that a certain level of degree was an element of one’s employability, especially for graduates and early-career employees, since “some positions were only open to people with a certain degree” (P10) and “some employers set starting salaries for employees based on their degree” (P31). Besides, some participants believed that achieving qualifications in foreign language and computer competency as well as other vocational qualifications could be beneficial to one’s employability, a fact which has seldom been mentioned in previous research.

Secondly, no matter whether participants had or had not previously entered the labour market, work experience (including internships) was believed to be influential on one’s employability. The most common reason given by participants was that,

Practices at schools or university were more like a rehearsal, but working is an actual combat. Some strategies can only be learnt in the real work context. More importantly, learning from experienced people is a short-cut to enhancing one’s working abilities. (P8)

Moreover, a few participants mentioned the impact of previous life experience on their employability. They believed that diverse life experiences could “enrich thoughts and broaden vision” (P17).

The third part of hard currencies refers to academic knowledge and professional skills. There was a certain controversy among participants as to the extent to which these two elements were important to one’s employability. Some of them regarded them as the core of employability, saying,

Regardless of the area, the professionalism of employees is the most important. Only by possessing desired professional knowledge and abilities, can you complete your work with high quality. Your work satisfaction will then be increased, and you can enjoy your work better.  
(P19)

Other participants, in contrast, did not put any particular emphasis on academic knowledge and professional skills. Some of them believed that “the course [they] studied was not skill-oriented, so the professional knowledge may not be applied to the work” (P13). Also, others did not limit their occupational choice to course-related areas, and hence paid greater attention to generic skills. P7 reported,

I had an internship in an accounting firm. I do not think the job can only be performed by a person from accounting background. The orientation training can equip employees with the needed professional skills within a short period.

Moreover, there were also some participants who suggested that academic knowledge and professional skills were not crucial to one’s employability, especially for fresh graduates, since “the difference in professional abilities obtained by new employees was not that obvious. Everyone needed to learn how to do a job well by

accumulating experiences.” (P2) So, these two elements were not perceived by every participant as being decisive in evaluating one’s employability.

### 5.3.2. Soft currencies

Compared to hard currencies, the items attributed to soft currencies were more diverse, with three categories identified by this research: generic skills, personal traits, and employment-specific abilities. Generic skills refers to the skills needed by almost all employees regardless of occupation. The most frequently mentioned generic skill in this research was interpersonal relationship management.

Specifically, participants stressed the importance of communication skills on enhancing the efficiency of teamwork. Meanwhile, they suggested that getting along well with colleagues could be beneficial to increased work enjoyment, which reflected the argument that people are not only the vehicles of economic productivity; rather, they pursue life wellbeing through employment (Sen, 1999). Also, people with excellent interpersonal skills might be better at expanding their networks, which could ultimately bring about increased capabilities for cooperation.

Another frequently proposed set of generic skills was related to one’s vision, which were specified as “being able to work in an intercultural environment” (P1), “being able to cooperate with people from different countries” (P2), “being open-minded” (P7) and “being able to propose ideas from an international standpoint” (P31). This perspective has seldom been presented in the existing literature on domestic Chinese students’ understanding of employability, and it reflects the fact that Chinese international students saw a close connection between their overseas experience and employability enhancement.

It was somewhat surprising that participants in this research prioritized the above-mentioned two aspects of generic skills to those more practical skills needed for carrying out specific work, even though “problem discovering and solving” (P26), “logical and critical thinking” (P14) and “learning abilities” (P4) were reported as essential parts of one’s employability. Participants tended to list these practical

skills, but gave few explanations about them. According to Nussbaum (2000:92), “the more crucial a functioning is to attaining and maintaining other capabilities, the more entitled we may be to promote actual functioning in some cases”.

Participants put more value on interpersonal relationship management and vision expansion as they saw further capabilities could be empowered by these two generic skills.

In addition, generic skills presented by participants also included independence and adaptability. Independence was linked to both completing one’s work and living one’s life independently. Adaptability, explained by some participants without full-time work experience, referred to successfully converting one’s identity from that of a student to an employee; adaptability was more likely to be described by the more mature workforce as being a transferable skill enabling people to fit themselves into new working environments. Both independence and adaptability were believed to make an employee more flexible in the workplace.

Participants in this research also thought that overcoming difficulties was a vital part of generic skills, with the ability to perform under pressure and emotion management skills emphasized the most. Working was regarded as more stressful than studying, and newcomers had to bear greater working loads and mental burdens. As P13 noted,

As a rookie, you may need to do the most tiring work with the least salary. It might be unfair but is the rule of the game. You have to adjust yourself, keep a positive attitude, work hard, and your efforts will eventually be rewarded.

P31, who had experience of recruitment in his previous line of work, agreed this idea by saying,

Fresh graduates must put themselves in the right position, being well prepared for enduring hardships and pressures. Keeping a healthy mentality is the most important.

In addition, resilience and emotion management were also linked to teamwork and interpersonal relationships, which reflected participants' understanding that an employable person was not only an excellent individual but also a successful member of a group.

The second category attributed to soft currencies was personal traits, which relates to the CA-conceptualized internal capabilities for one's employability which include not only abilities but also attributes. Many participants reckoned that one's employability should include a sense of responsibility. Some of them even prioritized this characteristic above all other kinds of ability. As P8 said,

More important than abilities, I think an employable person should be responsible for her work, her client, her team, and her employer.

Sometimes the sense of responsibility can be reflected by proactivity and dedication. For example, whether you are willing to bear extra work loads when needed.

Another personal trait proposed by a number of participants was self-confidence, which was more strongly emphasized in job interviews. "Being confident but not aggressive" (P31) in the conversation with interviewers was believed to be helpful in getting a job; meanwhile, "being confident but not arrogant" (P25) was considered a desirable working style. Other personal traits which were mentioned by fewer participants, but which were not unimportant, included being aspirational, having initiative, and being persistent and prudent.

The last category of soft currencies was employment-specific abilities. Having a clear career plan was suggested by many of the participants, no matter where they currently were in terms of their career development. Participants without working

experience or in early career tended to describe a career plan as a guide for their ability/skill cultivation. As reported by P28,

There are so many job-related abilities and skills. It is impossible to foster all of them. So, you need a clear career orientation, simply, what is your target occupation, then try to improve the abilities required by this occupation.

For some participants who had had longer working lives even prioritized a career plan above working abilities.

Young students may focus more on abilities or skills, because they can get a job only if they possess required skills. However, I totally ignore skills since I am quite sure it is impossible for me to be unemployed in my area. So, for me, the most important thing is to clarify what I really want to do, and how to make my future career more attractive and meaningful. (P1)

In addition to a career plan, participants also valued working attitude and ethics highly, which influence not only one's self-positioning in the labour market but also one's performance in specific working practices. As P3 noted, "professional ethics and values are the basis of an employee's working life. A good working attitude is the prerequisite for doing a job well". This idea relates to the internal capabilities embraced in the CA-informed conceptualisation of employability, which focuses on not only one's abilities at a practical level but also one's maturity at a cognitive level.

From a more practical perspective, participants included interview skills as relevant to employability, with ability to express oneself, communication skills, style of conversation, confidence, capacity to absorb strain, self-image and temperament being considered in particular. Job interviews required an individual to "show her/his priorities to the employer within a limited time" (P10), which could be considered a test of one's comprehensive qualities.

In line with Yorke (2006) and various other studies (e.g. Huang and Yang, 2016; Zhao, 2015) on Chinese domestic graduates, employability was interpreted by many participants in this study from a supply side and regarded as a combination of degree, professional ability, generic skills, personal traits and employment-specific skills. These items were included in the internal capabilities demonstrated by CA in terms of one's employability. Other participants, who believed that the conceptualization of employability could be broader, further acknowledged that individual abilities and attributes needed to be centred in the "constellation" of influential factors. Moreover, although a small number of participants linked employability solely to the stage of seeking employment when they defined this term, their further explanations in this regard reflected the idea that employability was also understood as whether employees could give the desired working performance, realize career development and actualize personal values in the labour market. This understanding was in accordance with Finn (2000) and Hillage and Pollard (1998), who saw employability as continuously changing according to the different phases of employees' working lives; also, this understanding echoed capabilities approach by connecting employability with long-term human development.

Furthermore, this study also found that participants realized that their employability might be influenced by many external factors than personal abilities alone. Although few participants stressed these factors when they defined the term employability, these factors were identifiable within their narratives. Involving external factors in the conceptualization of employability is in line with Brown et al. (2003), who dichotomized graduate employability into "absolute" and "relative" dimensions. Moreover, these factors are exactly the *conversion factors* suggested by CA when discussing graduate employability as a kind of *combined capability*.

### 5.3.3. Conversion factors

A social conversion factor that received the most heated discussion in this research was gender, together with another relevant issue, marital status, which was

inconsistent with Huang et al.'s research (2014) finding that individual characteristics such as gender and age were considered by Chinese international students as the least influential on one's employability. These issues stood out in this research, perhaps because of the unequal gender balance of participants. Many women participants talked about gender inequality in the Chinese labour market. P9 said,

My men classmates in undergraduate were all employed, but women suffered more difficulties. Employers asked our plan for getting married and giving birth to a child, or children, I should say, because Chinese government has abolished the One Child Policy. Employers do not want to hire someone who is going to pay more attention to family rather than work.

Some participants experienced the situation that employers directly indicated in their recruitment requirements that the position in question was only opened to men. The majority of participants were dissatisfied with the gender bias but felt powerless to challenge it. P2 even regarded it as understandable:

We have to acknowledge the difference between men and women, such as physical power. Men can take on more intense work than women. Employers are capitalists rather than philanthropists. What we can do is to make up for the innate disadvantages by for example achieving a higher degree.

Another social factor under heated discussion was family background and its derivative, *guanxi*. When talking about family background, participants expressed their ideas about the impact of social status and financial conditions on how much and what levels of resources could be accessed by individuals, together with how parental education during upbringing influenced one's vision, personality, characters and values. We also discussed *guanxi*, which is a Chinese term relating to social networks (Zhang and Li, 2003; Taormina and Gao, 2010) and social capitals

(Kaynak et al., 2013), but also with a negative sense directed towards the injustice and inequality of the recruitment process. The negative sense of *guanxi* could become stronger when related specifically to familial nepotism. While quite a number of participants complained about this phenomenon, others argued that *guanxi* is not be a deciding factor in all cases. As indicated by P18,

That is one of the reasons why I prefer working in a big city. In smaller towns and more remote areas, personal power can extend to broader reach, and hence the unfairness resulting from *guanxi* can be enlarged.

P14 agreed, stating that “*Guanxi* can be less influential in high-level platforms, such as companies listed in Fortune Global 500. They value one’s abilities rather than *guanxi*”.

The attitudes towards *guanxi* held by these participants were similar to that found in Li’s research (2013), namely that *guanxi* possibly impacted employment outcomes but was not a deciding factor. Furthermore, many of the participants talked about the influence of networks on one’s employability. Participants mentioned the importance of expanding their networks for accessing internal referral opportunities. Network, as discussed here, refers to the interpersonal resources developed by employees themselves with their classmates, alumni, colleagues and friends, which was defined as a somewhat more positive concept than *guanxi*.

Together with gender and family background which were focused on the most, other conversion factors were also identified from participants’ narratives when they defined the term employability, or more frequently, when they were prompted by the researcher to consider the influential factors of employability more broadly. Seven participants defined employability as how one’s abilities match employers’ requirements. Three participants regarded employability as a relational term encompassing competitiveness among peers. Participants also recognized that the wishes of parents and partners may limit their employment

choices. Furthermore, on a regional level, participants believed that the cultural tradition may influence people's professional values, and the scale and development of a city may determine employment opportunities. On a more macros level, participants stated that one's employability can also be shaped by the development of an industry, the capacity of the labour market, employment policies enacted by national government, and even the global economic situation. It is important to discuss the conversion factors which can influence one's employability. CA deliberately distinguishes between *internal capabilities* and *combined capabilities* when conceptualising employability, since the differentiation highlights two intertwined but distinct duties of an ideal society. A society is expected to equip citizens with internal capabilities by, for example, expanding education opportunities and enhancing teaching qualities; in parallel, a society also needs to create reasonable contexts for various options, so that people can actually realize their potentials and freedoms (Nusbaum, 2011).

In summary, the majority of participants in this study centred employees in the constellation of employability, and conceptualized the term employability from a supply-side perspective, which aligns with the internal capabilities suggested by CA. Both the hard currencies and soft currencies possessed by an individual were considered influential as to whether she/he would be able to get a job, maintain a job, achieve their desired development in their chosen occupation, and transfer to another working area if she/he so wanted, though participants' ideas about which types of currency were more important were varied in terms of their different occupations, career orientations and professional values. In addition to the thoughts relating to internal capabilities, social conversion factors were also involved in participants' understanding of employability, with gender, family background and social network being the subjects of considerable discussion. Meanwhile, as prompted by the researcher, participants realized more conversion factors needed to be considered when employability was evaluated, since one's employability represented a "dynamic interaction of individual attributes, personal circumstances, labour market conditions and other 'context' factors" (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005:207). Moreover, although only declared by one participant,

employability was believed to be not only job-related, but “needed to be put in a broader life scope, since working is an important part of one’s entire life” (P18). This understanding therefore accords with CA that through exerting impacts on one’s working performance and enjoyment, employability could be linked to one’s quality of life and wellbeing.

#### 5.4. How participants expected employability enhancement to occur via receiving HE abroad

While much existing research (e.g., NCIHE, 1997; Rothwell et al., 2009; European Council, 2012; Ito, 2014) constructs an absolute association between HE and graduate employability from a national dimension, few of these studies have focused on the increasingly international features of graduate employability, either from the perspective of HEIs (e.g., Huang, 2017) or international students (e.g., Mok et al., 2016). This study explored graduate employability based on the voices of Chinese international students. As shown above, career development was a significant motivation amongst participants in this research with regard to receiving HE abroad. We discussed what aspects of their career development participants hoped could be improved by receiving HE abroad in the first-round interviews. In general, while seven participants proposed that they were not sure yet how much receiving HE abroad would be beneficial to their career, the majority (25/32) foresaw significant contributions to their career prospects by receiving HE abroad. Therefore the following section presents the employability-related functionings which were expected by participants during their overseas year.

##### Overseas degree

Not surprisingly, when we discussed the question “in what respects do you expect the overseas experience could benefit your career future”, many participants (21/32) mentioned the importance of achieving a Master’s degree from a British university with a good reputation, which was consistent with many previous findings (Chen et al., 2017; Li and Zhang, 2017). This expectation was also in line with the motivation of some participants for receiving HE abroad and indeed with

many participants' conceptualization of graduate employability. As discussed in 5.2.2., achieving an overseas Master's degree in target working areas is important for the employability of many participants, especially those who obtained their Bachelor's degree from lower status Chinese universities and who need the Master's degree to act as a ticket to enter the new area that they would like to work in. Many participants stated that having an overseas Master's degree could be a basic requirement of some positions, which was in alignment with Stiglitz's (1975) screening theory that proposed employers estimate candidates' ability according to the academic degree they hold, so as to reduce the risk of hiring people with an unsatisfactory ability to do the required work (Huang and Cappelli, 2006). As P12 said,

Everyone knows the degree cannot be equal to one's abilities, but the criterion is there. Taking myself as an example, if I want to get a teaching position in an international secondary school in my city, I must achieve at least a Master's degree from a foreign university. No matter how excellent my teaching was, I could not get the position as a local undergraduate.

However, students from top-tier Chinese universities tended to be more critical about overseas degrees and the Chinese employers' attitudes towards them.

Chinese employers in general believe a person with overseas degree can be more excellent, at least in English abilities, but I don't think so. Employers just have a blind praise of the overseas degree! But, anyway, that is what employers believe. You want offers from them, you need to show them your overseas degree first, and then you will be given a chance to show your abilities. (P4)

As discussed in the literature review, the massification of HE has resulted in severe degree inflation in China (Li et al., 2008). However, this has not lowered the admission standards of top-tier Chinese universities, with competition in student

enrolment in these universities still being, or becoming increasingly, fierce (He, 2007). Graduates from top Chinese universities always enjoy particular recognition from the local labour market, with studying abroad at the Master's level adding a certain "brilliance" to their already present splendour.

Although participants may have different ideas about how much an overseas degree can represent one's abilities and contribute to one's career development, they actively or passively accept the fact that an overseas degree still matters in the Chinese graduate labour market. As suggested by the participants, quite a number of Chinese employers tend to screen applicants, regarding formal education qualifications as a gauge of people's knowledge or skills at least in the recruiting stage. In order to meet this kind of screening, receiving a Master's education overseas was chosen as a way to obtain a degree from the course relevant to one's expected working area, to make up for the insufficiency of their first degree, or to make those who are good still better in terms of their academic qualifications. So, a Master's degree achieved from a British university with high reputation among Chinese employers, was understood by participants as to various extents offering Chinese international returnees a higher starting point in their graduate employment, and more promising future career prospects. In this sense, international HE, as suggested by CA, enables participants to realize instrumental values by being employed and then making contributions to economy and society (Saito, 2003).

### Language abilities

For a large number of participants, improving English was a vital expected functioning during this overseas year, regardless of how many connections were foreseen between English and their future jobs. For people whose future work may depend extensively on their English abilities, for example English teachers or interpreters, English was their expertise and professional skill. For people targeting other vocational fields, good English proficiency would act as a bonus point in terms of their employability. Moreover, there was a common idea among participants

that employers would have higher expectations regarding the English ability of returnees from Anglophone countries. As demonstrated by P12,

If you are a domestic graduate, it is acceptable if your English is not very good. However, if you are an international returnee, employers will take it for granted that at least your English should be better than others. Otherwise they will easily judge you as a degree chaser. So, we have to improve English as much as we can to match the title 'international returnee'.

English ability, as suggested by previous research (Badur, 2003; Zhou and Todman, 2009), was still identified as significant for Chinese international students' overseas learning and employability back in China. Moreover, this research also found that students with a background of learning other foreign languages as undergraduate majors or who planned to work on international affairs expected to develop their third language in the UK as well.

#### Academic/professional enhancement

After the overseas degree and English proficiency, the enhancement of academic/professional knowledge and abilities was the third most frequently proposed employability-related functioning expected by participants during the process of receiving HE abroad. Although, as discussed in 5.2.2, only six participants were motivated to receive HE by academic enhancement, more participants involved this aspect in their expectation set. Some participants proposed the expectation on academic/professional enhancement since they were studying for courses that were not provided or were otherwise underdeveloped in Chinese HE. Academic achievements were believed to lay a solid foundation for participants' future work. As P3 said,

There is a shortage of talents in this area in China, so learning this course in itself is a great booster for my future career. What I am expecting is to

learn the knowledge systematically, and bring the advanced ideas back to China. We may be the pioneers of this area. Who knows?

For more participants, they emphasized achieving academic functionings, such as critical thinking and problem analysing during studying in the UK university with a rigorous academic atmosphere. Some participants set up a connection between academic functionings and career development because they planned to pursue a PhD directly after completing their Master's courses or otherwise several years later. Achieving desirable academic knowledge and skills in this year was considered an essential step to accessing additional capabilities to further their degree and eventually realize their career goals. For others without a plan to pursue a PhD, the academic abilities were believed to be also useful in the workplace.

Likewise, participants also hoped to acquire better learning abilities via receiving HE abroad. Some participants were "not satisfied with [their] performance in undergraduate studies" (P21) and wanted to change previous bad learning habits, for example, "learning for exams" (P5) and "procrastination" (P22), which demonstrated participants' agency for self-reflection and making improvements. Some participants realized that having the ability to learn independently was essential in the UK. As noted by P25,

No one tests whether or not you read the pre-session materials, but if you did not preview it, you really cannot catch up with the teacher. No one monitors you. You need to be self-disciplined.

P32 furthered this idea by saying,

Teachers here only give you suggestions based on what you have done, but never tell you what to do before you do something by yourself. You are required to be proactive, to take responsibility for your own study.

A good number of participants believed that studying abroad could represent an invaluable opportunity for them to become independent learners, which would without doubt benefit their career development. Learning would definitely be extended to the workplace, where employees are usually exposed to varied of tasks. Participants expressed that good learning habits and strong learning abilities constituted significant capabilities for them to better face the challenges of doing new tasks and providing them with more flexibility in terms of career transitions.

#### International awareness and intercultural abilities

The fourth aspect of functionings that participants expected to achieve during overseas HE to support their career development was related to acquiring a deeper understanding of internationalization and enhancing abilities of working in intercultural contexts. As discussed in the literature review (see p. 38), students' expectations of their internationalized and intercultural achievements were highly featured in the coexistence and fusion between Chinese elements and other cultural elements (Gu, 2009). In accordance with Li's research (2013), participants' particular attention to international vision acquired by receiving HE abroad did not necessarily relate to entering the global labour market, but was rather driven by the significant role played by China in globalization. The interesting point here was that internationalization-related thoughts had almost never appeared in the existing literature on how Chinese *domestic* graduates conceptualized their employability. Therefore, it was reasonable to argue that international awareness and intercultural abilities might be two of the most obvious distinctions between domestic and international Chinese graduates.

Many of the participants in this research described the increasingly international trend of Chinese working contexts, especially in metropolises such as Beijing and Shanghai, which were the main target destinations of international returnees for work. As P2 said,

The international trend in China is inevitable. Having this overseas year studying together with people from different backgrounds, I think I will be

better in dealing with international issues compared to those who never study abroad.

Many participants agreed with this statement, especially those targeting employment with overseas-funded or Sino-foreign companies in China.

People with overseas learning experiences would be preferred by employers of these types of companies because they know more about the situations of the countries they ever studied and can better cooperate with people from different cultural background and with different working styles.

P14 furthered these ideas by saying,

Even if I seek jobs from Chinese local companies, employers may see me as more flexible, having strong adaptivity, and being able to manage intercultural issues, because I have succeeded in completing my overseas studies.

In addition to the capabilities produced for working in an internationalised context, other participants understood the international awareness that they would require in this overseas year from a different perspective. Studying at a university that was highly internationalized in various manners, Chinese students were provided with access to a considerable number of international resources that would be otherwise difficult for them to access in China. As P19 noted,

I hope to work for international organizations. Last week I received an email from my department about a career fair of the United Nations (UN). I am going to attend. I know the competition is fierce but at least I will have a chance to meet officers from almost all departments of UN. If I studied for my Master`s at my Chinese university, I may never have had this opportunity. Now I feel I am closer to my goal.

Similar to this participant, many other participants appreciated the resources they could access as international students. Though they complained that the UK labour market was not particularly friendly to non-EU students, at least they, to some extent, knew more about what the UK or even the international labour market was like. Moreover, for people who had been involved in the Chinese local working context, studying abroad gave them “a different lens to see the Chinese labour market as an outsider” (P1) and then “find a better way to fit themselves into it” (P31) after returning. Albeit CA does not emphasize the totality of resources and their distribution as an end in itself, the existence of available resources is a prerequisite to discussing how capabilities and functionings can be generated. For international students in particular, they were facilitated to create new capabilities based on the resources that only can be accessed by studying abroad.

In addition to the internationalized resources, participants also regarded studying in the UK as an invaluable opportunity for developing their abilities for intercultural communication and cooperation. In line with previous research (Huang, 2005; Rudd et al., 2012), many participants reported that they chose the UK as their destination country for an overseas HE because they were not only attracted by the British culture itself but also the highly internationalized atmosphere of UK HE. Given that the numbers of local students in some courses were small, many participants said they actually had more chances to communicate with international students from other countries rather than native students (see also, Montgomery and Nada, 2019). However, people’s nationalities did not seem to be that important, as compared to gaining multicultural knowledge, exercising how to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds was more highly valued by participants with regard to their subsequent employability.

I may not be able to remember all they (foreign students) told me, or even sometimes I cannot really get their points, but I think it is meaningful to be involved in such a multicultural context. I learnt how to respect people with different ideas and beliefs. And more importantly

they sometimes inspired me to look at an issue from a perspective that I never thought about. (P2)

As noted by many participants, communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds made them become more open-minded, which could be an excellent contributor to their employability. Moreover, participants even regarded negative intercultural experiences as valuable, since they could “stay calm and have more strategies to deal with [the problems caused by cultural differences] if [they are] in a similar situation again in the future work” (P14).

This study also found that Chinese students held almost opposing attitudes toward working with foreign classmates academically and doing social activities with them personally. As P1 said,

It is interesting to have seminars with my foreign classmates, because they always came up with some great points. But I am not eager to build up closer friendships with them. Socializing [with foreign people] is not within my plan of this year. I don't think I will have [any] connection with them after I [return] to China. I don't want to waste my time on meaningless social activities.

In line with this idea, many participants argued that “making friends should be a natural process” (P25). Some said their personalities made them non-proactive in terms of socializing, and some older students felt it difficult to develop friendships with considerably younger students. The previous literature (Guo et al., 2014) suggested that Chinese students saw studying abroad as a means of social capital accumulation, hoping to set up international “*guanxi*” helping them access more resources and opportunities for career development. This argument did not emerge in the findings of this research for two possible reasons: 1) almost none of the participants had targeted working overseas after graduation (at least at the time when first-round interviews were conducted); and 2) with multiple tasks needing to be handled in this year, participants may not have had enough time to develop and

maintain international friendships. For the majority of participants in this research, intercultural communication was regarded as a contributor to their employability in terms of helping them practice spoken English, being more open-minded and being better at doing group work with different people. However, they did not intend to build international networks for the purposes of future career development. Several participants argued that they expected to benefit from Chinese alumni from their university and even from other UK universities. Chinese alumni were the real social capital accumulated by studying abroad, which facilitate the capabilities for developing their future careers back in China.

### Independence

Another significant employability-related functioning that Chinese international students hoped to achieve through receiving HE abroad was an increased independence. The majority of participants were the only children in their families, and many of them planned to work in a city other than their home cities after returning to China. So, independence could be important with regard to their flexibility to choose their destination city for their graduate job and their further mobility in response to job transitions.

Many participants studied for their undergraduate degrees in a city that was some distance from their hometowns. However, they saw studying abroad as a different story.

I am abroad now. It is a different country. Everything is different. My previous experiences did not work here. When I did my undergraduate studies, even though my university is far away from my hometown, it was still in China. I was quite sure that there would be someone to ask for help if I met difficulties. But here, different language, different culture, no one that close to you, your parents are not here, and you may never want them to know when you were in trouble. I indeed met lots of challenges, but I told myself, this is my choice, I have to stick with it. (P28)

Almost all participants, to varying extents, struggled to adapt to overseas learning and living during the period before the first-round interviews were conducted. They believed that the challenges of adapting to a new environment would also occur when they came back to China, leaving their hometown to go to another city, and joining new working contexts. So, the adaptive abilities gained by studying abroad would be significant capabilities for their success in settling into their new lives.

In addition to adaptivity, participants also reported that they needed to learn how to manage their lives in addition to their studies. Many participants compared the differences between their undergraduate lives in China and their current lives in the UK. In Chinese universities, sessions were more intensive, so that the majority of students' days was occupied by sessions. The majority of students in Chinese universities lived on campus and their mobility tended to be around the campus only. However, participants experienced totally different lives in the UK, where they needed to be concerned with every detail themselves and arrange their lives in an appropriate manner. This pattern was believed to be closer to what they would experience when they gained employment in cities away from their hometowns in the future. Hence, participants were more likely to describe their undergraduate years in China as "studying somewhere" but identified their overseas year as "living a life somewhere". They hoped the abilities to live independently gained through their year overseas could act as capabilities for creating further functionings which are needed in their future lives. Here it was noticeable that participants expected their employability enhancement to occur not only in terms of performance in the workplace, but also, as CA argues, with respect to their abilities for managing their broader lives.

Moreover, participants also expected to solve problems independently. In going to a foreign country, participants to a large extent lost their previous social support system. They needed to learn how to tackle problems by themselves and attempt to build up a new social support system in the meantime. Moreover, a good number of participants talked about the significance of being psychologically independent, for example, getting along with loneliness, staying optimistic, and

dealing with various pressures. P10 shared the experience of how she overcame various difficulties and successfully transferred across departments from another course to the course she was studying.

No one believed that I could succeed in the course transfer. My friends persuaded me to stick with doing the previous one. My parents suggested me to drop out and apply for the course I would like to learn next year. But I never gave up. I sent innumerable emails to staff in the two departments to state my situation. Finally, I made it. I just felt that if I could make a course transfer in a UK university with my own strength, I do not know what other difficulties I cannot overcome.

Participants expected to be “truly independent” (P22) by developing adaptivity, living skills, life management abilities, problem-solving abilities, and “a strong heart” (P7) to face the particular challenges that would arise during their year overseas. These achievements made them more independent in living, which would also be a premise of their success in the workplace. Furthermore, for participants who were going to leave their hometown to pursue career development elsewhere, living independently overseas for a year would allow them to show their parents that they “have become strong enough to live a life without the protection of the family” (P20), which indicated participants’ intention to negotiate the conversion factor (parents’ wishes) which could impact their employability.

#### Long-term personal development

In addition to the above specific points, many participants ended up with their answers to the question “how would studying abroad contribute to their future career” expressing the feeling that studying abroad could shape them from an all-round perspective. As P11 said,

One year is short but can be long enough to change a person. I do not know, but I think the influence of this year can be life-long... well, on my abilities, my skills, my ways of thinking, my angles looking at issues, and

even my personality. Do not know...I just started my journey, let's see.

(P11)

Many participants mentioned that their personalities may be shaped by this year, and positive personalities were believed to make them more welcome among employers. In addition to becoming more “confident” (P8, P15, P22) and “mature”(P19, P21, P31), the two characteristics referred to most frequently, students tended to link their specific personality development to their expected experiences in the UK. For example, some participants hoped to be more “rational” and “logical” (P7, P22) by training how to conduct research more rigorously. Some participants wished to be “bolder” and more “adventurous” (P14) by expanding intercultural communications and pursuing independent travel. Becoming “calmer” and more “patient” (P22) were connected to dealing with unexpected problems. Being more “tolerant” and “considerate” (P4) were referred to when talking about intercultural understanding. Participants also hoped to be more “responsible” and “decisive” (P4) in managing their current lives and realizing personal development in the future.

As mentioned in section 5.3, although participants, especially those with less working experience, were more likely to limit employability to the stage of getting a job when they asked to define the term, their understanding of the concept in fact extended to doing a job well and making progress in their chosen occupation when they linked their personalities to career development. As P21 stated,

Personality may not be fully demonstrated during an interview, but it can influence one's professional ethics, working attitude, working style, and working efficiency. People with good personalities and qualities can be more promising in achieving better development in the workplace.

The majority of participants had been abroad before in the forms of travelling, study tours, and short-term learning or working experiences, but this year was believed to have a greater impact on them.

It might be the only period that I can live abroad for a long time. So, it is the only chance for me to involve myself into the British local life. The influence on a person by living somewhere for one year can be quite different from that by travelling for a week. (P6)

Although most of the participants were not able to foresee what specific changes would happen to them, they firmly believed that they would gain invaluable “life experience” (P31). P10 stated,

When we had a family meeting on the decision of my studying abroad. my parents and I reached an agreement that studying abroad can be significant for my life-long personal development. Even if I cannot achieve lots of academic returns, going abroad and seeing a different world can be worthwhile enough. (P10)

When we held the first-round interviews, the participants were still in the initial stages of their overseas journeys, but it was obvious that they had expectations about this year from various perspectives. Their expectations on employability enhancement as a result of receiving HE abroad indeed coincided with CA’s argument about employability not being limited to appropriate performance in the workplace, but targeted at achieving broader human development. More feelings and perceptions about the impact of studying abroad on participants’ long-term personal development were reported in more detail in diary data and in the second-round interviews when they looked back on their whole-year’s experiences (to be covered in chapters six and seven).

## 5.5. Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the findings that emerged from the first-round interviews about participants’ motivations for studying abroad, their conceptualizations of employability, and their expectations about employability

enhancement through receiving an overseas HE. As theorized by CA, this research found that the choice of receiving HE abroad made by the participants was motivated both intrinsically and instrumentally. From the intrinsic perspective, studying abroad in itself was regarded as an activity carrying its own enjoyment and satisfaction, which provided participants with opportunities to expand their horizons, with the destination country, namely the UK, also being highly attractive. Studying in the UK not only fulfilled students' aspirations to access an Anglophone environment and Western culture, but also gave them a sense of self-actualization on receiving HE of excellent quality. From the instrumental perspective, while a small number of participants were motivated to receive HE abroad by the prospect of achieving academic enhancement, and fewer of the participants had made this choice as an alternative to their initial plan after completing their undergraduate studies; the most significant instrumental motivation to receiving HE abroad proposed by participants was related to career development, with the further explanations in this regard reflecting the different levels of individual agency embedded in this behaviour. There were also some participants who had been involved in an education setting with a strong international atmosphere who saw receiving HE abroad as "natural". The "no motivation" they reported was interpreted as being encouraged by pre-existing motivations considering their particular educational backgrounds.

In terms of the conceptualization of employability, the majority of participants in this research tended to define this term from a supply-side perspective, with both hard currencies and soft currencies possessed by an individual considered influential in terms of one's employability. For the hard currencies, a certain level of degree was perceived by almost all participants as an element of one's employability, with occupation-related qualifications seen as bonuses. Work experience was also widely believed by participants in this study to be influential on one's employability. Participants' attitudes towards academic knowledge and professional skills were varied considering their different occupation orientations. For the soft currencies, many aspects in relation to generic skills, personal traits, and employment-specific abilities were discussed by participants, and again

participants' ideas about which aspects were more important were various with regard to their different target occupations, career orientations and professional values. The hard and soft currencies jointly constitute the internal capabilities identified by CA in terms of one's employability.

In addition to the hard and soft currencies which could be fostered and developed, participants also presented two key social conversion factors, gender and family background, might influence one's employability. Furthermore, prompted by the researcher, participants reported more conversion factors, such as employers' requirements, other applicants' performances, scale of a city, development of an industry, capacity of the labour market, employment policies enacted by governments, and even the global economic situation could be influential when evaluating one's employability. Although participants in this research were likely to define employability in terms of personal abilities and traits, their specific explanations actually fitted into a broader conceptualization of employability suggested by CA as a dynamic issue oriented towards human development and life wellbeing. For example, participants interpreted employability as constantly changing, which could be developed or undermined whilst receiving an education and practicing in the workplace. They believed the impacts of employability were not only pertinent to getting a job, but also on maintaining that job and the further choices in an individual's entire working life. More importantly, they acquired the sense that employability might not only be related to jobs but could be considered in a broader life-related scope, which echoes one of the principal arguments of CA: that the actual goal of developing employability is to facilitate human development and human wellbeing in individuals' lives.

Based on their career plans and understanding of employability, the majority of participants foresaw considerable contributions could be made by receiving HE abroad to their career prospects, even though they were at the initial stage of overseas studies when the first-round interviews were conducted. In response to the screening strategy used by many Chinese employers, achieving a Master's degree from a British university with good reputation was highly valued by

participants at least in the phase of gaining employment. Echoing the central role of personal abilities in the entire constellation of one's employability proposed by the majority of participants, they expected advancements in English proficiency, academic and professional abilities so as to lay a solid foundation for conducting one's job well. Moreover, participants also hoped to obtain in-depth international awareness and well-developed intercultural abilities by receiving HE abroad in order to acquire preference from employers of overseas-funded or Sino-foreign companies and to enhance their ability in working contexts with international characteristics. Participants also expected to be more independent in learning, working and living to enlarge their flexibility to choose employment and enhance their mobility in response to job transitions. In addition to the career-specific benefits, participants also looked forward to the impact of their overseas education on their long-term personal development beyond their working lives.

This chapter has addressed the first sub-question by articulating the motivation set of participants for receiving HE abroad, demonstrating the conceptualization of graduate employability provided by participants, and discussing their expectations of employability enhancement during this overseas year. Making sense of these issues carries significance for further exploring EM in relation to a student-focused concept of employability. These findings are also important for other researchers and indeed HEIs to broaden their understanding of Chinese students' motivations for and expectations of receiving HE overseas.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how participants' EM was conducted during the one-year overseas journey according to their conceptualization of employability and their expectations regarding employability enhancement.

## Chapter Six Exploring EM – a Longitudinal CA-informed Analysis

### 6.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of this study in relation to the second sub-question: what practices were undertaken by participants to manage their employability during the one-year taught Master's course in the UK, and the third research sub question (which will also be further discussed in chapter seven): what factors influenced participants' understanding of and approaches to their EM. The findings reported in this chapter are based on the data from the nine-month solicited diaries, where participants recorded their employability-related practices, as well as the second-round interviews conducted at the end of participants' overseas Master's study where they reflected on their experience over the whole year, evaluated their EM, and narrated their ongoing thoughts about employability and careers. For this chapter, two analysis processes were conducted. Firstly, I reviewed the diaries to classify the activities and events relating to participants' EM, exploring why these cases were regarded as employability-related, how specific practices were performed therein, and what achievements resulted from the activities. Secondly, I returned to the second-round interviews, which had included a specific discussion of the experiences yielded by the diary data, to further explore how participants interpreted their EM practices, with a particular focus on the intertwining of their understanding of employability, EM and career plans.

The data analysis presented in this chapter is guided by CA which regards graduate employability as a type of "combined capabilit[y]" (Nussbaum, 2011:21), embracing internal capabilities and external conditions which jointly impact graduates' employment outcomes and broader career-related choices. EM, as such, is defined as the ways in which students develop their employability through their efforts towards self-improvement, and interact with external factors which affect their actions. This chapter first demonstrates participants' EM practices through specific activities, and illustrates the embeddedness of EM in their everyday overseas lives. Then it illuminates the involvement of influential people in the process of

participants' EM. The third section articulates participants' updated ideas about employability, EM and career plans after their overseas year, and discusses how these issues were shaped by things and people outside of the participants themselves.

## 6.2. EM whilst receiving HE abroad

This research adopted Walker and Fongwa's (2017) argument that graduate employability could be perceived as a type of "combined capabilit[y]" defined by Nussbaum (2011:21) as comprising both the "internal capabilities" of knowledge, skills, traits and abilities which could be fostered via HE, and external influences including social, cultural, economic and political opportunities for graduate employment. This definition clearly illuminates the fact that the factors contributing to graduate employability came from both the supply (internal capabilities) and demand (external conditions) sides. EM in this research was, as such, understood as the ways in which students (i) sought employability development from the supply side during their learning and living overseas, and (ii) interacted with external factors which facilitated or hampered their realization of employability development. The following section presents how EM was conducted via specific events, and how it permeated participants' overseas daily lives. This discussion is important, since it fits into this study's wider conceptualization of employability — a contextual and relational issue which should not be isolated from other parts of life. Moreover, comprehensively exploring participants' EM enables an in-depth understanding of why participants' employability-related expectations on receiving HE overseas (discussed in chapter 5) were realized or not. These findings could inform employers and HEIs about how to evaluate, and more importantly, help with the EM of students.

### 6.2.1. EM by specific events

Diary data indicated a variety of events in relation to participants' EM during the overseas year. As agentic beings, participants consciously chose to participate in some activities in order to enhance their employability, while sometimes they

engaged in activities without a purpose of EM, but realized their employability development when reflecting on their experiences. This section presents how participants' EM was conducted via curriculum learning, extra academic activities, career-related events, part-time jobs, volunteer activities and travel, discussing how these events were successfully converted into capabilities for participants' employability development, or in some other cases, the events failed in supporting participants to realize employability-related functionings.

### EM by curriculum learning

Curriculum learning was one of the most important components of participants' overseas lives and also an essential way for them to manage their employability. This was in line with the idea presented by participants in first-round interviews that academic progress was among the employability-related expectations of receiving HE abroad. Almost all participants produced diary entries on their curriculum learning, though the recordings varied in terms of specified levels and perspectives considered.

Session attendance was mentioned by many participants. Some entries detailed the session content together with participants' understanding of it. Participants sometimes stated that they were not sure if the knowledge they learnt was required by employers, but they wrote it down out of their own interest. This phenomenon reflected an understanding of EM following CA (versus competences approach) that individuals need substantial freedoms to opt for what they value in terms of their intrinsic pleasure and importance, rather than in response to external demands (Lozano et al., 2012).

Entries about sessions illustrated learning processes, for example, pre-session preparation and classroom performance by which participants developed their learning habits and abilities. Many participants were initially shocked by the significance of pre-session preparation in the UK, which was not particularly required in China. However, students were the agents of their own learning, being able to actively shape their learning habits when they felt it was necessary for the

higher achievements they would like to make. The improvement in participants' awareness and the practice of pre-session preparation was found in later diary entries, saying that they

became better at listening to teachers with questions abstracted from pre-session reading and thinking, which enhanced their performance in classroom interactions and the efficiency of their knowledge digestion. (P23, W4<sup>23</sup>)

Making efforts to better prepare for and be involved in sessions was an important part of participants' EM, partly because they were enabled to learn more knowledge that could be applied in future work. Moreover, the improved learning habits could be transferred to the workplace, acting as a capability for further required skills and abilities.

In relation to classroom learning, another heated topic was groupwork, because here individuals were not only the agents of their own learning, but also played an instrumental role for others and interacted with others' agency (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). Their learning, or failure to learn, was shaped by both individuals, themselves and their peers. Lots of participants depicted their experiences of group discussion, presentations and performances with their classmates in their diaries. Some of these experiences were described as highly positive. Participants felt they became more open-minded by learning new knowledge, viewpoints and thinking patterns from others, and then digging into their own ideas in more depth. They also achieved better English proficiency and intercultural communication skills as a result (See also, Gu, 2016). Whereas cooperating with others could sometimes be challenging considering the individual differences in working attitudes, working styles and personalities, a few participants complained of the low efficiency of their groupwork because of the uncooperative groupmates who left them to bear extra workload to complete tasks on time.

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<sup>23</sup> W4: refers to diary week 4 of 9.

When talking about the roles they played in groupwork, a good number of participants identified themselves as “followers” or “supporters”, especially when they were grouped with students from other countries than China, since “foreign students were more willing to chair the leading role and some of them were bossy” (P21, I2<sup>24</sup>). It seems that few participants developed leadership in groupwork, which was in keeping with Phuong-Mai et al.’s (2009) findings that being a leader in cooperative learning did not fit East Asian students’ values, but it was not evident that they should be taken as passive group members, as some studies (Li and Campbell, 2008; Zhang and Xu, 2007) have suggested. On the contrary, in addition to resonating with Wang’s (2012) research which found that Chinese students supported groupwork through thorough preparation before group activities, absorbing groupmates’ suggestions and completing their assigned work to good quality, this research found that some participants labelled themselves as the “mediator” in the group who

reminded other groupmates to come back to the main topic when their discussions went too far away from the task, mitigated the conflict between aggressive groupmates, and bridged the active and non-active group members. (P14, I2)

We may tend to have presupposed a worthy gain from certain activities, for example, leadership from groupwork, but CA reminds us to respect individuals’ freedom to decide what to do or to be. It was therefore reasonable for participants to choose which roles they would like to play in groupwork, as long as they were able to acquire desirable functionings from doing so, in view of the position that groupwork was situated in within their broader EM priorities.

In addition to session attendance, further recording of curriculum learning was connected with conducting research and completing assignments, since the main

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<sup>24</sup> I2: refers to the second-round interview.

assessment pattern of social sciences disciplines is through essay rather than examination. Conducting research was described by lots of participants as exploratory, since the British teaching-learning style encourages students to explore their own interests and come up with individual ideas rather than working on the same topic determined by teachers and following teachers' thoughts. Comparing entries in later diary weeks to those in earlier ones, it was not difficult to see that many participants had made progress in discovering and exploring issues, proposing new viewpoints, and sharing ideas with others. Participants thought they were being trained to be more inquisitive, curious, suspicious, critical and even creative whilst learning in the UK. These functionings echoed the "learning disposition" in Walker's (2006:128) ideal-theoretical list of eight capabilities to be developed by receiving HE, which was detailed as "being able to have curiosity and a desire for learning. Having confidence in one's ability to learn. Being an active inquirer". With regard to the impact of these qualities on one's employability, it was interesting to see that a participant wrote "being curious and suspicious is a good trait but may cause trouble sometimes if you work for a conservative and bigoted boss" (P5, W5). However, more participants held positive attitudes toward expressing critical opinions in the workplace, since this could help "avoid making decisions in a rush or jumping to a wrong conclusion" (P3, W3). Being creative, moreover, would "enhance one's work efficiency" (P24, W7) and "make an employee irreplaceable" (P20, W1).

In terms of assignment completion, there was a clear process that almost all participants struggled with particularly in their first few assignments, due to lesser English abilities and/or unfamiliarity with assessment criteria, but the situation improved in term two when students made progress on academic knowledge, critical thinking and English expression. This progress was also found in Bailey's study (2005), and it again echoed "agency", a central concept of CA, which refers to individuals' capacities to shape their own circumstances (Sen, 1992). However, this research also revealed that participants' challenges came back again when they worked on their dissertations, which were more difficult than module assignments. While participants were pouring out struggles with dissertation writing in their

diaries, they gave many positive narratives about both the strategies they used to handle their work and the confidence they gained in overcoming their difficulties. For example, some participants recorded that they set goals such as “I must read three articles today” (P4, W7) or “I need to write at least 500 words a day from now on” (P30, W8); they also expressed “a sense of achievement” (P21, W7) when they reached the goal and felt their “perseverance and persistence were greatly developed” (P14, W8). These expressions were less frequently found in the early diary entries in relation to academic dilemmas. The implication we could take from here was that “agency is not a fixed state” (Walker, 2006: 35); HE was believed to be responsible for providing students with substantial “agency freedom” to realize sustainable “agency achievements” (Sen, 1992:56-57). Linking to EM, many participants in fact expressed in their diaries more than once that they “could see a weak connection between the assignment itself and their employability” (P11, W3), but the process of conducting and reporting research taught them how to explore an issue step by step, with their skills of searching for information, problem discovery, data collection and analysis, and English presentation showing great progress. These skills were believed to support participants in better handling tasks in future work.

Another key point that frequently emerged in participants’ entries about research and composing assignments was critical thinking, a Western-centred concept (Atkinson, 1997) that was never encountered by many Chinese students until studying in Global North tertiary institutions. Participants believed that, due to receiving an education in the UK, they became more rational and rigorous in their approach to research. When facing up to an issue, they tended to “acquire information from different sources, explore the logic behind different perspectives, rather than make judgment subjectively or follow authorities superstitiously” (P7, W9). These functionings were believed to carry enormous significance by participants on their employability, not only in terms of their performance and reflection in the workplace but also during their decision-making process of choosing and transferring between employment. “Practical reason” was taken by Nussbaum (2011:34) under her list of ten central capabilities of human beings, to

refer to the capacity to plan and construct one's life based on critical and intellectual considerations (see also Walker, 2006:128). Employment issues, as an essential part of one's life, required well-reasoned judgement and choice. Achieving the ability to exercise critical thinking by receiving HE abroad enabled participants to perform well in terms of reflecting on their own characteristics, choosing preferred work contexts, and balancing work with other aspects of life.

While witnessing the achievements made by many participants on EM via curriculum learning, the fact could not be overlooked that the others' experiences were unfavourable when they struggled to adapt to the British learning environment, as they made the effort to do so, were disappointed at themselves and eventually chose to lower their expectations. I found in P26's diary entries that curriculum-related content had been discussed extensively in the first few diary weeks but gradually disappeared. We discussed her learning experience in the follow-up interview, and she said:

I was enthusiastic about my course, indeed... but I cannot adapt to the teaching style here. I felt my teacher taught me nothing in the class. ... I tried to find answers by myself through reading books and papers, but my English is not that good. I read slowly. ... I felt I could never know I was wrong until the low scores appeared on my assignments.

(I2)

As can be seen here, the transformation from the resources (sessions and reading materials) to capabilities (being able to learn valued knowledge and do well with assignments) and then functionings (achieving desirable learning outcomes and good results for assignments) was influenced by conversion factors from both the internal side (English competency) and external side (teachers' support). The absence of any factor would lead to a loss of one's capabilities and functionings. Responding to the loss, some chose to "give up" (P26, I2), making no further effort in curriculum learning, and turned to other things they valued; for example P26's later entries showed that she spent more time expanding her networks. Some

others sought alternative strategies to approach their original goals. As written by P12 who also suffered academic difficulties,

I used to choose topics for assignments out of my own interests, but the results were bad. Examiners said my topics were interesting, but I was not in a good logic to discuss it. This time I chose a topic that is not that impressive, but that I could manage well. (W6)

By this strategy, P12 achieved a higher score for the subsequent assignment, which was a realization of functioning. However, she felt “not that happy” because she achieved this by “lowering the requirement of [her]self” rather than “actually enhancing [her] academic abilities” (W6). Compromising so as to be more realistic, and then lowering one’s expectations of oneself is defined as *adaptive preference* by CA. Adaptive preference is explained as situations where people have to adjust their preferences to match their possibilities, as constrained by external circumstances (Nussbaum, 2000). Here we may reasonably attribute participants’ adaptive preference of academic improvements to the insufficient learning resources and support provided by education suppliers to international students, but also to the course lasting for only one year, a relatively short time for participants (and for HEIs to facilitate participants) to gain the academic achievements they expected. However, what cannot be neglected was that some participants made this choice under a rationale that weighed up academic achievements and overall pleasure in life. When the pressures brought about by academic learning disrupted their lives, they chose to “make a compromise with [themselves]” (P19, W6), saving themselves from “depression, setback and self-denial” (P12, W3). As discussed in the previous chapter, Chinese international students identify their overseas year as “living a life abroad”, with the academic improvement being just one aspect of their expectations. Not fully achieving the goal of academic progress was a pity, but not necessarily a destructive blow. By contrast, some participants believed it was reasonable to prioritize overall wellbeing of their overseas lives at the expense of losing some academic achievements. Linking this to EM, participants believed that these experiences

encouraged them to think over “what kind of work pattern [they] could accept and how to realize a work-life balance in the future”(P11, W7). These ideas imply that the significance of graduates’ EM may spread beyond the workplace to various aspects of individuals’ lives.

#### EM by extra academic activities

In addition to completing compulsory study tasks, participants also managed their academic-related employability by attending extra activities with an academic focus. Some participants made the effort to improve their English abilities by attending in-session language support modules. They tried to get more familiar with British academic learning by participating in workshops on critical thinking, avoiding plagiarism, referencing and data analysis. They also learned more specific skills such as SPSS<sup>25</sup> from related sessions, and accessed the topics they were interested in by attending guest lectures. Generally speaking, the diary entries on extra-curricular academic activities were more frequently found in term one. As reported by many participants in second-round interviews, they tended to attend as many activities as they could in the initial phase of their Master’s studies since they were curious about everything, but they became more selective as they came to understand more about their areas of interest, and were objectively occupied by heavier learning loads in the later period. Accordingly, entries on extra academic activities gradually decreased in term two and almost disappeared in term three. Moreover, the extent to which participants were willing to participate in extra academic activities was greatly influenced by the degree to which they connected academic achievements with career development; also, the specific academic achievements that were chosen to develop were determined by participants’ academic fields, targeted field of work and career plans.

There is not only a difference between students’ choices of developing employability by attending extra academic activities, but also a difference in

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<sup>25</sup> SPSS: a software package used for interactive, or batched, statistical analysis.

opportunities provided by different departments or teachers to their students. For example, a group of participants from one course reflected that they enjoyed multi-layered chances to access colourful activities, with some arranged by teachers as a part of a module, some organized by the department, and some that were open to all students of the university. By contrast, P2 from another department disappointedly said, “it was a boring community with very few research seminars or lectures, maybe because the department is poor” (12). Different departments had different resource organization and distribution; the situation is arguably more complicated when international students are involved, who may request the provision of resources to be more specific and/or diverse. Although CA does not stress the totality of resources and their distribution as an end in itself, the existence of available resources is a prerequisite to discussing how capabilities and functionings can be facilitated. Speaking to participants’ EM via extra academic activities, its realization constitutes at least four steps: (i) HEIs provided sufficient activities (resources) for students; (ii) considering their timeline (conversion factor), it was possible that students can engage in extra-curricular activities (capabilities); (iii) students choose to attend certain activities (choice) based on their interests and career plans (agency); and (iv) students acquire their valued employability-related achievements (functionings) through their chosen activities.

While some participants were dissatisfied with their academic experiences, the majority of participants in this research considered that their EM, via both compulsory and voluntary academic activities, was meaningful. This finding speaks back to the literature (Cranmer, 2006) which reports that academic learning is a less effective way of enhancing graduate employability. The contributions made by academic learning to enhancing participants’ employability included, but were by no means limited to, academic knowledge, learning habits, research skills, English proficiency, groupwork ability, critical thinking and learning curiosity. Nonetheless, participants varied in the extent to which they valued academic-specific abilities (e.g., research skills) as making a person more employable. It possibly depended on how much a person’s target job was related to the course being learnt and the academic skills that could be applied. An interesting example was that P32, who

reported the most negative academic experience among all participants, succeed in achieving an internship from one of the largest internet companies in China in May 2018, and she came back to China four months before her course completed. Her entries for the first six diary weeks were full of her struggles with and complaints about the difficulties she met in her studies and the depression they triggered. She regretted her decision to study abroad, since she felt “the experience was completely different from her expectations. [She] learnt no interesting or useful knowledge. It was a waste of time and money” (P32, W5). In the first diary week after her return to China, she wrote,

The main problem now is how to balance my dissertation and work. I need to be well-organized. ... Anyways, I have felt much better since I came back. Life in the UK was like a nightmare. I love my home so much. (P32, W7)

Studying in a country with a high-quality education is not a panacea by which everyone could enhance their academic abilities, since the adaptability to different teaching-learning patterns varies from person to person. Admittedly, the example of P32 was too extreme to be generalized, but it reminds us to be critical in evaluating the extent to which the improvement in academic achievements can shape ones’ employability, especially for those in social sciences disciplines, which may not be as skill-oriented as those in scientific or engineering fields.

#### EM by career-related activities

As reported in the first-round interviews, participants considered that performance in job seeking and recruitment to a large degree determined employment outcomes, after which one would own a platform from which to show increased employability by conducting and completing tasks in a work capacity. As such, participants managed their employability by attending career-related activities for the purposes of acquiring more information about the labour market, and enhancing employment-specific skills.

Informed by diary entries, in term one, many participants were enthusiastic about attending job-related workshops, such as those introducing job hunting websites, the MBTI<sup>26</sup> test, LinkedIn management, CV writing and interview preparation, but these activities were rarely mentioned later on in the year. The most common reason given by participants for not continuing to engage in these activities was that the “ideas delivered by these workshops were more targeted at finding jobs in the UK, but could be somehow different from those in the Chinese labour market” (P2, I2). Here again, we notice that the capabilities for participants to advance their employability were restricted by the resources available in the overseas HE contexts. Nevertheless, participants found the one-to-one CV check provided by the university’s Career Service helpful, since “the consultant edited the CV based on individual conditions and specific recruitment criteria” (P17, W9). More than half of participants turned to this service in term three when they were making the final preparations for their job searches.

Another concern proposed by participants after attending career-related activities, career fairs in particular, was that they were marginalized in employers’ recruitment plans. Diary entries on the experience of career fairs were brief and/or negative. The first point of dissatisfaction, as expected, was that the majority were UK-targeted and many positions were only open to EU students. In those with Chinese companies, employers showed significant preference for students in the Science, Engineering and Business disciplines. For the participants in this research, who were all from a social sciences background, they “hardly felt that [they were] the talents urgently needed by Chinese labour market” (P9, W2). Participants “could even not acquire substantial employment information from the career fairs, let alone accessing employment opportunities” (P13, W6). Participants’ experiences reflected CCG’s (2018) research finding that the largest disadvantage of current international returnees in graduate employments was a lack of understanding of Chinese labour market and domestic employers’ requirements.

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<sup>26</sup> MBTI: Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.

As discussed above, CA suggests that employability can be shaped by external factors in the form of social, economic, political and cultural dimensions. Here I would like to add a disciplinary angle which overlaps with other external factors: it is worth highlighting that, researching employability issues in HE, especially higher degrees, discipline is particularly important as graduates are likely to work in discipline-specific domains. The employability of these graduates is particularly affected by the unbalanced development among industries and the disciplinary-related inequality of employment opportunities. Moreover, as can be seen from participants' experiences, disciplinary inequality affects not only employment outcomes but also the process of EM.

Discussing the experience of career-related activities in follow-up interviews, the majority of participants felt that access to too few resources about the Chinese labour market was acceptable, because they had anticipated it before they chose to receive HE abroad. P8 described her experiences as "no disappointment, no surprise" (I2); here adaptive preference appears again. Meanwhile, there were a few participants who changed their expected work destination from China to the UK, who complained that they received insufficient support from the university, though they understood the university was somehow powerless given that the British labour market was not particularly welcoming for non-EU students.

Realizing the difficulties (e.g., visa constraints) to entering the UK labour market, participants, as stated in the first-round interviews, had adapted their preference of achieving permanent positions in the UK after graduation to accessing work experience in the UK, which would be a significant bonus for their future employment in China. However, this expectation seemed to be frustrated again; very a few participants accessed work experiences during this year (in line with Li, 2013). Moreover, except for four participants who kept paying close attention to the work opportunities in the UK, the remainder gradually gave up after a number of failures. An interesting point worth sharing here is that some participants cared less about the employment *outcomes* and were psychologically prepared for failure

before deciding to engage in recruitment. P14 applied for a position at the Royal Bank of Scotland; she wrote in her entries,

I gained knowledge about the bank industry by preparing the interview, and developed some interview skills like what to wear and how to show confidence. More importantly, I understood more about myself. I realized that maybe I am not the person for banking industry.  
(W1)

I followed up on this in her second-round interview where the participant stated,

I just wanted to have a try. I am not very interested in the bank industry, and I didn't expect they would give a position to a Chinese person not from a business background. I just wanted to see what the job application and interview were like in the UK. (I2)

P14 did not obtain an offer from the employer. Explaining her failure, from the internal aspect, her academic background (and possibly abilities) did not match the employer's expectation; from the external aspect, the position might be more suited to a local or EU applicant than a Chinese one. However, the unsuccessful outcome does not signal meaninglessness for the entire experience. The participant accomplished many functionings during the job application process, including banking knowledge, interview skills, gaining an understanding of British recruitment methods and, more importantly, a clearer self-awareness of (un)expected work areas. These functionings could positively contribute to further capabilities for the participant's career development. This story, as representative of the aim of the thesis as a whole, addresses a shift from *outcome* to *process* and a *dynamic analysis* of employability and employment issues.

#### EM by part-time jobs

In rare cases, participants (two) did find paid part-time jobs in the UK. P18 worked in a Chinese restaurant for four months, which almost changed her career plan in

its entirety. She had worked for a Chinese university as an administrative officer for three years and “never thought about staying at UK after graduation” (P18, I1). However, she gradually fell in love with life in UK, and her part-time jobs equipped her with the abilities to work in the catering industry. Moreover, her boss of her part-time job invited her to apply for the Tier 1 Graduate Entrepreneur Visa together based on their Chinese food business. Though this plan was finally aborted for various reasons (which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter), she felt that “a seed had been buried in [her] heart that [she] would set up [her] own catering business someday, even though [she] had to return to the original career plan” (P18, I2) for the moment.

P6 experienced an extraordinary journey working for a music festival, where she acted as a server in a dining car. Lasting for three days with a working shift of 9 am-7 pm, unremittingly serving customers during the dining times, she experienced a high-intensity job. Instead of specific work abilities, achievements recorded by her diaries about this job were more oriented towards working values.

One of the most touching things is that before the music festival closed, a customer we served before came to us and said ‘The food you made was really delicious. My friends and I enjoyed it so much. Thank you all.’. I felt so proud, though the food was not made by me. I just have a sense of achievement. It is significant for a job to provide people with a sense of achievement, isn’t it? (W7)

Bringing about less substantial changes to career plans or employment abilities, but still being identified as employability-related, P6’s experiences suggested that it was too narrow an approach to explore employability purely from a skill/competency perspective. The part-time jobs these two participants engaged with were not related to the course they learnt, and hence might be powerless to support their employment in course-related areas. Nonetheless, the experience “left [them with] an unforgettable memory” (P6), constituting a vital facet of their overseas journeys. More importantly, they expanded their imaginations as to what a meaningful job

could be and “what kind of life [they] would like to lead” (P18). Studying abroad, through broadening one’s horizons, encouraged people to pursue and reach more internal capabilities to work towards gaining what they valued.

In addition to obtaining work experience in the UK, this research also found that three participants worked on part-time jobs for their previous employers in China while receiving overseas HE, with P1 providing online teaching, and P4 and P14 working on document interpretation. In contrast to the above-mentioned two participants, these part-time jobs were highly relevant to these participants’ courses and target work areas, therefore giving them opportunities to “put the new knowledge and skills learnt in the UK into practices” (P4, W8), making them “more confident in [their] professional abilities” (P14, W8). Furthermore, working for previous employers was also an important way for these participants to “maintain connections with [the] Chinese labour market” (P1, W7). Recently an increasingly heated debate (Harris et al., 2015; Marsh and Oyelere, 2018; Xu, 2015) has developed about international students, regarding their gains in terms of international capital and loss of local capital. Chinese international students regarded being essentially isolated from the Chinese labour market as being of particular disadvantage to potential employment after returning (CCG, 2018). Responding to this, this study argues that it is necessary to distinguish Chinese international students by their previous work experience. Students who never built up solid connections with any employers in China might have a stronger sense of isolation whilst receiving HE abroad and/or sense of disorientation when entering the Chinese local labour market. However for people like the above-mentioned three participants (one with a seven-year working life and two with successful internship preceding the year of receiving HE abroad) could actively (P1 had confirmed the online teaching work with her previous employer before studying abroad) or even passively (P4 and P14 were unexpectedly contacted by their previous employers for interpretation tasks) maintain contact with the Chinese job market, and possibly face fewer shocks after returning.

### EM by volunteer activities

Engaging in volunteer activities was another important activity suggested by participants for EM. More than half the participants acquired volunteer experience. When recording volunteer work in diaries, participants tended to give detailed descriptions about their experiences, but ultimately reflected on relatively few employment-specific or professional skills acquired. This phenomenon suggests that volunteer jobs are somehow separated from real employment. However, participants linked volunteer activities to their employability due to the development of generic skills such as communication skills, cooperation skills and English proficiency, though, again, these generic skills were more often just listed in the diary entries rather than explained in detail.

It was noteworthy that the perceived value of working as volunteers by participants went far beyond making them more employable, notwithstanding the fact that some admitted that volunteer experience would “gild” their CV. A more widely acknowledged viewpoint was that volunteer activities enabled them to “go out of the campus and get more connections with local society” (P27, W2), since many volunteer roles aimed to serve local schools, hospitals, museums and residential communities. By doing this, participants felt they “were involved in local life in more depth” (P18, W4), “buil[t] up [a] deeper understanding of British culture” (P3, W2), and “access[ed] more ideas from both other volunteers and [the] people they served” (P29, W5). These achievements fulfilled participants’ expectations of broadening international awareness and intercultural experiences during their HE abroad.

More importantly, volunteering enabled participants to build up a new identity as “global citizens” (P19, I2), since they were motivated to “be more willing to help others” (P29, W1), “have more sympathy for vulnerable people” (P22, W4), “respect and be kind to everyone regardless of nationality or race” (P3, W2) and “have a stronger sense of social responsibility” (P17, W6). These functionings echo the concept of “world citizenship”, one of three essential parts (critical thinking and imaginative understanding being the other two) of Nussbaum’s (2006) model for

cultivating younger people's capabilities via education. She emphasizes the importance of equipping young people with the ability to establish a self-identity as citizens beyond their local region or cohort, but with the recognition, understanding and concern of all human beings (ibid). In this sense, international HE is of great consequence, given that local education is unable to provide students with an immersive intercultural experience that allows for a deep understanding of the community with a shared future for humankind, though people are talking about "internationalisation at home" (Wächter, 2003:5), meaning that those who cannot afford international education experiences still interact with international students and staff. Participants associating the self-identity of a world citizen with their employability showed that they did not simply perceive employability as specific skills and abilities within the workplace, but gave it a broader and deeper meaning relating to one's outlook on the world, life and values.

#### EM during travel

It was perhaps surprising that many participants reported that they developed their employability during travel, albeit that two or three participants believed traveling was totally irrelevant to employability. Previous research (Davey, 2005; Bamber, 2014) revealed that enjoying the convenience of traveling across Europe was a factor motivating Chinese students to study in the UK. Travelling, as such, was an important component of UK-educated Chinese students' overseas lives. Nonetheless, to my knowledge this is the first study demonstrating a relationship between Chinese international students' travel and their EM.

Many participants regarded travelling with peers as a form of teamwork, where they shared out the pre-travel work and managed the journey together. Among the entries about travel, surprisingly, unpleasant interpersonal interactions were more frequent than the pleasant ones, with disagreements, dissatisfaction, debate or even quarrels occurring among tour mates. This finding, to certain extent, fitted the reality, since the majority of participants travelled with people they met after studying abroad where there was "a lack of familiarity between travel partners in terms of living habits and traveling preferences" (P5, W6). However, P2 who

recorded several instances of unpleasant travel experiences explained in the follow-up interview, “my travel experience in fact was not as bad as shown on diaries. It was written like that because overcoming difficulties was more related to EM.” (I2)

In addition to interpersonal relationships, participants faced many other challenges whilst travelling, for example a flight was cancelled suddenly, a tour mate lost her passport just before the night of departure, a booked train was missed, and theft or even robbery occurred in Europe. Participants had been extremely worried when they were involved in these matters, going through a very difficult process of tackling the associated problems. However, they reflected that they ultimately benefited from these experiences, given that they learned to become calmer when facing complicated circumstances and more capable and confident at problem-solving.

Discussing the employability enhancement resulting from travelling, another noteworthy point referred to the spirit of exploration. Instead of group tours, participants preferred independent or semi-guided tours, with their footprints tracking throughout UK, Europe and North Africa. P21 recorded how her emotional conditions changed from anxiety to excitement when visiting an unfamiliar British city alone. P5 narrated her fantastic ten-day journey with a tour mate in Morocco, including three days and two nights in the Sahara Desert. She summarized her experience,

A wonderful exploring journey! ... We made every effort to talk with local people who are not English speaking, using translating applications and body language! We explored the splendid culture of Morocco, a third-world country located in Africa and believing in Islam. Isn't it attractive? ...Oh gosh, sometimes not exploring but taking adventures. I used a COMPASS to identify directions in the Sahara. Google map? No way! NO INTERNET THERE! (W2)

P5 was still excited when we followed up her Morocco journey in the second-round interview and told me that she had become a consultant expert in Moroccan travel among her network. She even published a sophisticated journey manuscript on a popular travel information-sharing website. This journey triggered her enthusiasm to “discover the beauty of the world and share it with more people” and the spirit of exploration could “spread out to [her] study and future work” (P5, I2).

P6 recorded part of an experience during her journey in Switzerland, where she and her tour mates ignored their initial travel plan and made a sudden decision without fear of taking the associated risks.

Today is quite special for me. We got off the train at a town we didn't know. We were simply captivated by the beauty there. We spent some time in that town without a plan, wandering and taking photos. I think sometimes people need to break down the rules or plans to explore the world, just following the heart, being flexible, and chasing every opportunity to make the life experience unique. (W6)

In line with the idea of P6, a reason given by some other participants why they thought exploring was linked to employability could be as simple as “people with unusual life experiences might be more attractive” (P12, I2). Further, they argued that “studying abroad gave (them) courage to try something [they] had never done before” (P9, W9). People might be afraid of changes or taking risks if they never went out of their comfort zone. However, living abroad gave people a space where they could discover the extent, and perhaps limits of their own potential. Participants therefore believed that being adventurous would distinguish them from other competitors whose thinking and actions were occupied by traditional Chinese norms.

The travel experiences of Chinese international students is underexplored in the literature. Participants reported that travel was perceived by some of their peers or even teachers as a past time, a way to enliven a tedious studying life or, more

disappointingly, a sign of squandering money. This study, being unintentionally enlightened by the data, addresses the role of travelling in international HE from a perspective of EM and beyond. As discussed above, while travelling, the abilities developed by participants included but were not limited to groupwork, problem solving and exploring. Participants' diary entries on travel also mentioned, though without detailed explanation, plan making, time management, intercultural respect and understanding, communication skills, expanding horizons and broad-mindedness, which comprise the soft currencies understood by participants as a vital part of their employability (as discussed in chapter 5). The improvement of these abilities carry significance not only in terms of one's employability but also on being and becoming "fully human" with both intrinsic and instrumental values (Nussbaum, 2002:290).

#### 6.2.2. EM permeates overseas daily lives

Education, per se, is a basic capability with intrinsic value, but at the same time can be instrumental to other capabilities (Saito, 2003). Receiving HE abroad, adding an international characteristic to education, enhances its capacity for proliferating further capabilities. The cultivation provided by international HE not only depends on serious learning, but extends to almost all aspects of students' lives. In this research, data collected by diaries and follow-up interviews indicated that, in addition to specific activities or events, participants' EM practices also permeated their everyday overseas lives.

As discussed in the previous chapter, participants in this research had low expectations regarding the accumulation of social capital from receiving HE abroad. However, many entries were related to participants' socializing and networking, which they interpreted as a part of their EM. An interesting phenomenon was that the majority of recorded socializing practices were between participants and other non-Chinese people, while in the follow-up interviews participants reported they made more friends with other Chinese students than UK or other international students. At issue was the fact that the boundary between network and friendship was ambiguous: Walker (2006:128) referred to "being able to form networks of

friendship” when explaining the capabilities of “social relations and social networks”. Empirical research, in concluding that Chinese (or Asian) students tended to fail to establish satisfying intercultural social connections with local students in particular (Bailey 2005; Wu and Hammond, 2011), possibly combined these two concepts together. Different people have different perceptions of networks and friendships. In the second-round interviews, several participants talked about their social lives by differentiating between these two concepts. P1 explained,

For me, to identify a person as a friend, we need to meet, chat, exchange ideas, and reach agreements a lot. With other Chinese students, we were more likely to make it, while with people from other countries, it could be more difficult. But it doesn’t mean I built no connections with people from other countries. (I2)

There seemed to be an agreement among participants that

it becomes more difficult to make new friends in adulthood than in childhood. [Adults] extremely treasure their existing friendships and actually feel excited about new friendship, but kind of avoid being proactive. (P30, I2)

Moreover, some participants identified themselves as “anti-social” when socializing was “not out of intrinsic desires but for utilitarian purposes” (P25, I2). Participants reported that they did not realize they were developing social abilities while staying with their Chinese friends, instead, they simply enjoyed the time together. However, they could have had a stronger awareness that they were trying to acquire some social functionings such as intercultural understanding and communication skills when they networked with people from other countries (see also Li, 2013). During some social occasions, participants did not seek friendship, but were more likely to learn how to establish and maintain various types of relationship with classmates, flatmates, friends’ friends and even strangers from

different backgrounds. This idea echoed the capability of “affiliation” advocated by Nussbaum (2011:34), referring to being capable of engaging in “various forms of social interaction”. Participants believed that these social experiences could make them more open-minded and enhance their abilities with regard to “getting along well with colleagues and building up collaborations with new partners in [the] workplace” (P10, W8). Moreover, “good social skills strengthen one’s adaptivity” (P12, W5) which would help people to be involved in a new environment more easily. These perceptions explained why networking across nations and cultures was more likely to be associated with EM.

In addition, participants also suggested that intercultural socializing made them more introspective about their own culture. Some participants accessed others’ ideas about China. P16 wrote about her experience of regularly attending tea parties held by a local couple:

Many people in the party are curious about China. I found foreigners’ views on some issues of China were different from those of Chinese people. ... But I feel I become more tolerant when people hold different opinions from me. I try to understand the logic behind their ideas instead of pleading against them without thinking. (W6)

Many participants agreed with P16 that listening to others’ ideas was not to determine who was right and who was wrong, but to “make oneself think out of the box and become more impartial and unprejudiced” (P27, W9). Also, establishing cultural identity and confidence was not a matter of refuting others, but a means to “face one’s own strengths and weaknesses in a rational way and keep pursuing progress” (P20, W8). Furthermore, it was notable that some participants argued that being more open-minded did not rely on communicating with foreigners, but could be achieved by discussions among co-nationals, as “Chinese society was so complicated that the differences between north and south, east and west could be huge” (P21, W2) and worthy of further consideration and thought.

Reflecting on participants' socializing practices, numerous ideas of CA were implied, including not only capabilities at a foundational level, such as being able to live with and react to others outside oneself, but also more advanced capabilities such as achieving mutual recognition and respect for others (Nussbaum, 2011; Walker, 2006). Considering the international context where participants' socializing practices took place, the capabilities and functionings they accessed could be further advanced, reaching the level of intercultural communication, understanding and cooperation. These achievements, alongside their potential derivative capabilities, enhance employability, particularly given the circumstances of the current Chinese labour market, which has become increasingly inclusive and diverse. Employees are required to be open-minded, tolerant to individual differences, and be able to operate within a heterogeneous working group.

In addition to socializing, participants' EM practices were also embedded in the various minutiae of their daily lives. During the course of the year, participants felt that they were always facing multiple tasks that needed to be handled at the same time, even on very ordinary days without unexpected issues. Many people who had not previously identified themselves as being organized learnt to carefully plan their studies and daily lives so as to survive such task-filled situations. Time management frequently appeared in participants' entries, no matter whether recorded during term time or holidays. Participants noted that social sciences courses tend to have a small number of contact hours. They sometimes had only two days with sessions every week. This course setting, on the one hand, gave participants more flexibility to conduct their studies and lives in their own way, whilst on the other required them to schedule and to exercise considerable self-discipline. P28 who started her Master's course immediately after completing her Bachelor's course left the diary form blank for five days and wrote in the summary of that diary week,

I felt guilty this week since I almost did nothing meaningful except for attending two compulsory sessions. I think I have not yet adjusted myself to such a flexible learning style here from the highly-structured

one in China. I was used to being occupied...😬<sup>27</sup> I need a written plan, or at least a to-do list. I can't waste my time anymore! (W1)

This kind of maladaptation was found not only among participants who directly transferred from the Chinese HE to the British one, but also in some participants who had been away from HE for long periods. As P31 with three-years' work experience wrote,

Having plenty of free time can be more challenging than having [a] tight schedule. I [am] used to a busy life. However, I am a bit disoriented at the moment. I need to fill up my agenda. (W5)

Being able to intellectually plan, reasonably conduct, and critically reflect on one's life are essential capabilities for people. They are defined as "practical reasons", which are included in both Nussbaum's (2011) list of Central Capabilities and Walker's (2006) education list of capabilities. What can be further understood from the above two participants is that the ability to plan one's life is always required, no matter whether one is in education, the workplace or indeed any other context; people need to adjust themselves in response to the opportunities and challenges at the different stages in life. Leading an independent life in an unfamiliar environment represents an invaluable opportunity for participants, regardless of their previous experience, to prepare themselves as more responsible individuals in terms of planning for their future careers and broader lives.

Alongside making a plan, challenges were also hidden in the process of implementing their plans. As can be seen from the diaries, more than half of the participants struggled with procrastination during their overseas year. Holidays were the most challenging time, since participants needed to balance their studies and other activities such as traveling in Europe and socializing with friends. A perfect plan was sometimes negated by certain lack of self-control. Numerous

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<sup>27</sup> 😬: emoji of embarrassing.

anxieties and struggles showed in the entries when a diary week coincided with a deadline week. Realizing the importance of adhering to their plan, participants adopted certain strategies to discipline themselves. A good example found in a number of participants' diaries was that they set specific goals for their everyday learning tasks. As reflected in their later diary entries, fortunately, the majority of participants were "making progress on time management and self-discipline" (P23, W7) and gradually "finding a work-life balance" (P2, W8). Nevertheless, four participants reported in the second-round interviews that they wanted to defeat their procrastination in terms of subjective will, but failed in terms of their actual actions. They acknowledged the importance of being self-disciplined no matter whether in a learning or working environment and acknowledged that the "workplace is much crueller where few excuses could be tolerated" (P11, W3), but were sometimes "defeated by their laziness" (P26, W7). Furthermore, the follow-up interviews clarified that the procrastination was related to participants' insufficient English language abilities and low academic self-efficacy, which coincides with Lowinger et al.'s (2014) research findings. Faced with a similar difficulty, some succeed in overcoming it but others not, suggesting individual differences in acquired agency which impact the formulation of capabilities and the realization of functionings. International HE (and education more broadly) is assumed to contribute to the development of students' agency; however, it is not a means for everyone's agency to reach a given, expected level.

In addition to individual factors, conducting one's life as planned was also challenged by unexpected issues, whose occurrence did not only upset individuals' original agendas, it even caused considerable trouble. P7 depicted an experience where her laptop broke down suddenly when her deadline for two assignments was imminent.

I came back from London, arrived at my dormitory, ate my dinner, and planned to write my essay after watching an episode of my favourite anime. Everything went on perfectly! However just when I was watching, I accidentally knocked over my mug. A whole mug of water

was spilled on the keyboard of my laptop. ... My laptop was broken, and my heart also... 😭<sup>28</sup> (W3, Monday)

The main task for today should be essay writing, but I was too upset to write. I made an appointment with the IT Service and then went to the library. I tried my best to cheer up but failed. I just edited the introduction part a bit with low efficiency. I then gave up and started to watch a variety show... Guilty! (W3, Tuesday)

It is annoying to get up with a deadline in mind! 😞<sup>29</sup> Worse still, IT Service have announced the complete death of my lovely laptop. ...The deadline is coming! I lost lots of materials, literature and writings! Although I have expected the worst case, I still feel desperate when it really happens. I went back to my flat and poured out all my complaints to my flatmate. At dusk, I calmed down and went to the library again to continue my writing, leaving the matter of buying a new laptop to after submitting. (W3, Wednesday)

Submitted my essays on time! 💪<sup>30</sup> It was a horrible week... but I survived!!! I forced myself to pull my attention back to the assignments no matter how stressful and anxious I was. Actually, I know my abilities of dealing with emergencies and controlling emotions still need to be improved. I may have to face more complicated situations in workplace. The biggest enlightenment the overseas experience gives to me is that life will be better as long as you never give up fighting with difficulties! (W3, Summary of the week)

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<sup>28</sup> 😭: emoji of crying.

<sup>29</sup> 😞: emoji of crazy.

<sup>30</sup> 💪: emoji of strong.

The occurrence of an accident was always alongside a series of other troubles, individuals having to save themselves from the dilemma by engaging various abilities at the same time. In the above situation, P7 asked help from the appropriate experts (IT service officer), while finding an alternative way to work on her assignments (writing in the library), prioritizing more important tasks (buying a new laptop after assignment submission), asking for comfort from others (chatting with a roommate), and working under pressure and a bad mood (focusing on writing even though being anxious). Being able to overcome this accident shows that P7 had obtained some functionings in problem-solving, and the experience further strengthened these functionings and generated more capabilities for avoiding similar mistakes and dealing with other emergencies in the future.

P7 without doubt was not the only one who experienced unpleasant situations. Previous sections have mentioned unexpected troubles during participants' travels. There were also some recordings about accidents that occurred in the course of daily lives, for example, P4's friend suddenly fell down some stairs and was injured; P9 lost her bank card and it was illegally used to spend a large sum of money. A common challenge faced by more than half of the participants during this overseas year was illness. Participants noted discomfort and expressed sensitive emotions, for example they felt lonelier and more homesick whilst ill. However, things could be extremely challenging when participants were unwell during an assignment or exams. As P13 wrote,

I am too uncomfortable to cook, but I cannot eat without cooking, cannot take medicine without a meal, will get sicker without medicine, and cannot write my paper if getting sicker. (W6)

Many participants started to take regular physical exercise when they realized that bodily health was the premise of the success of all other actions. Moreover, surprisingly, many participants wrote in their diaries that "physical health could be crucial for one's employability" (P7, W3) since "bad health condition could not be an excuse for missing work" (P17, W5). This idea was not proposed by anyone in

the first-round interviews, and indeed physical condition has received almost no attention from previous research on Chinese international students, even though bodily health is acknowledged as a basic necessity for human beings (Venkatapuram, 2013).

Receiving HE abroad is never a simple matter. It was not surprising that a great number of diary entries recorded participants' struggles, frustrations and even depression during this year. An abundance of studies (e.g., Misra et al., 2003; Leong, 2015) have illustrated the study loads of international students. However, this research argues that study-related difficulties are just a part of the numerous other difficulties that international students have to overcome. Diary data elaborated the psychological and emotional activities when participants were disturbed by a variety of harmful incidents such as being burgled, breaking up with partner, and losing a family member. P6 said in the second-round interview,

The overseas life is not as glamorous as what we post on WeChat. We show parties and travel, but never show studying day and night in the library, let alone the extremely miserable times we had to get through only by ourselves.... Those not studying abroad could never know the hardship of it. (I2)

Facing difficulties, some participants occasionally chose to release their distress by drinking alcohol. An extreme example was found that P15 "got a habit of intemperance in term two, getting drunk four or five days a week" (I2), since he was on the verge of breaking up with his long-distance girlfriend. However, participants more frequently used positive strategies to manage their emotions, for example through the company of friends, turning to movies or books for comfort, and seeking help from well-being consultants when they were in poor or detrimental psychological states. Moreover, some participants reported that keeping diaries (both solicited and private ones) had a therapeutic effect (Roulin et al., 2007; Furness and Garrud, 2010). Participants tried different ways to extricate themselves from their dilemmas and to pursue peaceful overseas lives. Surviving

challenging circumstances, participants felt that their resilience had been greatly improved. They learnt to “stay positive and optimistic when being bewildered and never give up regardless of the horridness of any situation” (P13, W8). P3 quoted a sentence from *The Old Man and the Sea* in her last entry, saying that “A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (W9).

In this overseas year, participants not only developed their abilities to network, problem solve, tackle emergencies, tolerate uncertainties and overcome difficulties, but also acquired psychological traits such as resilience, endurance and persistence. Many participants, moreover, reckoned that they “might never be forced to overcome so many difficulties if [they] did not live abroad independently” (P28, I2). Walker (2006) suggested “educational resilience” as one of the essential capabilities that should be fostered by HE. According with this, this research further argues that the resilience (and other abilities and traits) fostered by international HE go far beyond the educational setting. Receiving HE abroad enables international students to become more capable of facing the challenges inherent to a highly competitive workplace which requires employees to work under pressure, deal with emergencies, maintain a positive attitude, and recover quickly from bad conditions. Furthermore, the capabilities and functionings acquired from being independent overseas provide international students with more courage and intelligence to plan, manage and create a fulfilling life in the future.

### 6.3. Influential people involved in EM

Acknowledging the central role of the future employees themselves in EM, and considering the diary, a self-report form, being adopted for data collection, it was understandable that participants concentrated more on their own perceptions, practices and reflections about EM during data generation. However, participants were not isolated in their EM; on the contrary, EM was situated in the interactions between participants and the things and people outside them. Following the previous section which focused on the *things*, this section spotlights the *people* who were intentionally or indeed unintentionally involved in participants’ EM during the

overseas year. These people acted as conversion factors which affected how participants converted resources of overseas HE into their valued capabilities and functionings. This section discusses how these people's actions affected participants' EM practices and career plans.

### 6.3.1. New acquaintances

Participants' employability-related experiences were closely connected with the people they met in the UK, including their teachers, classmates, flatmates and other new acquaintances. Teachers, without doubt, were particularly influential on participants' EM. In the second-round interviews, many participants reported that, how much they enjoyed a module was essentially determined by the teacher, in terms of teaching style, provision of resources, activity organization, provision of feedback, interaction with students and personal charm. Teachers' impacts were also reflected in the diary data. Some participants recorded that teachers were supportive in their assignment completion.

I had a meeting with my supervisor today to get her feedback on a part of my draft dissertation. She praised me, saying that I made great progress on organizing my ideas logically. Thank to her support, I feel I am in a good rhythm of working on my dissertation. (P28, W8)

Others, however, complained that they could not keep in touch with their teachers at all.

He abandoned me... actually not only me but also all students in his group. None of us heard from him. Does the department pay him for treating students like this?! 😡😡<sup>31</sup> (P22, W6)

There were also some participants who felt confused as to why they had effective discussions about assignments with tutors, but ultimately received bad results.

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<sup>31</sup> 😡 : emoji of angry.

I received the result of an assignment today. The score is so low that I cried. I cannot understand why. We have discussed my draft and she (the tutor) said I was on track. However, what she wrote on the feedback sheet was totally different from that in our previous meetings. Why did she agree with me and then give me a low score? Why??! 😭😭😭<sup>32</sup> (P32, W4)

Teachers acted as a conversion factor, converting the learning resources to students' capabilities to gain academic achievements. Their impacts could be more noteworthy for international students who have entered a new education system; their impacts could be further heightened for international students on one-year Master's courses because they are keen to gain effective guidance regarding their academic adaptation. However, effective guidance was not easy to provide due to the differences in educational culture and individual requirements.

In addition to academic experience, teachers also influenced participants' EM by altering their career plans, especially regarding their decisions about pursuing a PhD. Again, this influence could be both positive and negative. Some students were encouraged by their teachers and obtained helpful information and suggestions from them, while others saw their enthusiasm dampened by their teachers who expressed doubt about them having sufficient academic ability to achieve a PhD. Two participants reported in the second-round interviews that they ruled themselves out of further study due to receiving negative feedback about their abilities from their teachers.

In the formal learning context, classmates also played a role in participants' EM, with their impacts less serious compared to that of teachers. As mentioned previously, participants became more open-minded by acquiring new ideas, angles and thinking patterns from collaborative learning with classmates, gaining the

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<sup>32</sup> 😭 : emoji of crying.

abilities to tackle interpersonal and intercultural matters. Moreover, classmates, co-nationals in particular, inspired participants to rethink their career plans. Many participants shared ideas with their Chinese classmates about the current Chinese labour market, the development of their course-related industries, and their plans for their future careers and lives. P28 wrote in an entry,

I didn't want to work in a big city because of the high living pressure. However, I changed my mind after chatting with some classmates who also came from small cities of China. I felt I was not the only one who had to bear the pressure. If others can do it, why can't I? (W2)

With the popularization of receiving education abroad, the family background of Chinese international students has become increasingly diverse. Exchanging ideas with other Chinese students, participants not only learnt from those who had different family background from themselves, but also found a sense of belonging with those having similar backgrounds. These idea exchanges encouraged participants to think over how to take advantage of familial capital to support career development, whilst at the same time helping with how to contest familial conversion factors (e.g. disadvantaged financial condition) which might impede their ability to choose and conduct their working lives as originally anticipated.

Within participants' overseas everyday lives, another group of new acquaintances who impacted participants' EM was their flatmates. The majority of participants shared accommodation with others during their Master's year, some with flatmates from China, and others having flatmates from different countries. As reflected in the diary data, participants living with co-nationals were less likely to feel lonely, suffering fewer of the difficulties frequently caused by different lifestyles (see also Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006), but their social circle tended to be limited to Chinese people. The majority of these participants reported in their follow-up interviews that they did not regret having no foreign flatmates, though many of them mentioned that their spoken English might have improved more if they had lived with foreign nationals instead. In terms of participants living with UK and

other international students, they on occasion encountered culture shock or even conflict, but gained an increased number of opportunities to develop broader networks, achieve a greater enhancement of their English communication skills (see also Wu and Hammond, 2011), and felt a stronger international atmosphere during this year.

An interesting situation revealed by this research was that several participants who returned to China in advance of submitting their dissertations said they made this decision as soon as their Chinese flatmates left. P2 reported in the second-round interview,

I indeed had planned to return in advance, say August, but was not intending to come back so early, the middle of June. The most direct reason was that my flatmate suddenly decided to return. It wasn't that I couldn't stay without her, but... the feeling was hard to say. I don't know. I just came back. (I2)

Participants might not have taken their employability into consideration when they made the sudden decision to return to China in advance, but this decision brought about certain impacts. On the one hand, it made participants' one-year overseas journey rather shorter; on the other, it facilitated their ability to start job hunting earlier than their peers. According to the second-round interview data, most of the participants who came back early found jobs or internships shortly after returning. Receiving HE abroad was reasonably regarded to enhance graduate employability, but sometimes had negative impacts on their employment opportunities. For example, international returnees almost missed the "golden season" (from March to June) for graduate recruitment in China, because of the different lengths of the Master's programmes offered in China compared to overseas. Moreover, while capabilities are always seen as influential in terms of choices, the phenomenon displayed here reflected the effect of one's choice (returning to China in advance) on enlarging — or diminishing — further capabilities such as allowing job hunting to start early.

In addition to the people who were regularly engaged in participants' overseas lives, this research also found that their employability-related experiences were unexpectedly influenced by people they happened to meet just once. P6 who had a part-time job in a music festival wrote in her diary,

The coach we took was broken. We waited for rescue for several hours. When we were finally picked up by the rescue coach, some of us were so furious that we poured out [our] bad mood to the coach driver. However, the driver showed great tolerance to us, comforting us and trying to cheer us up. I was so impressed by his positive attitude. I cannot believe a person could keep active and positive while driving from 10 pm to 2 am. He is loyal to his work. (W7)

This unique experience taught the participant to be patient and positive when facing unexpected situations. Moreover, the rescue coach driver made her think further about professional values, ethics and attitudes. A few more participants also reflected in their diaries on their understanding of professional values when they were impressed by the working spirit of others (e.g. a museum guide met by P30 in Paris; an NGO officer met by P10 at an event). This aspect was emphasised as being amongst one's employability set across industries and nations (Wang et al., 2009; Jackson, 2016; Harun et al., 2017) and as also being an important component of one's agency regarding being a reliable employee.

### 6.3.2. Old acquaintances

Together with the new people involved in participants' lives in the UK, their old acquaintances, including old friends, colleagues and employers, also had certain effects on their EM practices. As presented in the previous section, three participants gained opportunities from previous employers or colleagues to work in part-time jobs while studying abroad. Working was an excellent way for participants to keep in touch with the Chinese labour market, with their previous employers and colleagues, representing invaluable social capital which would be

beneficial to their future careers. Moreover, the career trajectories of previous colleagues, as P1 noted, could be “the proxy for [her] when planning [her] own career” (P1, I2), which means she learnt lessons from her previous colleagues’ employment transition experiences, and reminded herself to avoid similar mistakes.

In terms of old friends (in China or other countries), all participants maintained connections with them in the overseas year. These people provided significant emotional support for participants, especially in the initial stages of their overseas year. Nearly all participants agreed that they were more eager for and reliant on friendship than they expected during this overseas year. While new friends provided more substantial company and shared more happiness, old friends, even though being separated in space, were more helpful when participants were in negative states, since the old friends understood them better and could thus more effectively help with their emotional issues. Therefore, old friends made positive contributions to participants’ mental health, which was a capability of any other activities they conducted. These findings are consistent with Ye’s (2006) research, indicating that while making the effort to adapt to the local context, Chinese international students still strongly rely on their previous networks in China to maintain cultural and mental belongingness.

From another perspective, old friends also acted as information providers for participants. For example, P2 found that a friend was doing similar research to her, though based in a different country. They exchanged ideas through video chat, and her friend sent her useful documents that were difficult to access in the UK. Moreover, participants also gained employment information from China from their old friends, and shared career plans with each other. An interesting finding revealed by the second-round interviews was that some participants expressed a preference to work in a city where some of their friends were already living. These participants were from one-child families, for whom friends were similar to siblings while they were growing up.

Old acquaintances, despite being geographically separated, were deeply involved in participants' overseas lives. Their emotional company benefited participants' mental wellbeing in the new living environment; the information they provided supported participants' learning and working practices; the friendship between them in some cases shaped or influenced participants' plans regarding their careers and broader future lives. Old acquaintances were not only a positive conversion factor facilitating participants to access additional capabilities for career development, they also brought instrumental values by which participants could develop their agency freedom and agency achievement so as to conduct their lives in a more meaningful manner.

### 6.3.3. Partners

Partners were another highly relevant factor to participants' EM, in terms of both the process and long-term career plans. During the overseas year, ten participants maintained long-distance relationships with their partners. The impacts on participants' employability-related experiences were both positive and negative. Six participants thought that their partners were by-and-large supportive, although small quarrels brought about by geographical separation and the time difference were inevitable. Three of them said that they unexpectedly enjoyed the separation. As P2 shared,

I know someone is there. I can seek help from him whenever I need. In the meantime, he cannot hamper me from doing anything I want. I feel I enjoy more freedom this year. (I2)

However, this was not necessarily the case for everyone. P15 reported that their long-distance relationship undermined his wellbeing during his overseas year, because "a large amount of [his] extra-session time was invested in having video chats with [his girlfriend]" so that he missed many activities; worse still, frequent quarrels kept him "in constant anxiety" (P15, W4).

Partners, without doubt, were more influential in terms of participants' emotional state than any other groups of or individual people. Whether participants could receive positive support from their partners was particularly influential as to whether they could enjoy their overseas lives; partners were also influential regarding whether participants could effectively involve themselves in their own interests regarding employability development, knowledge acquisition and any other experiences they valued.

Furthermore, partners were also a significant factor in terms of participants' career plans, with the geographical work destination in the spotlight. The majority of participants in this research are in the generation affected by China's One Child Policy. Things can be complicated when a couple makes the choice of the city they want to be their permanent residence, if they are originally from different cities, and each of them is an only child, considering the familial responsibilities they have in different cities. For some, one of the partners makes a compromise and moves to the other's city; others choose a third city in which to live; this choice is usually made by couples where neither comes from a big city. Also, considering much further ahead, couples also need to reach agreement as to the roles they will play in the future family and workplace, so as to achieve a work-life balance. All of these complex issues had an impact on the EM of the participants in this research, regarding the choice of different employability-related capabilities and functionings valued by different work destinations, and the extent to which participants would like to devote themselves to EM, considering the work-family arrangements they had set for themselves.

#### 6.3.4. Parents

Parents, compared to other groups of people, engaged less in participants' EM practices in their overseas lives, but played a significant role in their career plans. While more than half of the participants' parents completely respected their choices, some parents were reported as being "bossy" with regard to their child/children's choice of employment. Taking the location of work destination as an example, some parents, strongly influenced by Chinese traditions, requested

that their child/children should return to their hometowns, since they valued the community that resulted from having all the family members together. By contrast, some parents from underdeveloped regions did not “allow” their child/children to return to their hometowns, but urged them to challenge themselves in big cities. Moreover, some participants could not reach agreement with their parents as to what types of jobs they should choose. Parents preferred employment “provided by state-owned sectors, which were stable, less risky and less stressful” (P13, W8), while participants thought working in this kind of context would “wear down their willpower” (P13, I2), and hoped to work somewhere with challenges, innovation and passion. Since different work contexts have different requirements for employees, participants adjusted their specific EM practices while negotiating with their parents about their career plans.

Poring over the data, it was found that participants in a relatively young age group (20-25) were more likely to feel that they were somehow being controlled by their parents regarding their graduate employment choices. On the contrary, participants who were older (over 25) and with more social experience tended to actively involve parents in their plans regarding their careers and future lives. P1 told a story of how she made the final decision to continue her studies through a PhD in the second-round interview.

It’s not an easy choice. I have initiated this idea (pursing a PhD) since I came here, but I couldn’t ensure that due to lots of concerns: four years, around £100,000 of expense... I need to calculate the input-output ratio. More importantly, I was not sure about my parents’ attitude to it. I cannot go without thinking about their feelings. I am not as young as the fresh graduates. I am bearing more social and familial responsibilities. ... The turning point came when my parents visited me during the Easter holiday. They said they thought studying here for a longer time would be great for me. I was so surprised! You know my parents share a strong identity of the family. ... It could be said that the support of my parents let me finally made up my mind. I feel really grateful to them. (I2)

It is not uncommon to see in traditional Chinese culture that the parent-child relationship is particularly emphasized. There is an old Chinese saying “*yang er fang lao*” (养儿防老) which means “bring up children for the purpose of being looked after in old age”. People’s career development, to a large extent, determines whether they have the financial ability to support the elderly. So, it is understandable why many Chinese parents participate in the decision-making process that helps decide their children’s career plans, and why many Chinese students place a particular importance on their parents’ thoughts. China is becoming more open, and the impacts of these traditional values are diminishing; the One Child Policy, by contrast, objectively exacerbates the interdependence between parents and children. This point, attracting researchers’ attention (e.g., Zhang and Goza, 2006; Deutsch, 2006; Ng et al., 2013), was stressed by many participants in the second-round interviews when they talked about the external factors impacting their employability, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

This section has discussed how participants’ EM was affected by the people who were involved in their overseas lives, including their parents, partners and both new and old acquaintances. These people constituted a strong force, or, as described by CA, “conversion factors” affecting participants’ EM practices and longitudinal career plans. From one perspective, participants’ EM was at least partially impacted by the capability sets and achieved functionings of the people associated with them (e.g., developing employability abilities by learning from others). From another perspective, the possibility that participants could convert resources into capabilities for employability development and substantial employability functionings was also affected by these people. This section therefore argues that, when exploring the external factors influencing individuals’ EM (versus employment outcomes), more emphasis should be placed on the familial and interpersonal conditions they are situated in, in addition to the broader climate

such as economic development and (inter)national policies, given that the families and associates are the live players in the process of EM.

#### 6.4. Changes to students' ideas about careers

In contrast to many studies on graduate employability which focus on the employment *outcomes* achieved by graduates (e.g., Wilton, 2011; Michavila et al., 2015), the final round of data collection in this research retained the focus on EM, involving more discussions from capabilities perspective on how participants evaluated their EM practices in the overseas year, how their understanding of employability had been shaped, and how these practices and understanding in turn worked on their updated career plans. This is in line with CA which places more emphasis on processes than outcomes, and directs one's EM at human development rather than human productivity (Sen, 1999). The aim of the discussions in this section was to manifest how the one-year overseas experience affected (or otherwise) Chinese students' ideas about their career and broader future lives.

##### 6.4.1. Different job-seeking stages

When the second-round interviews were conducted, participants were at very different stages of seeking employment. Seven participants had come back to China, with two of them in internships, one preparing for PhD Entrance Examinations in China, one in a part-time job while working on her other Master's degree at her Chinese university, and another three still looking for jobs. Six participants decided to stay in the UK until their visas had ended instead of going back as soon as their courses had finished. Two were enrolled in intensive programmes for course-related certificates; another three were hunting for job opportunities which could provide them with a work visa; another did not aim to work in the UK but simply wanted to enjoy another half-year of British life. The remaining participants intended to return to China after submitting their dissertations. Except for very a few who did not start job hunting, most had applied

for some form of employment. However, none of them had secured a job at that time, since nearly all employers require face-to-face interviews in China.

Interpreting the different job-seeking stages of participants from the perspective of CA, these did not necessarily reflect participants' abilities to make career plans and practice job hunting. Rather, to a certain extent, participants showed how job seeking was valued by them at the moment, how they varied in their "hunger" to enter or return to the labour market, their self-confidence in achieving their desired employment outcomes across time, and their attitudes towards the position of work in their broader lives. As P24 who simply wanted to stay longer in Britain stated,

It is not that urgent for me to find a job. I won't be unemployed. I had worked for a long time and will work for longer. I just want to chase this opportunity to enjoy my time in this lovely country. Work is not and should not be the whole life. (I2)

The example here echoed an essential argument of CA, i.e., evaluation should be based on the capabilities of individuals to choose what to do or be (Sen, 1992), rather than adapted to a unified or homogenized standard for certain outcomes, regardless of individual preferences or differences.

#### 6.4.2. Self-evaluation of EM

In the second-round interviews, an overarching question for participants was "do you think you have become more employable now compared to one year ago?" Except for two giving negative answers, two-thirds of participants strongly confirmed their progress with regard to employability, while the remaining third thought they had made some achievements but were not sure about their competitiveness compared to others. Many participants gave further explanations for this question by mentioning the upgrade of degree, suggesting that academic qualifications were still regarded as influential in terms of employability. When

talking about the specific EM practices, participants' self-evaluation showed substantial differences.

Referring to the EM via academic learning, an almost total agreement was that participants had acquired more academic knowledge and gained a deeper understanding of conducting research, which they felt could positively contribute to their employability. Participants who were highly satisfied or highly dissatisfied with their academic experience were small in number. The majority felt that their academic learning mixed both gain and regret. In terms of the EM obtained via non-academic activities, the general satisfaction was higher than for academic learning, with a wide range of enhanced generic abilities reported by participants. This was not surprising, because the diary data also embraced more frequent and specific recording of non-academic activities and generic skill development than academic-related events and abilities. Also, soft currencies, discussed in Chapter five, enjoyed wider acknowledgement regarding their importance to employability. However, again, individual preference needs to be considered when comparing participants' practices and satisfaction with EM from both academic and non-academic perspectives. For instance, P3 who had high expectations regarding academic improvement recorded several times that she gave up opportunities to travel and social events because she wanted to spend more time on her assignments (also revealed by Li and Stodolska, 2007), whilst P17 asked for an extension to her dissertation due to a volunteering opportunity in Africa. So, participants' self-evaluation of EM through different experiences varied depending how they mapped their employability set to their career plans.

With regard to EM in daily lives, participants offered rather positive reflections, with the personal traits developed appearing most frequently. Describing their entire year in Britain, participants used words such as "meaningful" (P30, I2), "fruitful" (P29, I2) and "unforgettable" (P10, I2). Summarizing the most significant personal development of this year, participants noted being "more confident" (P15, I2), "bolder" (P4, I2), "more independent" (P7, I2) and "more mature" (P9, I2) instead of listing specific abilities. The enhancement of personal traits, compared to

specific skills, was reported to have greater impact on convincing participants that they had become more employable as a result of their year overseas. Again, this idea was also indicated by diary entries where participants gave more detailed and emotion-filled narratives explaining why their improved personal traits would benefit their employability. Participants, in the follow-up interviews, further stated that whether or not the specific skills that had been enhanced to a desirable level still needed to be tested in a real work context, but personal trait development was fully confirmed by the participants themselves. Participants' perceived stronger employability enhancement from their improved attributes reflected a resonance with CA's argument that the value of pursuing employability is in essence directed towards one's development and actualization.

#### 6.4.3. Updated understanding of employability

As discussed in Chapter 3 (p.73), EM is an iterative process according to CA. Participants' EM during this overseas year was, to a large extent, guided by their conceptualization of employability; at the same time, the process of participants' EM through receiving HE abroad in turn shaped their ideas about employability and future career, and their updated ideas again influenced subsequent EM practices. Moreover, participants' foci on EM were found to vary in response to different events and across different stages of their overseas journey. From participants' diary entries, it was not difficult to find focus shifts from one aspect of employability to another. The entries for the last two diary weeks included more reflections on how their employability might be shaped by factors out of their control, and this phenomenon lasted until the follow-up interviews.

Acknowledging the central position of internal capabilities in one's employability set, and recognizing their own progress with regard to these aspects, participants shared more in the second-round interviews about the understanding they had developed of the impact of external conversion factors on their employability. An interesting phenomenon that was noted was that when we discussed factors that were out of the participants' control in the first-round interviews, they were more likely to share others' stories and express views objectively. However, in the

second-round interviews, when they themselves were facing the labour market without any protective screen, they expressed the real feeling of how powerless they were in the face of these factors. From their narratives, I could feel their stress with regard to some such circumstances.

While participants who wanted to find jobs in the UK reported that the visa policy troubled them the most, the majority of participants targeting the Chinese labour market shared their concerns regarding gender prejudice not only in the workplace (also discussed in chapter five) but also in terms of societal norms, together with the impact of the One Child Policy – and indeed its abolishment – on their working and personal lives. Many participants mentioned that men appeared to be more welcome in the Chinese labour market (or possibly worldwide), regardless of industry, sector type or position, and that men were even becoming “more popular in traditionally women-dominated areas such as preschool education and nursing” (P10, I2). Participants’ claims were not groundless. According to a reliable investigation, approximately one-fifth of recruiting advertisements for China’s national civil service in 2018 specified “men preferred” or even “men only” (Qin, 2019). The preference for men was stronger in the private sector. A common excuse given by employers was that they were legally required to cover the costs on female employees’ maternity leave. Some companies in China, as participants realized, provided shorter or even no parental leave for male employees, so that men had fewer absences because of parental responsibilities than women. Employers’ concern about maternity leave costs have been exacerbated since the One Child Policy was finally relaxed in 2011 and completely abolished in 2015, which means the maternity leave of women employees could potentially double.

It was not only about the job hunting stage that many participants mentioned gender inequality in long-term career development and work-life balance. In addition to the widely discussed issues such as gender pay gap (Fortin et al., 2017) and the “glass ceiling” for women’s promotion (Glass and Cook, 2016; De Jonge, 2015), participants elaborated on complicated situations they were facing. As noted by P17,

The demand of women in today's society is too high. We are required to develop careers while taking good care of families. I am the only child of my parents, my boyfriend also. If we get married and have two children, it means we two need to take care of four elders and two juniors. Do you think it would be realistic for me to be a housewife even if I agree? No! I have to make financial contributions to the family. However, at the same time, is it possible for me to completely devoted myself to the career? No. The housework division is always gender unbalanced no matter for a housewife or a professional woman. Worse still, if one day the couple must sacrifice one person`s career to the family, it is highly possible that the wife would be the one; otherwise, she would be blamed for having no sense of family responsibility. (P17, I2)

In line with P17, a number of participants, either out of intrinsically placing higher value on the family or due to being forced by the traditional identity of the women role, expressed the idea that they would possibly have to make certain compromises to family life with regard to their careers, even though they did not currently face this choice. A significant point stressed by women participants was that women`s dedication to the family should be recognized and respected. "The value of women should not be underestimated or denied even if they do not create or create less financial wealth for the family." (P14, I2) As for the men`s opinion, the three men participants in this research suggested that they paid little attention to balancing career and family. They personally endorsed gender equality, but recognized the difficulty of addressing the long-lasting gender bias in both the workplace and their family lives.

It was obvious that participants still faced many challenges in terms of their employment and employability after returning to China, with these challenges closely connected to broader political, cultural and social values in China. Facing up to such external conversion factors, participants somehow felt powerless, but they did not give up the attempt to improve their individual circumstances. It was

noticeable that, in the first-round interviews, when participants were asked to define employability based on their own perceptions, the majority followed an ability-orientated description. However, as shown in their diary entries, and indeed as confirmed in the second-round interviews, they realized that, even just from the supply-side perspective, one's employability was not purely determined by ability but also one's overall package of internal capabilities.

However, a point to note here was that a number of participants stated that they were initially enlightened in their thinking about employability from broader perspectives when the researcher introduced the complicated conceptualization of this term at the end of the first-round interviews. Further, their understanding was increased whilst working on the solicited diaries, where the various aspects relating to employability were listed, which kept reminding them of the depth and breadth of this term. It might be suggested that the interventions from the researcher and diary method could have influenced the process by which participants developed an understanding of employability. Nonetheless, in the first-round interviews the conceptualization of employability was explained *after* participants had expressed their own ideas. During diary research, the data collection tool only prompted the angles by which to connect participants' various experiences with their EM, but did not release guidance on specific content. Thus, what is to be understood as employability-related experiences were finally based on participants' own interpretations. The diverse and distinctive data on participants' experiences and their interpretations of the experiences, as achieved by diary research, demonstrates that this approach respects the autonomy of participants regarding data generation.

#### 6.4.4. Ideas about career plans

The second-round interviews also explored participants' updated ideas about future career after the overseas year. The first main finding was that most participants did not establish more specific career plans, which to some degree echoed their lack of satisfaction with EM via formal career-related activities (as discussed in 6.2.2.). Furthermore, the majority of participants did not demonstrate

any particular changes about their ideas about areas of work, geographical destinations and sector types, except for increased emphasis on the international characteristics of work contexts. This finding somehow deviated from the diary data, which suggested that participants had acquired new ideas from others about career development. Some participants responded to this apparent contradiction by saying that their ideas indeed kept fluctuating, but what they were trying to do was to “clarify their ideas, make a better choice, rather than completely alter the initial plan” (P11, I2). Others added that “there is a distance between thought and reality” (P27, I2), which reflected the fact that participants’ preference for career progression might be adapted by insufficient opportunities in the extremely competitive graduate labour market in China (see also, Huang, 2013).

Although most participants’ career plans were not modified to any great extent, there were some exceptions. Obvious changes were found in participants’ PhD plans. Among more than ten participants who had previously mentioned pursuing a PhD, only one had gained such an offer at the time the second-round interviews were conducted, with two still in the preparation or application stage, while all the rest had given up on this idea. Some participants completely abandoned their PhD plans as they found “both their academic enthusiasm and academic ability were not strong enough to support the completion of a doctoral course” (P21, I2). However, six participants reported that they were only temporarily putting aside or pushing back their plans to pursue PhD studies because they would like to accumulate more work experience before embarking on a PhD, and also, more prosaically, that financial concerns was another influential factor.

If the altered PhD plan was more attributable to participants’ internal capabilities, the changes in target work destinations (geographically) were more impacted by external conversion factors, with the participants’ partners being the most influential. P20 began a relationship with a Japanese man and decided to follow him to Japan after graduation. Her career, and even her entire life, had to be replanned. P28 was determined to stay in the UK because she had developed a relationship with a British Chinese person. The most important thing for her at that

moment was to “stay in the UK legally, regardless of the type of job” (P28, I2). She was working as a sales assistant in a department store. In section 6.3, partners’ impact on EM and career plans was mentioned as a common issue faced by almost all non-single participants. However, in the two cases illustrated here, participants’ career (or life) plans were dramatically altered by relationships established in their overseas year. Studying abroad created the capabilities for these two participants to live an entirely different life to the one they had envisaged, but one that they nevertheless valued.

Following the career plan, the second-round interviews also questioned participants about what they valued the most when choosing a job. The interesting finding here was that nearly all participants placed salary as the first, or amongst the first three factors, which was not observed in the first-round interviews when the same question was asked. Although participants insisted that potential career development, being able to apply knowledge and skills in practice, aspiring enterprise culture and a harmonious atmosphere were still essential to their desired employment (as proposed in the first-round interviews), they had become more realistic when closer to entering the labour market, especially those who planned to work in big cities where house prices and living expenses are extremely high. As P3 noted, “career ideals need to be based on economic independence” (P3). Here we saw that economic independence served as an essential capability for participants to nourish other career-related functionings.

This section has illustrated the participants’ different job-seeking stages, presented their self-evaluation of EM as conducted during their overseas year, and analysed their updated ideas of employability and career after receiving HE abroad. The key argument in this section was that international HE made positive contributions to participants’ confidence with regard to employment, deepening their understanding of employability, and providing them with more insightful thoughts about career. However, these issues were inevitably shaped by individuals’ internal capabilities and external conversion factors.

## 6.5. Summary

The principal aim of this chapter was to map the key issues of participants' EM during their one-year Master's journey and to show the impact of receiving HE abroad on participants' graduate employability and long-term career decisions. This chapter, guided by CA, elaborated findings from the diary study and second-round interviews regarding how participants pursued internal capabilities to enhance their employability, how external conditions affected their EM practices, and how their career-related abilities and thoughts were shaped by receiving HE abroad.

Regarding participants' EM practices, an overarching finding was that these were not only connected with specific events, but also embedded in their overseas daily lives. Specifically, participants managed their employability via academic learning within and beyond their curricula. Most participants saw some improvement in academic abilities, even though they were varied in terms of perceiving the impacts on their employability. Participants also managed their employability via work-related activities including career events, part-time jobs, and volunteer work. Their satisfaction with this part was relatively low because of the few opportunities available to work in the UK, insufficient connections with the Chinese labour market, and discipline-unbalanced resources and opportunities to enhance employability. Travelling, rather than being a past time, was associated with participants' EM, given that abilities developed during travel carried significance not only with regard to their employability but also on the becoming and being "fully human". In conducting lives overseas, participants achieved both enhanced abilities and developed personalities which they regarded as transferable to the workplace.

In addition to managing internal capabilities, participants' EM was also shaped by external contexts, with familial and interpersonal dimensions standing out among the associated contextual factors. Participants' EM practices were influenced by important "others" including their parents, partners, new acquaintances in the UK and old acquaintances in China who were actively or passively involved in participants' overseas lives. Reviewing participants' entire overseas year, an

intertwining between participants' understanding of employability, EM and career plan was found, where participants initially managed employability based on their conceptualization of employability and career plans, after which the process of EM in turn shaped their ideas about employability and future careers, and the updated ideas again influenced their subsequent EM practices.

Moreover, this chapter argues that international HE is both effective and ineffective in terms of supporting the graduate employability of international students. From the positive dimension, receiving HE abroad equipped participants with capabilities to realize certain functionings which would have otherwise been difficult to achieve without their international learning experience. These functionings could nourish further capabilities relating to participants' graduate employability and long-term career development by distinguishing them from Chinese domestic graduates. Nevertheless, from the negative dimension, participants to various extents were isolated from the Chinese labour market while receiving international HE. As students in social sciences, participants were disadvantaged in the sense of attracting the attention of both host universities and Chinese employers. Furthermore, receiving HE abroad could not solve the real-time career-wise problems that participants had to face after returning to China, because these problems were closely related to unchangeable personal circumstances and more powerful external conditions, which prevented participants from freely making their preferred career choices.

## Chapter Seven Unexpected but Reasonable: Exploring the Complexity of Chinese International Students' EM and Overseas Lives

### 7.1. Introduction

Whereas the previous two chapters analysed data across the participant group, this chapter brings the motivations for receiving HE abroad, career plans, EM practices and conversion factors relating to EM together in longitudinal narratives. As discussed in section 4.6., the adoption of narrative analysis shifted the focus of the data analysis from *what* happened to participants' EM during the overseas year to *how* participants make sense of their EM (Bryman, 2016). The idea of constructing narrative analysis was triggered by the unique stories of EM showcased by some participants' diary entries, and finally confirmed after the second-round interviews when participants interpreted their EM experiences by positioning EM at the wider scope of their complex overseas lives.

This chapter focuses on the narratives of four selected participants. Their stories are set out to demonstrate how their motivations for receiving HE abroad and initial career plans guided their EM practices, which conversion factors influenced their EM, how participants were affected by these factors, and how their EM during the overseas year in turn worked to update their career plans. Constructing comprehensive narratives of four participants' experiences, this chapter aims also to challenge stereotypes of Chinese international students, namely that they are a privileged group in their home society and enjoy the possibility of leading lives they value during their overseas period and, indeed, after returning to China (i.e. students from rich families, as reviewed in Chapter two). There are at least two reasons for the necessity of breaking the stereotypes of Chinese international students under the current globalized HE context. Firstly, as discussed in 2.2.4, the popularization of studying abroad has diversified the backgrounds of Chinese international students financially, geographically and academically. Studying abroad is no longer a choice that is only open to students from rich families or large cities

or with outstanding academic records. When studying abroad is no longer equivalent to an elite education, this drives the imperative to explore what international HE brings to students with different backgrounds. Secondly, the concept of lifelong learning has complicated the trajectories of Chinese international students in terms of their previous experiences (see on p.26). Chinese international students are no longer limited to “emerging adults” (Arnett, 2014:10), but include people in different age groups, with differing marital status and working and personal lives. This complexity also requires a dehomogenized analysis of Chinese international students to avoid overlooking the truth that is otherwise concealed by stereotypes. The data analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates participants’ EM and career choices being shaped by a complicated conversion factor set including previous experience, important “others”, individual agency, family background, relationship (or marital) status, financial condition and gender. It indicates the necessity of exploring Chinese international students’ overseas lives, EM and future plans in a case-by-case manner rather than seeing them as a homogenized group.

The four participants whose narratives are drawn out in this chapter were chosen because their identities and previous experiences distinguished them from the other participants, and more importantly their EM practices were unusual due to their personal circumstances. As special cases, the characteristics of their stories were perhaps not obviously apparent in other cases, but were to some degree common among these participants. In discussing each of the four participants, this chapter combines their narratives from the diary entries and the two rounds of interview, analysing the complicated circumstances behind their EM practices, career choice and broader life plans from a capabilities perspective. The following section first presents the four participants’ narratives separately, and then abstracts the shared conversion factors impacting their EM and career plans from the four individualized stories.

## 7.2. P18 Jingwen<sup>33</sup>

Jingwen left a deep impression on me in the first interview as being a person with a strong sense of her goals. She gained eligibility for postgraduate recommendation<sup>34</sup> when completing her undergraduate studies working as an administrative staff for her university in Beijing for two years. However, she turned down continuing her postgraduate study after the two-year working period, and chose instead to study abroad. When talking about the reasons for studying abroad at that time, she said “I really want to achieve a Master’s degree quickly, find a stable job, and fully settle down” (I1). Studying a taught Master’s programme in the UK therefore was thought to be a good choice, creating capabilities for Jingwen to obtain a degree in one year and to enjoy the preferential policies offered to international returnees in *hukou*, which would be positive in the sense of both her employment and goal of settling down. Jingwen’s strong sense of her intended goal was also reflected by her explicit career plan.

I prefer to continue the administrative work at a university. If I cannot find this kind of position, I may do administrative work in other state-owned sectors, but I think I can find a job at a university. (I1)

Guided by the career plan, Jingwen’s academic learning was highly focused on rethinking her previous work practices and preparing herself with more knowledge and abilities to do the job better. For the four core modules of her course, she completed assignments for two modules by exploring policies towards China’s HE which she had touched on in her previous work, so as to “know more about the background, purpose and value of the policy formulation”(W7). Meanwhile, her work experience enabled her to see “how these policies were implemented in a real context” (W3), which stimulated her insightful evaluation of these policies. Conducting research on policy-related topics to a large degree pulled her out of her academic dilemma. As she wrote in her diary,

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<sup>33</sup> The names of participants in this section are pseudonyms.

<sup>34</sup> The eligibility for postgraduate recommendation: getting a postgraduate position without examinations.

I found writing a paper seems not so difficult. I am quite familiar with this policy, and I do have lots of ideas to express. I wrote approx. 500 words this afternoon. I am no longer the person who can only write 100 words a day. (W3)

Coming back to her entry for the first diary week, there were also some records of assignment writing for a research method module.

I feel so miserable. I cried to my parents again while having video chat... I tried to follow the sample piece, but I just cannot express myself clearly. My English is just like shit!!! I feel I may fail to graduate... (W1)

We followed up her changes in academic learning in the second-round interview, where she still remembered her desperation when working on her first assignment.

Who can you ask for help? No one. Turning to teachers? The help they could provide was not to write the paper for you. Turning to classmates? They were also struggling. No matter who you turn to, they can only comfort you or give you some advice, but in the end, you had no choice but to type word by word by yourself. (I2)

Facing difficulties, Jingwen, like some of the other participants (e.g., P26 and P12, as discussed in section 6.2.1), began to lower her academic expectations to release her stress while continuing to study hard, where the adaptive preference identified by CA can be seen. She comforted herself, "I only need a score of 50 to pass" (W2). However, as she gradually made progress in learning, she "came back to the high requirement of [herself] and the high expectation of academic achievement" (W6) (which also happened to P28 and P9). This phenomenon reflected participants' agency in changing their undesirable learning conditions and the successful conversion from existing capabilities (P28's work experience on education policies)

to further functionings (P28's progress on academic learning) Moreover, in contrast to many other participants whose struggles emerged again during the dissertation period, Jingwen's research progressed smoothly, again owing to her previous work experience. Jingwen's research for her dissertation was a comparative study on student support systems in Chinese and British universities, with this topic in line with her main purpose for receiving HE abroad: "to explore the institutional settings of British universities and how they deal with student crisis cases" (I1). She believed that figuring out these two issues would benefit her work practices as an administrative fellow whose work was highly relevant to student experiences. When conducting her research, she recruited participants amongst previous colleagues and students. She "could do six interviews a day because [her] participants were highly cooperative" (W9). She completed her research and writing efficiently. However, she also reflected some negative effects of her work experience within her academic learning.

My work experience to some extent limited my thoughts. I focused too much on the issues I had met in the previous workplace. I found my classmates' research topics were far more interesting than mine, for example, catering provided by universities. I was too lazy to explore new things; also, sometimes I preferred playing safe. (I2)

Discussing Jingwen's academic learning, it was not difficult to reveal that her previous work experience acted as a two-sided conversion factor. On the one hand, this work experience enabled her to locate herself in an empirical context to understand the knowledge, which facilitated her learning and even saved her from the adaptive preference of lowering academic expectations. On the other hand, the work experience created a comfort zone for her wherein she completed the learning tasks with less effort, which demotivated her from exploring a broader knowledge, which may in turn have yielded additional benefits and capabilities for her future career.

In addition to academic learning, Jingwen's "focus" was also reflected in her activity participation. She attended almost no events on expanding specific knowledge or skills, instead involving herself in various experiential activities that she tried to compare with similar ones in China. For example, she engaged in volunteer work several times and found that "the cooperation between volunteer activities and local communities in Britain is better than that in China" (W4). However, after participating in the organization of a postgraduate conference, she felt her "Chinese university did better on that than [her] British university" (W6). Also, for socializing, as she said in the first-round interview, she did not reject friendships that formed naturally, but paid less attention to deliberately developing her network for instrumental purposes, because "what [she] wants to do in the future has nothing to do with socializing in the UK" (I1); instead, she devoted more effort to maintaining connections with her friends and colleagues in China, who would play more positive conversion roles in her future career and life in various ways.

From March 2018 (W5), Jingwen's life began to change when she obtained a part-time job with a family workshop for Chinese cuisine, whose owners were a Chinese couple. During term time, she was only able to work limited hours, but her meticulous work performance was appreciated by her employers. Starting from the Easter holiday, she began to work the maximum hours that her visa permitted, which completely altered her pace of study and life.

I moved to their house, working in the daytime and writing my assignments at night. My female boss is a PhD student in her writing-up year. Every night after finishing work, we went to her office to write. Although it seemed that I spent less time on my assignments, my efficiency actually improved. You know the deadline was there...5000 words, 15 days... you must write some words out every day anyway. My last two assignments were written at night. I completed them on time and got good results. (I2)

Doing this part-time job to some extent distracted Jingwen from her academic learning, but enhanced her abilities in “time management”, “work efficiently” and “multitasks tackling” (W6), which were the functionings achieved from the studying process but also the capabilities required to do many types of work generally.

A greater influence brought by this part-time job was the change in Jingwen’s career plan. Her bosses invited her and another partner to “apply for the Tier 1 Graduate Entrepreneur Visa together based on the Chinese cuisine family workshop” (W7), which created a significant capability for Jingwen to set out her career and new life in the UK. Jingwen was very excited, because she found she “became eager to stay longer in the UK, where she could foresee the possibility of an easier and happier life” (W7), despite the fact she had labelled herself a “degree chaser” (I1) who would return to China as soon as she graduated. Jingwen began to seriously discuss this issue with her parents and her long-distance boyfriend. Nevertheless, she did not receive a positive reaction from any of them.

My boyfriend is firmly opposed to my stay in the UK, because he believed it would lead to the end of our relationship. Actually, he is still in my future plan. He could pursue a PhD degree in the UK after his Master’s study in China. However, he is indecisive and afraid of uncertainties. I don’t know how to persuade him... (W8)

Here we clearly see, as discussed in section 6.3, that a person can act as a conversion factor to another’s capabilities and functionings. Becoming a positive or negative conversion factor was determined by the person’s agency. In Jingwen’s story, her boyfriend was a negative conversion factor because of his narrow vision (he had never been abroad) and his “indecisive” personality. Similar to her boyfriend, Jingwen’s parents, who had lived their whole lives in a small town in the southeast of China, could not provide any substantial advice to her, but simply felt that “investing £50,000<sup>35</sup> on this business was a burden and risky” (W8). Her

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<sup>35</sup> T1 visa requires £50,000 from each applicant.

parents' opposition was a stronger conversion factor, or even a deciding factor of Jingwen's capability to apply for the T1 visa, since she could not afford such a large amount of money without her parents' support.

The last straw that crushed the plan to stay in the UK as entrepreneurs was the withdrawal of the third partner, because his parents demanded that he return to China. His withdrawal meant Jingwen was the only graduate in the team.

My bosses don't graduate this year. They could be the members of my team, but I will be the only candidate. It means I need to face the whole selection process alone. I am not confident to handle the panel. My parents and boyfriend don't support me. I feel isolated and helpless.

(W8)

The lack of internal capabilities (being able to face the selection process alone) and the negative external factors (opposition from boyfriend and parents and partner's withdrawal) finally made Jingwen give up the application. Talking about this experience in the follow-up interview, Jingwen still could not help sighing, and said it was a great regret for her. Losing the opportunity to apply for the T1 visa, Jingwen also lost her passion for seeking jobs in the UK. She accepted the reality that she had to go back to China for the next stage of her life. The career plan she once firmly insisted on then became her adaptive preference. Nonetheless, the good news was that Jingwen kept collecting employment information in China during this overseas year; she mentioned this fact in her entries almost every diary week. She further explained in the follow-up interview that the reason why she could access lots of employment information was that she was still in the WeChat chatting groups she joined when working as an administrative staff in her Chinese university. Collecting and sharing employment information was a part of her previous work. The majority of the group members were administrative staff in different Chinese universities and human resources staff in different companies and institutions. They kept sharing resources with each other so she could get this information without much effort, and more importantly some job positions were

only open to a small range of people. Here, we saw an example of a positive conversion factor, where Jingwen's previous colleagues converted employment information to her capability to find a position in the Chinese labour market.

Jingwen frankly stated,

I never worry that I couldn't be employed. What worries me is that the pressure I have to bear in China is actually much bigger than that in the UK. (I2)

Born in an underdeveloped small town, having been admitted to a top-tier university in Beijing, Jingwen preferred staying in a top-tier city, even though she would suffer huge pressure in struggling to build a life there. Her parents suggested that she move to a second-tier city to live an easier life, but they respected her choices. As Jingwen stated,

My father said when he set foot in our town from his village for the first time, he thought the river in the town seemed much more spacious than that in the village. He felt that he must make every effort to stay in the town. So, he understands that I don't want to move to a less developed place after staying in Beijing for so many years. (I2)

Interpreting Jingwen's and her father's stories from a CA perspective, their *imagination* of valued lives had been extended by upward social mobility, and they were emotionally unable to accept a "reverse flow". Jingwen thus made the effort to find a foothold in Beijing as an outsider. In order to meet the requirements that would allow her to enjoy the preferential policies of *hukou* offered to international returnees<sup>36</sup>, Jingwen could not return early to China for job seeking even though she had completed her dissertation when we conducted the second-round

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<sup>36</sup> Chinese students staying overseas for degree learning for more than 360 days are qualified to enjoy the preferential policies of *hukou* in Beijing.

interview. Talking about her understanding of employability after her overseas year, she said,

I didn't think employability has anything to do with one's identity. Now I just feel the identity is extremely influential. People with Beijing *hukou* enjoy more priorities than those without; the permanent resident identity or a visa with work permit is a premise for working in the UK. It's unfair, but it's the reality. (I2)

Here the policy-side conversion factors for one's employability were put in the spotlight. Under China's current residential registration system, *hukou* is particularly important. For example, only people with *hukou* can buy a house in the local area; only children with *hukou* can enrol at local public schools<sup>37</sup>. Jingwen therefore preferred to seek an administrative position in a state-owned sector that was strong in terms of applying for *hukou* for employees. However, an associated problem was that those working for state-owned sectors earn much lower salaries than for private sectors or foreign enterprises, which might leave her in financial straits, considering the high cost of living in Beijing. Responding to this, Jingwen emphasized the value she placed on a family-work balance in her future life, which was another reason for her preference to engage in administrative work for a state-owned sector which was "boring but stable" (W9).

My boyfriend is more capable to be the main bread winner in the future considering our potential work areas. I think it's reasonable for one to be a breadwinner and the other a homemaker. Considering my lower ability to make money, I am willing to invest more time and vigour in taking care of the family, especially when I have children someday. (I2)

Many of the women participants in this research expressed a similar opinion on the division of household labour, which may also be impacted by their social sciences

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<sup>37</sup> Children can only be registered in the area that their parents' *hukou* belongs to.

background from which they “did not place a high expectation on [themselves] to make a fortune” (P10), and all the more so when some held traditional cultural beliefs of “sacrificing [oneself] to the family” (P12) (See also, Ji, 2015; Leung and Shek, 2016). Jingwen had put forward a view in the first-round interview that her struggle for a life in Beijing was not for her own enjoyment, but to provide her children with more resources and opportunities. Her ideas for money making and a family-work balance exactly reflected the idea advocated by CA (against HCT) that people’s value should not be measured by their productivity or economic wealth only, but rather that every individual has the right to decide how to lead a life based on their own life philosophy.

In the second-round interview, I found Jingwen had not completely abandoned the desire to live abroad, though we discussed many issues related to returning to China. Looking back on her overseas year, her thoughts were substantially shaped by her employability-related experiences. In the first-round interview, she said she was determined that she would return to China as soon as she graduated. However, it appeared more and more frequently in her diaries that she enjoyed life in the UK and made considerable effort to stay. After her T1 visa application failed, she “became more emotionally resistant to returning to China” (W9). Although she was unable to stay in the UK, “a seed has been planted in [her] heart” (W9) that she planned to work for a few years, “saving money, and possibly to study for a PhD in a country with more friendly immigration policy and then stay there” (I2). Receiving HE abroad, as Jingwen reported, has “enlarged [her] imagination, diversified [her] thoughts, and encouraged [her] to explore more possibilities of future life” (I2).

Receiving HE abroad unexpectedly shaped Jingwen’s story, albeit she had self-identified as a degree chaser. Her updated preference of career and life could not currently be fulfilled due to the constraint imposed by various conversion factors. However, the overseas experience provided her with a broader imagination of what a valued life could be, and more importantly equipped her with the capabilities and functionings required to lead this kind of life. Coming back to her previous career

plan was an adaptive choice under her then current situation, but should not be simply interpreted as a failure of her EM in this overseas year.

### 7.3. P19 Aizhen

Aizhen was one of the participants who had the most frequent personal contact with me during and after this study, mainly because she was preparing for a PhD application and sought information and suggestions from me. She informed me of her wish to do a PhD in the pre-research meeting, and kept updating me on her progress. Driven by the plan to pursue a PhD, and the high requirements for professional knowledge of her target work area, academic learning constituted the most important part of her EM in this overseas year. In contrast to many participants who recorded academic learning by briefly writing “I had a session today” (e.g. P2, W2), Aizhen recorded every session and seminar in its specific detail, including the topic, key arguments and her reflections. Nevertheless, her learning frequently did not go very well due to her relatively low English proficiency, which was also mentioned in her first-round interview.

Though English ability is frequently suggested as a barrier to Chinese international students from learning efficiently (Gu, 2009; Chen et al., 2017), it was unexpected that this occurred with Aizhen, who obtained a Bachelor’s degree from a top-tier university located in Guangzhou (a top-tier city in China), and who achieved an overall 7.5 in her IELTS. She explained,

I came from a small town in Shandong where the English teaching was extremely test-targeted. My ability of spoken and written English was so low that it made me cry when I just entered the university, especially compared with my classmates from Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. I made some progress during my undergraduate study but not too much. I got an overall high score in IELTS owing to examination strategies. (I1)

Aizhen's accounts implied an imperative of assessing capabilities (English ability) in addition to functionings (achieved a good result in her IELTS), because different *processes* may be hidden behind the same *outcome* (achieving high score in IELTS by English ability or examination strategies) (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). Aizhen wrote many times that she read too slowly to finish pre-session reading and she felt frustrated about her failure to express her ideas in English precisely. Worse still, she failed one module in term one. She contacted me as soon as she received the bad news; we had a coffee meeting then, trying to figure out the reasons and remedies. She sadly told me that she had had a foreboding that she might fail. She had four deadlines which were close to each other, and failed the one that was the last. She felt too tired to do it properly, relying on luck to pass with a low score. Failing the assessment was a huge blow to Aizhen, so that she still felt aggrieved when reflecting on it in the second-round interview.

I could not forgive myself. ... In fact, I gave up applying for a PhD programme at British universities just after that. I felt I could not get an offer, let alone a scholarship. (I2)

Just as Aizhen said, the notes on PhD applications almost disappeared from her diary entries after week four, but she did not give up making the effort to improve her academic performance. She studied rather harder in term two, beginning to keep records on the preparation and writing of every piece of her assignments and dissertation. Moreover, she engaged in exercises to improve her English proficiency, for example, "watching British TV series to learn vocabulary" (W6), and "chatting with foreign friends to enhance spoken English" (W5). Besides, she came up with a strategy to enhance her learning efficiency,

When learning a new topic, I found it was helpful to read some materials in Chinese first and take notes of key words. After that, when reading English books and articles on the same topic, I could figure out the professional vocabulary and expressions. (W6)

Acting with agency for learning and actively experimenting with various strategies, Aizhen made progress in her academic performance, which was approved by her teacher, with the teacher's compliment encouraging her enthusiasm. Aizhen's effort and progress in academic learning after her initial failure reflected her agency in taking control of her life instead of performing passively, although she admitted that she was under constant pressure during her overseas course. She wrote in the summary section for the last diary week before her return to China (in July),

My MA life almost comes to the end. Reflecting the whole year, I realize that I am not capable of studying in English. I am happy that I made the decision to apply for a PhD in China. (W8)

I followed up her choice of pursuing a PhD degree back in China in the second-round interview and found out more reasons for this, in addition to the language barrier. Aizhen reported that she could not adapt to the teacher-student relationship in UK universities, which was "mutual respect but emotional alienation" (I2). She "could not find a sense of empathy" (I2) with her teachers. She expected "a more harmonious and closer supervisor-supervisee relationship" (I2), which reflected the central capability of "meaningful relationships of mutual recognition" with others (Nussbaum, 2007:24). It was understandable that Aizhen had this expectation, as she was a person who placed high value on the emotional interaction with others. She

made a short phone call with [her] mother every day, having long video chat with [her] young sister once a week, having short video chats with more than ten friends a week in addition to numerous messages (I1).

Moreover, Aizhen also spent substantial time with her new friends in the UK, and thought they were the "angels" making her overseas life "warm and unforgettable" (W8). Aizhen attributed her emphasis on families and friends to her growing up in Shandong, an area with the most traditional Chinese Confucian culture of family value, and she had lived a collective life for around ten years in schools and

university before studying abroad. Her overseas year made her realize that “the farther [she] goes, the more [she] misses home” (I2), which was also a reason why she could not remain abroad any longer. Here it is worth noting that Aizhen’s decision about pursuing her PhD back in China partly resulted from a cultural-wide conversion factor, which had been progressively reinforced during her life.

Another barrier preventing Aizhen from doing a PhD study in the UK was the more prosaic conversion factor – expense. Losing confidence in her ability to achieve a scholarship because of the undesirable academic outcomes of her Master’s study, she worried about the cost of completing a PhD programme overseas. In fact, Aizhen came from a better-off family. In the first-round interview, when discussing how the cost of overseas HE influenced the financial condition of participants’ family, she said “spending 500,000 RMB (approx. £57,000) this year is not a problem” (I1), while the budget for many other participants was 300,000 RMB (approx. £34,000). Nonetheless, as the eldest of a family with a younger sister and younger brother, Aizhen always thought she should not spend too much of her family’s money, which was also because she had “witnessed the hardship of [her] parents’ entrepreneurial stage” (I1). Her financial scruples were also reflected in her giving up the 2+2 joint programme for studying in the UK since the third year of her undergraduate studies, but choosing instead to be an exchange student in South Korea to save money. Moreover, Aizhen was one of the few participants who said salary was the most important factor in terms of choice of employment in her first-round interview because she wanted to “make money and fund [her] young sister to study abroad” (I1).

Aizhen’s choice of studying for a PhD degree in China was the result of her internal capabilities and external conversion factors. Of note was that this choice might have relieved some of her concerns, for example, she would not be required to study in English, but it failed to solve problems such as gaining appropriate financial reward. Driven by the desire to fund her younger sister’s overseas education, Aizhen decided to be an entrepreneur while doing her PhD. She was preparing to set up a business selling fashionable handbags with her business partner from South Korea,

who was her classmate during her Master's study. Her partner has worked for the two largest Korean TV stations, having networked with lots of stars who "can lead the trend"; Aizhen's family had been engaged in the production and sales industry for many years, so that she "could access some channels to sell goods to the vast Chinese market" (W7). The cooperation between these two manifested a proliferation of capabilities when people share resources with others. During the Easter holiday, Aizhen spent two weeks with her business partner in Budapest to "visit local plants for handmade leather goods" (W6) and laid the foundations for further cooperation. When the second-round interview was conducted, Aizhen's online handbag store was almost ready to open.

Aizhen was the only person of all the participants whose closest friend during her overseas year was non-Chinese. Poring over her diary and following up in the second-round interview, I found the reasons why she was able to build such a close friendship with the South Korean woman and how important this friendship was to their overseas lives. Aizhen had made four Korean friends when she engaged in a summer school in Germany after the second year of her undergraduate studies, and then studied in South Korea as an exchange student for a half year in her third year. It is natural that international students prefer to form connections with co-nations in the early stages of being overseas (McFaul, 2016). However, there were few mainland Chinese people on Aizhen's course, which resulted in her approaching the second-most familiar group to her, namely Koreans. Sharing a homological culture, they found much in common regarding their habits or thinking. The Korean woman, who was eight years older than Aizhen, had abundant learning, work and life experiences, acted as her mentor in the knowledge aspect. As Aizhen wrote,

We worked on assignments together today. ... Her English is excellent. She can always get my points. We have no barrier to communicate. Every time when I can't find a precise word, she sends me one. (W5)

She is just an expert! Her ideas always enlighten me. The intercultural communication pose me different angles to look at the issue. (W7)

Studying for a Master's course that was different to her Bachelor's degree, all the more without work experience, Aizhen felt her academic foundation was weaker than many of her classmates. Her Korean friend acted as a positive conversion factor (as discussed in the section 6.3 Influential people involved in EM) in supporting her academic learning, "giving insightful advice to [her] PhD research plan and future career development" (W9). Meanwhile, Aizhen provided her Korean friend with care and emotional companionship.

Aizhen frequently emphasized the importance of new friendships and the network she created in this overseas year in the data provided. She treasured the support provided by her friends when she was in trouble or in a negative mood, though she also stressed that this overseas year taught her how to manage her life alone. In addition to the mutual support in their daily lives, Aizhen thought highly of the idea exchange with friends because she found she "kept building up self-identity, figuring out what kind of person [she] would like to be and what kind of future [she] wants" (W9), and "felt less lonely on the way towards career ideals" (I2). These were the vital functionings Aizhen achieved from her EM in this overseas year, which are likely to deliver on-going impact on her career development.

Because of the PhD issue, the career plan Aizhen described when we had the second-round interview was significantly different from those of the other participants. She told me three main tasks in her PhD period in order to lay a solid foundation for her career goal to be an officer in the United Nations: (i) improving knowledge relating to international affairs and language skills; (ii) accumulating work experience; and (iii) managing her handbag business to realize financial independence. Additionally, we also talked about a few broad issues related to her future career and life. As mentioned previously, Aizhen comes from the Shandong province of China, which is the hometown of Confucius. Many traditional Confucian ideas are still retained by the Shandong people, such as "*guan ben wei*" (官本位), which means that being a government officer is the significance of one's life (Wang

et al., 2019). Aizhen's parents always had a preference for her to be a civil servant, but she did not concur. So, she "always worked hard to prove them that [she] was on track to a good life" (I1). For another instance, "*an tu zhong qian*" (安土重迁, referring to having great attachment to one's hometown and being unwilling to be mobile) is also valued by the Shandong people. Aizhen told me that, when she decided to go to a university in Guangdong, many relatives of her parents' generation tried to persuade her not to go that far. She insisted on her own ideas at that time; however, what is interesting is that "after experiencing the life far away from hometown, [she] found that her ideal life-long living place was still her hometown where all her relatives were, even though [she] planned to challenge herself and make more money in big cities before 35 years old" (I2). Aizhen's sense of belonging to her hometown and family, together with the cultural traditions behind this, to some extent could be regarded as a negative conversion factor to her capabilities regarding working mobility, but might be positive in the solidification of her social capital in the local region. The conversion factor for cultural characteristics might be difficult to change, even if individuals leave their original cultural context for a certain period of time, because culture has a primary impact on individuals' preference towards functionings, and the formation of capabilities to realize functionings (Jackson, 2005).

Like other woman participants, Aizhen also shared her ideas about her intended work-family balance in her future life. It was unexpected that Aizhen, as a person with strong family values, said that she had some doubts and fears regarding marriage, and was concerned about compromising her career for family. She reported that "I cannot think of a reason to devote myself to a marriage and family; it requires lots of courage" (I2). She further explained her ideas by taking her mother as an example.

Women of my mum's generation contribute too much to families. I feel my mum has hollowed herself out for the family. She works hard for the family business and takes care of my father and we three children. How

much does she live for herself? 5%? Or maybe less. ... My mother impacted me a lot. On the one hand, she makes me know that women must be strong; on the other hand, I feel I don't want to make my life like hers. (I2)

Aizhen decided not to marry before she was 30, and would “never sacrifice her career for her family” (I2, also proposed by P14). The family responsibilities associated with gender served as a social conversion factor which significantly affected Aizhen's perceptions and decisions in terms of her future career and broader life. Of particular note was that her experiences and ideas about gender issues helped her determine the main topic of her PhD research and encouraged her to work in the field of gender equality.

The EM intentionally conducted by Aizhen in her overseas year constantly related to preparing herself for PhD study. Changing the destination country from the UK to China was a decision that took into consideration both her internal capabilities and contextual conversion factors. As a representative of a typical (or stereotypical) Chinese international student (e.g., in the typical age group, from a well-off family, having some difficulties in learning as discussed in chapter two), Aizhen's experiences and her reflections on them demonstrate how after-studying-abroad choices are impacted by a complexity which interweaves cultural, social, familial and personal values, helping subsequent researchers to explore the unique stories behind groups with a seemingly homogenous identity.

#### 7.4. P15 Huiyang

Huiyang was one of the participants that I recruited by snowball sampling. We engaged in a gathering held by a mutual friend before the research, having personal contacts during the year, so that we established a relationship of mutual trust. Based on this, he confessed, almost unreservedly, his family background, relationship condition, mental state, and the influence of these factors on his EM and broader life in his overseas year.

Huiyang's family relationship was complicated. His parents divorced when he was young, with his father forming a new family and his mother always staying single. Huiyang lived with his mother, who was always busy with her business. He had "become independent since [he] was a child in living and studying"; his parents "rarely caring about [his] thoughts and feelings" (I1). When choosing a course for undergraduate study, he wanted to learn education and psychology, while his parents were strongly opposed to this and asked him to study law, since his parents "with low educational level blindly believed that lawyers were decent" (I1). As a compromise, he entered a university specializing in law in Shanghai, but chose English as his major. Huiyang treated his undergraduate study perfunctorily since what he learnt was different from what he expected. However, he worked in part-time jobs related to English teaching, which he was more interested in. In the third year of his undergraduate studies, inspired by his classmates, Huiyang "suddenly realized that studying abroad might be an opportunity for [him] to transfer to the course [he] wanted to learn" (I1). He then went through the difficult process of persuading his mother (also his funder) to support his choice. Fortunately, this time, his mother compromised in the face of his firm attitude.

Huiyang's choice of studying abroad was "highly oriented to [his] future career" (W1), and he therefore had high expectations regarding his professional ability development via academic learning. Nevertheless, he experienced many difficulties in terms of being able to study efficiently; for instance, Huiyang's undergraduate studies had not left him with a particularly solid academic foundation. He, as discussed in section 6.2.1, also did not form the habit of pre-session preparation, which left him unable to follow the teachers when "they expected students had learnt the basic ideas by pre-reading and jumped to deeper discussions directly" (W1). Moreover, modules in term one were theory-based, which made his learning experience difficult and tedious; "it was not until term two when [he] practiced in designing and delivering sessions that [he] understood the significance of learning the obscure theories" (W5). Another factor, whose impact was prevalent throughout the entirety of his overseas year, was that Huiyang's long-distance

girlfriend, who was studying in Hong Kong, occupied almost all his extra-session time, especially in term one.

She does not realize that I am experiencing lots of difficulties here. ... I do hope she will understand that I don't have that much time to accompany her. We have video chat when I wake up until I go to a session. I go back to my flat as soon as the session finished at 3 pm, having video chat again until she falls asleep at 5 or 6 pm. ... After the 'duty call', I start cooking and then have my dinner at around 7 or 8 pm. She is not even aware that, due to accompanying her, my timetable has become irregular and unhealthy. ... I never go out on weekends; I always stay in the room for chatting with her. Actually, if you ask me, can I bear it? Yes, I can. But is this the state I want? Absolutely not! (I1)

The reasons for Huiyang's inability to adapt to the learning in the UK included both his internal capabilities, such as his academic foundation and learning habits, and external conversion factors, such as the difficulty of the modules. His girlfriend was a special factor, since her impact was on the one hand external to Huiyang, while on the other reflected Huiyang's own ability to manage his relationship. In order to solve the problem of this relationship, Huiyang returned to China during the Christmas holidays, instead of travelling within the UK or Europe as many of the other participants did. However, this trip failed to help him repair the relationship, and instead his girlfriend raised many more problems which troubled him further.

She is local in Shanghai, but I am not. Our family background, I mean economic condition, has a large gap. Her parents require me to buy a house in Shanghai if I want to marry her. It means I would have to let my mum take out all her savings and even sell our property in our hometown. How can I do this?! I could understand that her parents want me to guarantee their daughter's living standards, but this is indeed beyond my financial ability. (W2)

Facing an unsolvable problem but unwilling to give the relationship up, Huiyang found his depression recurred after coming back to the UK. He was stuck in a dilemma that he “predicted [he] would eventually break up with [his] girlfriend but avoided facing it right now” (W4). From his entries in term two, I found Huiyang had adopted many negative habits such as smoking, drinking and staying up late to release his huge mental pressure, and he even told me in the follow-up interview that he had thought about suicide. As a researcher but also his friend, I consciously kept in touch with Huiyang to ensure he was safe. Fortunately, Huiyang’s depression did not have a significant effect on his studies. Owing to his previous teaching experience, he “adapted well to the practice-oriented modules” (W4) in term two, with “compliments on [his] performance in peer teaching from teachers and classmates making [him] confident in [his] profession” (W4). Here the work experience formed a capability which enabled Huiyang to achieve desirable academic performance, and the teacher and classmates’ compliments acted as a positive conversion factor which encouraged his motivation for further progress. Huiyang “immersed himself into study for more than 12 hours a day”, which enabled him to “escape from having too much contact with [his] girlfriend” but also served as “a way to defeat the depression, since making progress on academic learning made [him] feel [he] was doing something meaningful” (W5). There has been an increase in the number of studies focusing on depression and the broader mental health of Chinese international students, but they predominantly adopt an acculturative perspective (e.g., Wang et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2012), i.e. how challenges of adaptation to the culture of host countries negatively affects Chinese international students’ mental health. Huiyang’s case implies a particular imperative to explore the interaction between international students’ mental health and academic learning.

From diary week 6, Huiyang started gym exercise, “trying to keep healthy to support the remaining months of the dissertation” (W6). The gym exercise had a positive effect in the sense of pulling him back towards improved health, both physically and psychologically. He reflected that “using alcohol to cure the depression turned out to be the worst choice” (W7), and he found he was “getting better at controlling his

thoughts” (W7). This reflection represented Huiyang’s agency for altering bad behaviour and adopting – or readopting – a more positive lifestyle. Moreover, he engaged in three academic conferences while working hard on his dissertation during term three, when many of the other participants appeared to be unwilling to participate in extra academic activities (as shown in section 6.2.1) given their workload. Huiyang reflected on his experiences as follows:

It was a shame that none of my classmates showed up. How nice the opportunity was, wasn’t it? ... I listened to many presentations and chatted with lots of people. The happiest talk happened between me and a PhD student from [another country]. His PhD topic was exactly the same as my dissertation topic, though he was based in [another country] and I was based on China. We chatted over the lunch time, and I learnt a lot from him. Actually, his research was much deeper than mine, but he was very interested in my research. We exchanged contact details, and he invited me to share my research outcomes with him after completing my dissertation. (W8)

The academic conference experience encouraged Huiyang significantly since he found himself “as a Master’s student, unexpectedly, was able to discuss with PhD students and could even give them insightful suggestions” (I2). It not only helped him realize his progress in terms of academic knowledge but also motivated his “desire to further his degree as a PhD” (W8). In the summary section of week eight, Huiyang reported that his depression was coming back under his control.

Huiyang’s experience showed a process of loss and recovery of capabilities. Suffering depression because of his relationship crisis represented a loss of “emotional integrity” which refers to one’s freedom from anxiety (Walker, 2006:129). In response to this, Huiyang, to some extent, adopted a somewhat negative way of dealing with the situation (e.g., drinking and smoking) at the beginning, but was saved by his obviously improved academic learning (he performed well in practice-oriented modules), with his previous work experience

acting as a positive conversion factor. More importantly, his agency gradually had an impact, which was reflected in the fact that he consciously fought his depression by going to the gym and engaging in interesting activities (academic conferences). Furthermore, the compliments he received from others (other conference attendees) were also beneficial to his self-recognition. Huiyang's success in defeating depression was ultimately due to both his own agency and positive conversion factors.

Returning to a healthy mental condition, the good news kept arriving. Huiyang gained a part-time job at the university. He was proud that he was "one of the eight selected candidates from nearly a hundred" (I2). For the last two months in the UK, Huiyang was extremely busy, dealing with his dissertation, part-time job and IELTS test (for his job application); altogether, however, he felt he indeed "enjoyed this period when [he] could focus on the things he valued" (W9).

As Huiyang reported in the second-round interview, his preference was to stay in the UK rather than returning to China after graduation. He had been resisting this thought until he broke up with his girlfriend (two weeks before the second-round interview). Although Huiyang experienced many difficulties in terms of his academic learning and mental condition in the first half of his overseas year, he never felt that he could not adjust to daily life in the UK; instead, he "enjoyed the relaxed, free and independent lifestyle" (I2). More importantly, in contrast to many participants who "could not adapt to the relatively alienating interpersonal relationship in the UK" (e.g., P19, I2; P28, I2), Huiyang was perfectly comfortable with this, stating that it gave him "a sense of security" (W9). Besides, Huiyang was also one of the few participants who built up close friendships with local people. He had a flatmate, a British national doing a PhD in [another discipline] who "shared a similar family background" (I2) with him. They became familiar with each other by having "dinner talks" (W1) and "beer talks" (W5) when coming across each other in the shared kitchen, and then these talks gradually became a weekly routine. Huiyang "was introduced [by his flatmate] to the whole group of PhD students in [another discipline] who were from different countries" (I2), which opened a path for him to

access a diverse range of cultures. On top of the international friendship, Huiyang also built up network with co-nationals, including his Chinese flatmate, some classmates doing groupwork together, and students in his pre-session language course. Huiyang was highly satisfied with his social situation during his year, which was an important factor in shaping his wish to stay in the UK. Notwithstanding all of these positive conditions which facilitated his capabilities for conducting a valued life in the UK, when the burden of returning to China for his girlfriend was effectively removed, it was too late for him to plan a career in the UK. Talking about “giving up applying for a teaching position in the foundation school of his university” (W8), Huiyang expressed his regret in this regard several times, but he had indeed lost the opportunity.

In the second-round interviews, I also asked about his wish to do a PhD, as Huiyang mentioned this in diary week eight. He responded with forced smile, “it is a dream that I don’t know when I can realize... maybe never.” (I2). He further explained,

Several reasons prevented me. First of all, where can I get the money? I don’t want to ask money from my mum anymore, and I don’t think I can achieve a scholarship. Secondly, as I mentioned in the diaries, studying for a PhD degree is like walking on a one-way street. You cannot easily withdraw from your PhD as resigning a job. I don’t think I am well-prepared to start it right now, academically or emotionally. In my view, at least in my area, I cannot succeed in academic research without work experience. The last reason, well, I have to say, I don’t have much emotional attachment with my parents, but my mum is my mum, I just cannot leave her alone. (I2)

Here again, we saw that Huiyang’s freedom to continue pursuing a PhD in the UK was hampered by both limiting internal capabilities (disadvantaged academic ability, insufficient emotional preparation, lack of work experience) and negative external factors (lack of money, unavailability of scholarship) as well as factors that blurred the internal and external boundary (his mother).

Huiyang finally decided to return after graduation. Seeking a job in China, the first thing for him to decide was the geographic destination. Huiyang hesitated between two cities, Shanghai, one of the most developed cities in China, where he completed his undergraduate studies, and his hometown, where he enjoyed more capital as a local. Huiyang mentioned in the entry for diary week two that he “sometimes envies [his] old friends and wished he never left his hometown”. I followed this comment up in the second-round interview. Huiyang stated,

I am the only one who has gone out of the hometown among the group of us who have been best friends for around ten years. I know they admire my chance to go to Shanghai and then abroad to see a different world. However, when I look back to my experience, I am serious, if I could choose again, I would have always lived a peaceful life in that small city. I know how stressful living in Shanghai is. I can see the possibilities but also the impossibilities of a better life there. (12)

Interpreting Huiyang’s account through the lens of CA, this evokes the relationship between capabilities and functionings. In referring to the “possibilities of a better life”, Huiyang meant the capabilities for him to lead a life he valued in Shanghai, while by “impossibilities” he emphasized the distance between capabilities and functionings. Huiyang’s struggle regarding whether or not he could truly realize a better life in Shanghai echoes the argument that functionings imply an endpoint for capabilities, and capabilities are pointless if they can never be converted into functionings (Sen, 1999). For Huiyang, leading a life he valued in Shanghai is the functioning, which is also the real value of his capabilities regarding the upward mobility that would allow him to live in a more developed city, instead of staying in his hometown.

Driven by the “possibilities”, Huiyang eventually chose Shanghai as his destination, rejecting a job offer with a decent salary in his hometown. He believed that he would have a better career prospect in Shanghai. Huiyang conducted some research

into his target employment field by “attending classroom observations in [his] upper secondary school”, and “chatting with [his] cousin who was working in a public secondary school” when he went back to China for the Christmas holiday. Moreover, Huiyang interviewed eight secondary school teachers in China when conducting research for his dissertation, thus getting to know more about the real work context of public educational sectors in China. Based on this information, Huiyang evaluated himself and found that, compared to public schools, his “personality, teaching methods and philosophy” were more suitable for private education institutions, which “gave teachers more flexibility in conducting teaching practices” (W9) (capability 1). Moreover, considering the differences in classroom teaching between China and Britain, he thought “the teaching methods [he] has learnt in the UK could be accepted by more people in big cities who were more open to different teaching-learning patterns” (I2) (capability 2). Huiyang, who had achieved excellent results in his IELTS (8 overall with 9 in Speaking) (capability 3), therefore set his goal to the three largest private English training institutions in Shanghai, which could provide him with a better career development platform, but also a higher salary. More fortunately, one of his undergraduate roommates, who was a local in Shanghai, rented a room to Huiyang at a low price (capability 4), which greatly reduced his cost of living.

As discussed in section 6.4, many participants, especially women participants, tended to link their career plans to their broader lives, taking marriage, work-family balance and parental care into account. Huiyang, by contrast, placed a greater emphasis on his personal development. This might nominally be initially attributed to gender difference, in the sense that men may have significantly lower “work-family guilt and work-interfering-with-family guilt relative” to women (Borelli et al., 2017:356). However, Huiyang’s choice was also impacted by his personal circumstances. He “had little desire for marriage and family because of [his] childhood experience” (I1), and all the more so when he broke up with his girlfriend. Huiyang “did not want to invest more time and vigour on building up and maintaining a relationship at the moment” (I2). Furthermore, the alienation

between himself and his parents made him “unwilling to involve them too much in [his] future life” (I2).

Huiyang, whose choice of receiving HE abroad was strongly oriented towards career development, experienced particular challenges in fulfilling his expectations of academic improvement, activity participation and employment opportunities. His EM during the overseas year was strongly impacted by his long-distance relationship, and his career plan after receiving HE abroad took into account his own abilities and preferences (internal capabilities), potential working and living circumstances, family members and financial situation (conversion factors). As someone who suffered from depression (i.e. in CA terms, someone with a lower capability to conduct a valued life compared to others in healthier mental states), Huiyang confronted considerably greater difficulties and issues than others throughout their studies abroad. The experience of surviving a period of poor mental health reflected his agency for self-adjustment, with his success in defeating his depression in turn further enhancing his agency for control over his life.

### 7.5. P24 Fangfang

Fangfang started to think about receiving HE abroad after participating in a programme where she worked as a team manager of a UK-based summer camp for young Chinese children. One of the children who participated in a performance course “reflected her progress in language and self-confidence with extreme excitement” (I1), which deeply impressed Fangfang and enlightened her thinking in terms of representing a potential business opportunity. Fangfang “did market research on [performance-based English learning] in Beijing as soon as [she] returned, finding only two institutions with relatively large scale operation” (I1). She then planned to study for an arts-based teaching course in the UK so as to lay an academic foundation for her entrepreneurship. However, resigning to the need to study abroad was a significant decision, which resulted in various problems that needed to be tackled.

Fangfang was a single parent of a six-year-old girl. She thought that it would be an invaluable opportunity for Xinran (Fangfang's daughter) to experience British education if she could bring Xinran with her to the UK. Fangfang consulted the international student office of her target university, being informed that it might be easier to get visas if another adult who would be able to take care of Xinran could go with them. Fangfang's mother was the only person who could do that, but the problem was that her grandmother (who was more than 80 years old and had Alzheimer's disease) would also have to come with her if her mother moved to the UK. Fangfang considered her savings and decided to apply for the four visas this would require, whilst at the same time anticipating her applications would be refused. Fortunately, and to her surprise, she succeeded. In order to prepare Xinran, who had learnt a little English, to study in a British school, Fangfang registered Xinran at a summer camp there, whilst she herself registered to attend an intensive course in Economics at the same time as a "rehearsal" (I1) for their following year in the UK. During this period, Fangfang also found a house within walking distance of Xinran's school in order to enable her mother to drop off and pick up Xinran from school.

As a single mother and the only child of her widowed mother, Fangfang overcame many more difficulties than the majority of other participants in converting the international HE resources to her capabilities to study abroad, and further faced a more complicated life in the UK. From her own perspective, having been out of HE for more than ten years, it was difficult for her to switch back to the role of a student. Fangfang always mentioned her lack of English proficiency in her diaries, which was due not only to "the under-use of English during the ten-year working life" (I1) but also her "reduced language acquisition ability compared to young students" (W1). Fangfang recognized the advantages she had as a result of her rich social experience for learning an arts-based teaching course in terms of "having better ability of empathy" (W2), whereas she found that "there was a gap between [her] and [her] classmates, some of whom were more than ten years younger" (W2), with the gap impacting her participation in groupwork.

We did a rehearsal for the group performance. It's my first time to perform on the stage. It's really exciting! Those young people [her groupmates] are full of energy, immersing themselves into activities easily. I found I couldn't do as well as them. (W2)

The age gap also influenced her social life with her classmates.

I am too much older than them. The topics they discussed have very distinctive characteristics of youth and hormones. I am too old to talk about that. (I2)

Fangfang "did not anticipate the age gap would be a problem" (I2). She felt helpless when she found it did indeed matter, because solving the problem caused by this age gap, an unchangeable factor, not only required Fangfang's agency to open herself to merging into a group of younger people, but also required a certain willingness and agency on the part of those same younger people to take someone older in.

In addition to internal factors, Fangfang's life was also strongly influenced by her daughter as an external conversion factor. Xinran, to Fangfang's surprise, adapted to her British life very well. Her relative lack of proficiency in English did not prevent her from involving herself in the community. There was a girl from Hong Kong who acted as the translator when Xinran needed help in this regard. Xinran's daily life was also supported by her grandmother. However, accompanying Xinran still occupied a lot of Fangfang's time, making her extremely selective about her participation in extra-curricular activities.

I hardly participated in social activities on campus. The golden time for adult socializing is 7 pm to 11 pm, but I could not invest this period in social events, because it is also the period for our mum-daughter interaction: listening to her experiences at school, playing with her, helping with her assignments sometimes, giving her a shower, and

telling her stories before sleeping. These things could only start when I arrived home. So, it was impossible for me to go back home late. (I2)

Having few capabilities for networking with schoolmates was reflected by Fangfang as a huge regret, since one of her essential expectations in studying abroad was to find partners for her planned business. Nevertheless, it turned out that “the majority of activities [she] attended were arranged by Xinran’s school or those she could bring Xinran to” (I2), for example, visiting pony club (W4), family swimming (W8) and participating in a drama festival (W5).

In addition, taking care of Xinran also impacted Fangfang’s capabilities for dedication to academic learning, especially after her mother and grandmother went back to China in March when their visitors visas expired, with the burden of looking after Xinran then falling entirely on her alone. Fangfang stated in her entries,

Mum and grandma have gone back to China and my cooking era is coming. That’s horrible!!! ... I have no more than 4 hours of studying time per day because I need to go shopping, cook, pick [Xinran] up, accompany her to play with her classmates after school... Woman, don’t get married – especially don’t gave birth to a baby until you hate yourself. 😂 I guess I hate myself so much that I brought me and my girl to a foreign country...😂😂😂 (I’m kidding) (W5)

The caring burden became increased when Xinran was on holiday (W8) or when Xinran was ill (W5), which required Fangfang to invest more time in her daughter rather than her academic work. She “applied for the extension for almost every assignment in term two”, as well as for her dissertation (W7; I2). Fangfang “did not feel satisfied with [her] academic performance” but felt “it was acceptable” (W9). Her “expectations on academic improvement was not that high” (I1), because she enrolled on this course for the purpose of “setting her foot in this area as a businessperson, rather than an academic” (W9).

There was no doubt that Fangfang's capabilities of fully realizing academic and social functionings as an international student were restricted by her role as a single parent, notwithstanding the fact that her mother had shared part of her caring responsibilities for the first half-year. Nevertheless, having Xinran as a "sweet burden" (W9), on the other hand, acted as a positive conversion factor in some ways. One of the most obvious benefits was that Fangfang received the opportunity to audit performance-based English lessons at Xinran's school (W4), and was allowed to conduct the fieldwork for her dissertation there (W5). Fangfang organized workshops for the primary school children. Though she felt "it was much more difficult than being a traditional teacher in language teaching classes" (W8), her workshops "went on very well since all the children had been familiar with [her] and well cooperated with [her]" (W8). Furthermore, Fangfang exchanged ideas with teachers at Xinran's school where, together with Fangfang's teachers at university, they became the human resources that would allow her to realize the capabilities of her potential business in China.

In addition to impacting her overseas experience, Xinran was also a non-negligible conversion factor for Fangfang's career plan. When we held the first-round interview, Fangfang talked about her desire to do a PhD programme, which would be a way to stay in the UK for a longer time "in case Xinran preferred to stay" (I1). Her PhD-related notes appeared frequently on her diaries for the first half-year. Fangfang also thought about other ways to extend their legal stay in Britain, for example applying for a Tier 1 visa as a graduate entrepreneur (W2) and finding a job in London (W8). However, these plans were not ultimately converted into any functionings. I followed this up in the second-round interview.

Xuemeng: Are you still going to do a PhD?

Fangfang: Maybe not. Xinran loves living here actually, but... If I do a PhD, I need a scholarship. No one can guarantee it. Also, there are too many difficulties in daily lives that can be foreseen. I just don't feel confident enough to face all of them.

Xuemeng: When did you decide to give up the PhD plan?

Fangfang: When my mum and grandma went back to China and I had to look after Xinran all by myself. I am bad at cooking. How poor Xinran was when she lost her dear grandma who was the best chef in the world in Xinran's eyes! It was just like a rehearsal for the PhD life. I cannot have my mum and grandma together with me for another four years considering the state of their health. I felt it would be too difficult to bring Xinran up while doing a PhD.

Xuemeng: How about the T1 visa? You mentioned it in the second diary week.

Fangfang: I searched for some information. The largest barrier is money. I told you before, I almost ran out of all my savings this year. Where can I get another £50,000?

Xuemeng: You also mentioned a job in London.

Fangfang: Yes. That was a position in a studying abroad agency. I thought about working here for one or two years, a bit shorter than a PhD, so that Xinran could receive a British education for longer. So, I applied for some jobs. You know I cannot do a busy job like in consulting companies. I need to take care of my daughter. However, light work means a low salary. I calculated the salary and expense in London. No, no way to stay there, especially because I still have a mortgage in China.

(12)

The dialogue clearly showed that Fangfang's capability to stay in the UK was constrained by many conversion factors from both internal (e.g., lack of ability to look after Xinran alone, cooking skills, undesirable financial condition) and external sides (e.g., mother and grandmother's state of health, overseas living expenses). Similar to some of the other participants' situations who had expressed a preference to stay in the UK after graduation, many resources (e.g., PhD opportunities, T1 visa, job vacancies) seemed to be there, but they were actually not the capabilities which would allow Fangfang to live the

life she most valued with regard to the constraints her conversion factors represented. Moreover, the negative impacts of these conversion factors were further exaggerated considering Fangfang's identity as a mother whose choice not only affected herself, but also her young daughter, whose capabilities and wellbeing were largely provided by her as an adult (Lewis and Giullari, 2005).

Accepting the reality of the situation, Fangfang decided to return to China. When we held the second-round interview online, she had taken Xinran back to China for primary school registration. Nevertheless, the decision to return did not end her difficulties in terms of her available choices. Fangfang was still struggling to choose a destination for her career development. Fangfang had previously worked in Beijing for more than ten years, but her (and Xinran's) *hukou* was still in Tianjin, their hometown, a city around 83 miles from Beijing. Xinran could only be enrolled in a public primary school in Tianjin because of the *hukou* restriction. Fangfang therefore needed to work in Tianjin if she wanted to spend more time with her daughter every day. However, this conflicted with her preferred direction for her career development. By studying the Master's course and communicating with her teachers, Fangfang realized that building an arts-based English training centre immediately after returning to China was unrealistic, since she "had less experience of operating a business independently" (W6) and she also "lacked teachers and start-up capital" (W6). So, it was necessary for her to "join an existing institution in this area to acquire practical experience and accumulate related resources for [her] potential business" (W6). Nonetheless, "arts-based English training was fast developing in Beijing, but underdeveloped in Tianjin" (I2), which meant Fangfang might be unable to work in her preferred area, and would have to adjust her career orientation if she were effectively forced to work in Tianjin. The conversion factors playing out in this situation are complicated, including the policy of *hukou*, the unbalanced development of an industry, Fangfang's ability to set up her own business immediately, her long-term career development, and her caring responsibility for her daughter. Facing this dilemma as a result of all these conversion factors, Fangfang emphasized her identity as a mother,

At this stage, and maybe in the following two or three years, I may prioritize my daughter over my career. I have been thinking about this

for a long time. Now I have persuaded myself around 70 or 80 per cent. Currently, the most significant thing for me is to accompany my daughter, because she is at an important stage of her growth. I know it would be a shame to miss the business opportunity, but it would be a bigger shame if I am absent from my daughter's development. I am a mother. This is a job from which I can never resign. (I2)

From the words "persuade myself", we can see Fangfang's hesitation, which might be common among mothers who see good opportunities for career development, but worry about poor-quality care for their children (Lewis and Giullari, 2005). Interpreted using the lens of CA, the choice between "a shame" and "a bigger shame" in essence implies a loss of the real freedom of mothers in terms of their available choices and lowered expectations as adapted to the opportunity.

Having connections with Fangfang (sometimes outside of the research interactions), I always perceived her sense of responsibility as a mother. She told me that she "cared about Xinran's gains from this year more than [her] own" (I2), which was reflected in her diaries reporting her experiences and feelings as being completely blended with her daughter's. Fangfang tried her best to give Xinran a family life in the UK, rather than a travel-like short stay. It was impressive that Fangfang bought two kittens for Xinran, which made Xinran "keep saying she was so happy, and she loves mum sooooo much!" (W6). Fangfang further reflected in the summary section of that diary week,

My friends say I'm crazy to keep pets in my current situation - mum and grandma have gone back and we are living a "poor" life... but I think we do need to enjoy our life here. It's not travel for 5 or 10 days. It's a matter of months. The flat is not a flat only. It should offer Xinran a feeling of home where there is something and somebody to love. (W6)

Fangfang also decided to take Xinran back to the UK after the primary school registration in China, and stay until their visas were due to expire (January 2019)

because she wanted to give Xinran as much experience of British culture as possible, especially British drama. Due to the study burden, they had had less time for the theatre than she originally thought they would, even though both of them were passionate about it. Fangfang thought this regret must be resolved, overlooking the fact that the official time at which Xinran was due to start primary school in China was September 2018. Fangfang also expressed the thought in her second-round interview that she could not let Xinran be educated in the UK, but would create a relaxed and happy learning atmosphere for her in China. "Setting Xinran free from the high pressure of study common among Chinese students" (I2) was a significant decision after learning the British education philosophy and communicating with many of the parents of Xinran's British classmates. As she wrote in her diary,

Chatting with local people, I found that they had an impression of Chinese children and parents that children bearing heavy study pressure and adults having no personal lives. That's completely true!... The year in the UK makes me feel that life without enjoyment is meaningless. I hope Xinran can enjoy her life and love her life. (W8)

Fangfang thought her understanding of education and life were in some way renewed during this year, which was an unexpected benefit of studying abroad. Her experiences and reflections exactly echoed CA's key principle, that the activities conducted by individuals should ultimately lead to the flourishing of their quality of life and wellbeing. Fangfang's renewed value also motivated her to prioritize her daughter over her career, at least as things currently stood. Fangfang's series of choices, including bringing Xinran abroad, giving her an authentic daily life in the UK, allowing her to study without pressure after returning to China, and fully participating in her growth, not only mattered in terms of what kind of life Fangfang had, but also had considerable impact on Xinran's capabilities. For Xinran, as a child, has limited individual capabilities and her functionings and wellbeing are heavily reliant on the provisions of her mother's care (see also, Jackson, 2005; Lewis and Giullari, 2005).

The change in Fangfang's attitude to her career was also reflected in her understanding of the term employability. In the first-round interview, she gave a highly individual-oriented definition of this term.

My understanding [of employability] is competitiveness. When an individual enters the labour market, how competitive he is in his area, and how much bonus he can provide to his target position. ...  
Employability is much more than one's ability such as professional knowledge, soft skills, emotional quotient and so on. It, in fact, is a comprehensive reflection of one's entirety on the career, including one's humanity, quality and learning ability. (I1)

Compared to many other participants who were fresh graduates, Fangfang, based on her ten-year work experience, gave a more insightful definition of employability, which was derived from the supply side of being an employee, but she overlooked external influential factors. In the second-round interview, when the same question was asked, Fangfang said,

It (employability) is too difficult to define. It is a big topic. It relates to choice, I think, a two-direction choice. Taking myself as an example, when I make a choice of my career, what I need to consider is not just what I would like to do or what I am capable of doing, but also what I am allowed to do concerning all different factors involved in my life and also factors in labour market. It is not as simple as a direct match between ability and career. It is so complicated. (I2)

The change in Fangfang's perception of employability, similar to that of a number of the other participants, reflected the fact that ideas can be shaped by the different situations in which one has been located. Participants were more likely to emphasize the importance of ability on one's employability when they were fresh Master's students who expected to enhance their employability by improving themselves. However, at the end of this time, when they were just about to enter

the labour market, they truly realized the impacts of other factors on their employability, that is, in addition to the ability-position match. Fangfang's feelings were stronger than other participants because her circumstances were more complicated. Moreover, compared to other participants, who stressed the independence of their overseas lives, Fangfang, by contrast, had a family life during her year, which naturally led to a much greater consideration of the weight between family and career.

Fangfang recognized that the unsolvable contradiction between taking care of her daughter and developing her career was the largest dilemma she faced. However, she did not think that prioritizing her participation in her daughter's growth was a sacrifice (of her career), and her choice therefore cannot necessarily be seen as an adaptive preference. Fangfang thought "spending the following two or three years on training Xinran to be independent in study and daily life was actually creating more [capabilities] for [herself] to concentrate on career development in the future" (I2). Fangfang was still on the way to struggling for a family-work balance as a single mother.

## 7.6. Summary

Though the narratives in this chapter have emphasized a focus on individual experience, if read together they manifest how previous experience, important "others" and individual agency work on students' EM during the overseas year, and how family background, relationship (or marital) status, financial condition and gender influence employability and career choice. Previous experience was the origin of participants' motivation for receiving HE abroad, and also formed the capabilities and functionings which had been possessed by participants. These existing capabilities and functionings decide the starting point of participants' EM in creating further capabilities, and achieving more functionings. Other people who were involved in participants' overseas lives acted as conversion factors, having an impact if participants could convert the resources gained by receiving HE abroad into their employability and other achievements they valued. Whether other

people played positive or negative conversion roles in participants' EM was highly dependent on the agency of those people. The agency of participants themselves, without doubt, was also significant to their EM, with which participants actively expanded their capabilities and more importantly fought the negative conversion factors which were preventing them from realizing various functionings.

The stories of these four participants, in common, show the expansion of career possibilities that can be achieved by receiving HE abroad, but also, unfortunately, a failure to some extent in the capability-functioning transition due to external conversion factors (and also internal factors). It was evident that family background was particularly significant in terms of region of origin, regional culture, parents' vision, family structure and parent-child relationship, which influenced the roles that family members played in participants' career choice, and the extent to which family members were involved in participants' career plans. Financial condition (familial and individual) was another significant factor, which had less of an impact on participants' EM practices, but played a role in their ability to freely make a career choice. This finding is a powerful counter to the previous research's neglect of Chinese international students' financial situations. Furthermore, relationship (or marital) status also shaped participants' overseas experiences and their plans for their future careers and broader lives, with the gender difference distinctly reflected in their ideas about family-work balance. These four distinctive factors are indeed intertwined with other political, cultural, social and industry-related conversion factors, constituting a more complicated system that affects Chinese international students' EM and post-graduation career decisions. The narratives of these four participants will almost certainly not be representative of the entire picture regarding Chinese international students' overseas lives, EM and future plans; however, I would argue that the extent to which overseas HE affects students' EM and personal development varies from person to person given the complexity of their individual circumstances. This complexity demonstrates the necessity of dehomogenizing Chinese international students in order to fully explore this population.

## Chapter Eight Conclusion

### 8.1. Introduction

The main purpose of this thesis was to explore the EM of Chinese international students whilst studying taught Master's courses in social sciences in the UK. The significance of exploring this issue lies in the current situation of the graduate labour market in China which is faced by Chinese international returnees. The last two decades have witnessed a constant increase of international students from China, and the huge wave of returnees after 2009 gave rise to a certain contradiction between Chinese students' expectations that receiving HE abroad would enhance their employability, and the progressively heated competition in the Chinese domestic labour market. As studying abroad became increasingly popular and the development of Chinese HE accelerated, Chinese local employers began to take a more skeptical attitude to recruiting international returnees (Zweig and Han, 2010), especially those with only one year of taught Master's overseas learning experience (Liu et al., 2017). Moreover, the value of international HE on one's employability may be differentiated by discipline. Accordingly, there is a certain imperative to explore the employability issues of present-day Chinese international students, especially taught Master's students in overlooked disciplines such as social sciences.

The findings of this research enrich the knowledge of Chinese international students' EM experiences during their one-year Master's study in the UK, specifically in terms of how Chinese international students' expectations regarding the enhancement of their employability are situated in their motivation set for receiving HE abroad, how their EM practices are conducted, and how they interact with conversion factors which impact their EM and career choices. At the same time, the adoption of CA expands the application of this theory to that of transnational research context, with the target population not traditionally recognized as being a vulnerable group. Moreover, the diary-interview methodology employed by this research has injected a certain vitality into the methodological repertoire for international HE research.

This chapter presents the empirical findings of this research and the contributions to a more insightful understanding of Chinese international students' career-related requirements and experiences of receiving HE abroad. Following that, it demonstrates how this study has contributed to CA and diary-interview methodology, and indicates certain possibilities for theoretical and methodological developments. Further, the practical implications of this study are also showcased in this chapter, mainly in terms of the improvements that can be made by HEIs in better serving Chinese international students in their EM. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this study, and ideas for future work for the wider academic community in relation to the employability issues of Chinese international students.

## 8.2. Key arguments of this research on the basis of the empirical findings

This research project draws attention to the employability issues of Chinese international students, which is an overlooked topic in the literature of both international HE and graduate employability. Tracing the EM of 32 UK-educated Chinese students for their entire Master's course, this thesis argues that receiving HE abroad is effective in supporting the graduate employability of participants by equipping them with capabilities and functionings which are difficult to achieve without international experience; however international HE can be less supportive when students' EM and career-related decisions are constrained by stronger external conversion factors which are complicated by sociocultural, familial and individual contexts. Guided by the three sub-questions, the key arguments of this research are presented as follows.

Analysing the data derived from first-round interviews, this research proposes arguments regarding the complicated relationship between motivations for receiving HE abroad and expectations regarding employability enhancement (the first sub-question). As discussed in 2.3, the existing literature on the motivations of Chinese students for studying abroad is dominated by push-pull approach. This

research, theorised by CA, understands motivations from the perspective of individual agency, regarding students as being able to make choices consciously, rather than being compelled by push and pull factors. This research finds that participants took the decision to receive HE abroad out of intrinsic motivations (including being attracted by the novelty of an overseas experience, being interested in the destination country, and to fulfil a dream of studying abroad), instrumental motivations (including the benefit to career development, to achieve academic improvement, to make up for the failure of furthering their degree in China, and to avoid working immediately after completing their undergraduate studies), or a combination thereof, or even “no motivation”, a phenomenon where some participants regarded studying abroad as a “natural” step after completing their undergraduate studies. Career development, proposed as being significant by the majority of participants, stood out in the motivation set, with many other motivations (e.g., academic improvement, degree elevation) also suggested as potentially enhancing participants’ competitiveness in the labour market. Moreover, employability enhancement was seen as an essential expected reward even for participants who were not necessarily motivated to study abroad by career-related considerations. In the first-round interviews, the majority of participants conceptualized employability from a supply side, focusing on individual abilities and traits, though the specific elements emphasized varied from person to person due to their differing target occupations, career orientations and professional values. Participants’ expectations on employability enhancement, as achieved by receiving HE abroad, were not only applicable to immediate graduate employment outcomes, but also to long-term personal development.

Based on the knowledge that employability enhancement is an important aspect of participants’ motivation for receiving HE abroad, this research further explored what practices were undertaken by participants to manage their employability during their overseas year (the second sub-question). Previous studies have investigated the overseas experiences of Chinese international students, with the majority focusing on English proficiency (e.g., Leedham, 2014; Zhou and Todman, 2009), academic performance (e.g., Gu and Maley, 2008; Wu, 2015) and

acculturation (Bailey, 2005; Bamber, 2014; Gu, 2016). However, only a few studies (e.g., Huang et al., 2014; Li, 2013) have discussed the employability-related issues of Chinese international students in particular. This research contributes to the knowledge by arguing that EM represents an angle from which to interpret Chinese international students' learning and living experience in host countries, since the effort that students make to improve language, academic knowledge, intercultural abilities and other aspects would eventually be beneficial in terms of employability enhancement. Analysing the diary data, as complemented by the follow-up interview data, five arguments were produced which indicated the insights on how participants' EM practices were situated in their holistic experience of studying in the UK.

Firstly, engaging in academic activities within, and indeed outside, their curriculum is an essential way for participants to manage their employability, through which they not only acquired advanced knowledge but also improved a wide range of generic skills (e.g., English proficiency, good learning habits, research skills, group working skills, critical thinking abilities, and task management skills), with these achievements acting as capabilities for facilitating further skills and abilities required in the workplace. This argument challenges previous literature which suggested that academic learning is a less effective way of enhancing graduate employability (Cranmer, 2006). The academic activities in which Chinese students participated during their period studying in the UK, have in a general sense expanded their capabilities to learn new knowledge that they did not have access to before studying abroad, and to develop other valued skills and abilities that were not sufficiently facilitated by the education in China. Moreover, considering the fact that many participants in this research studied a different course from the one in their undergraduate studies or came back to education from the labour market, gains from academic activities can be further highlighted in terms of their future career.

Secondly, participating in work-related activities including career events, part-time jobs, volunteer work constituted an important part of participants' EM practices,

which worked effectively (or was expected to work effectively) for their access to employment information, employment-specific strategies, expanded employment imagination, accumulated work experiences, maintenance of their connections with the Chinese labour market, generic skills, intercultural understanding, and self-identification as a global citizen. Some of these achievements (e.g., intercultural abilities, global citizenship perceptions), again, are difficult to fulfil without a relatively long overseas sojourn. However some other elements (e.g., employment information, employment-specific strategies) were generally believed to be insufficiently facilitated by UK HEIs due to the overwhelming focus of career-related activities at HEIs on local students and interdisciplinary imbalance. Furthermore, individual differences can be prominent regarding the work-related activities for maintaining connections with the Chinese labour market. Students without work experience seldom engaged in these activities during their overseas year, while those with work (or successful internship) experience enjoyed more opportunities and strategies for keeping in touch with the Chinese labour market (e.g., by part-time job).

Thirdly, never mentioned by any existing literature, travelling, rather than being a past time, was associated with EM, given that participants developed their teamwork abilities, problem solving, expanding their horizons as well as the traits of the spirit of exploration and broad-mindedness during travel, which were significant in terms of employability and, further, on becoming and being fully human. Travel whilst studying abroad was easily taken for granted as a past time, a way to enliven a tedious studying life or, more disappointingly, a sign of squandering money; few studies have made efforts to understand international students' travels. This study, being unintentionally inspired by the data, demonstrates the value of travelling during studying abroad on Chinese students' EM. This does not necessarily mean that participants consciously took travelling as a method to develop their employability; rather, the diary keeping encouraged participants to reflect on their wider experiences during the overseas year and to think over their employability-related issues from various perspectives.

Fourthly, in addition to the above-mentioned specific events, participants' EM practices were also permeated their daily lives while overseas. Participants developed their abilities with regard to intercultural socializing, tackling multiple tasks, plan making, time management, self-discipline and emotion management in their everyday lives, with these achievements being regarded as easily transferable to the workplace. While building up these abilities, participants also developed their personal traits, becoming more organised, confident, considerate, resilient, tolerant and persistent. It is worth noting that participants cultivated these personal traits which they perceived as a significant part of their employability, not only from the perspective of their positive experiences, but also from that of unfavourable or frustrating experiences. While the long-term situations that remained unimproved shaped some participants' adaptive preferences towards lower, perhaps more realistic achievements, reinforced personal traits confirmed participants that they have become more employable after studying abroad. Whilst existing discussion on employability-related experiences has relied almost exclusively on specific events (e.g. Li, 2013) and specific skills (e.g. Cai, 2014), this research was able to discover the often ignored EM practices embedded in everyday lives and the less focused employability elements regarding one's traits, owing to the comprehensive conceptualisation of employability provided by CA and the ability of the diary method for recording the everyday experiences and nuanced emotions.

Fifth, participants' EM was not only determined by their own choices, but was also impacted by conversion factors, with important "others" including parents, partners, new acquaintances in the UK and old acquaintances in China who were intentionally or unintentionally involved in participants' overseas lives showing the greatest impacts. To my knowledge, no existing literature has deliberately explored the significant role of these people in students' EM, albeit many people, such as teachers, peers, employers, parents, friends, indeed appeared in passing in the discussion of graduate employability and career decisions (e.g. Batistic and Tymon, 2017; Gill 2018; Wong and Liu, 2010). Again thanks to the CA conceptualising EM as an interactive process and the diary method facilitating the production of wide-

ranging data, this thesis is able to make a strong argument that familial and interpersonal conditions are worthy of greater attention compared to the broader climate such as economic development and (inter)national policies when exploring the conversion factors influencing individuals' EM, given that families and associates were the live players in the process of students' EM.

In addition to working out the common approaches for participants to manage their employability throughout their year overseas, this research, with its longitudinal in-depth design, enabled the individual differences in EM to be explained. Chinese international students have been regarded as a cohort from a socio-economically elite background who enjoy considerable capabilities and freedoms, in the sense of effectively being able to lead their lives as they wish. This perception is deeply ingrained, even though the popularization of studying abroad has diversified the structure of Chinese international students. This research therefore argues for the dehomogenization of Chinese international students when discussing their motivations to, and experiences of, receiving HE outside China, their post-studying-abroad choices regarding career development and the construction of their broader lives. As shown in Chapter six, even regarding the common approaches to EM, participants' experiences and perceptions had various nuances (or, sometimes, contradictions). This was essentially a result of participants' disparate personal circumstances. According to the narrative analysis of two rounds of interview data and nine-month diary data from four selected participants whose EM processes were somewhat distinctive in this cohort, this research argues for the recognition of three key conversion factors which affect participants' EM (the third sub-question).

Participants' EM practices can be impacted by previous (educational, work and personal) experiences, which determine their existing capabilities and functionings in terms of nourishing their future employability. Participants' EM practices can also be influenced by other people involved in their overseas lives, whose own agency decides the roles these individuals play in participants' EM. Moreover, participants' own agency also affects their EM practices, since their agency decides the extent to which they actively extend their capabilities for employability enhancement and the

ability to challenge negative external conversion factors which are preventing them from realizing employability-related functionings.

Further, the narrative analysis shows the enhancement of participants' employability as a result of receiving HE abroad, but unfortunately also shows a failure to some extent in the capability-functioning transition. This raises four core conversion factors that can impact students' freedom regarding career choice. Firstly, family background is particularly significant to participants' attitudes to their career-family balance, which influences the relative importance they assign to family and career, the significance of family members' suggestions about their career choices, and the extent to which family members might be involved in their career plans. Relationship (or marital) status also affects participants' plans for their careers and broader lives, with compromises being made to accommodate partners and children. Thirdly, gender differences were reflected in participants' concerns regarding the family-work balance, with the identity of mother intensifying the sacrifice of career to family duties. Finally, financial situation plays a key role in participants' career choices: whether employment (e.g., start-up capital for entrepreneurship) and where to work (e.g., living cost in metropolises) can be freely chosen or whether the decisions are effectively out of their hands.

### 8.3. Theoretical contributions of this research

CA, which regards human beings as the end, and is ultimately directed at human development, provides an insightful conceptualisation of graduate employability and, more importantly, implies the significance of the exploration of *employability management*. Graduate employability is interpreted by CA as a "combined capabilit[y]" (Nussbaum, 2011:21) comprised of internal capabilities, including one's knowledge, abilities, skills and traits that can be improved by receiving HE, and external conditions that can affect the realization of one's career-related desires. CA leads the value of employability enhancement towards an increase in the possibilities for individuals to conduct the work and live the broader lives they have reason to value, rather than merely achieving employment for the pure and

prosaic purpose of economic reward. As such, it is, worthwhile to discuss employability enhancement from the perspective of how people exercise their agency-driven strategies to develop internal capabilities, and how they interact with external conditions so as to direct themselves towards the lives they hope to lead in the future out of intrinsic desire, rather than having to respond to a set of standardized demands of the outside world. This research therefore focused on Chinese international students' *employability management* rather than their employment outcomes, arguing that EM is not a linear but an iterative process throughout peoples' entire period of study and their working lives, and the progress achieved from their EM being not only the functionings but also the capabilities which can allow for other, further achievements.

In addition to the conceptualisation of graduate employability and EM, the adoption of CA also has significance for the methodological design of this research. With an understanding that individual freedom should be centred on the activities of human beings, this research serves an exploratory orientation without predicting what participants' EM would or should be like, but instead, based entirely on participants' self-reported data on how they managed their employability according to their own circumstances. Furthermore, as employability is continually shaped by internal capabilities and external contexts, this research adopted a longitudinal design which enabled the researcher to observe the dynamics that participants' employability-related perceptions, behaviour, experiences and choices were play during the entire year of receiving HE abroad.

This research in turn makes contributions to the development of CA. Relatively speaking, CA has never been part of the mainstream theory used in the fields of either HE or graduate employability research. The majority of existing studies (e.g., Calitz, 2017; Walker and Fongwa, 2017; Wang, 2011) using CA were conducted at the national and regional levels, with little research addressing the increasingly international and transnational dimensions of HE and graduate employability. This research, exploring Chinese students' EM while studying in a UK HEI, has contributed to the application of CA in a transnational context where participants'

perceptions and actions were exercised in a system with culturally diversified features. This study has complemented the repertoire of research practices informed by CA, which is advocated as a theory open to various contexts (Sen, 1993) and with a universal orientation (Nussbaum, 2000).

Additionally, this research positively contributes to CA by challenging its predominant application in the exploration of economically vulnerable groups. The target population in this research, Chinese international students, is not regarded as vulnerable, neither traditionally nor even under the current circumstance that their economic background has been diversified. However, these students, as foreigners to host countries, indeed suffer certain vulnerabilities in many regards, whose negative impacts cannot be negated simply by economic stability. As shown in chapters six and seven, participants, to various extents, confronted difficulties in the sense of language proficiency, academic performance, culture adaptation, networking, mental health, negative stereotyping and xenophobia, with some (even though not a significant number) of them feeling that they were in a state of poor wellbeing during their entire stay overseas. Chinese international students (and other international students from developing countries and regions) may be trapped in a middle ground between being “privileged” in their home country and somehow “vulnerable” in their host countries, since they may to various extents lose their privileged status in the academic, social and psychological circumstances they encounter overseas, with economic privilege being unable to secure trouble-free lives. This situation ultimately triggers an imperative to rethink the privileged label typically attached to Chinese international students; how many of these privileges actually still remain when Chinese students study abroad, and which factors should be considered when a vulnerable group is identified? This research hence argues for an expanded identification of vulnerable groups, which is retrieved from a CA-informed understanding that human beings’ wellbeing and quality of life are not solely determined by their economic status. This argument enlarges the applicable participant group for CA-informed research.

CA has laid a solid theoretical foundation for this research. However, it also has limitations. A core assertion of CA is to treat each person as an end, addressing a focus on the capabilities that are enjoyed by each and every individual, rather than forming an evaluation based on general or average resources available to a cohort sharing common characteristics (Sen, 1999). This standpoint makes CA a flexible theory, which allows researchers to customize their approach based on empirical sites and participant characteristics; however, it is impossible to have a closed framework that is convenient for replicable evaluation practices. This in-depth qualitative study does not aim to produce an operationalized framework of CA in the context of graduate employability. Nevertheless, there is potential for further work to contribute a specific list that facilitates the measurement of graduate employability from a capabilities perspective.

Secondly, beyond the work that has been undertaken in this research in the adoption of CA in a study with international features, subsequent research could make additional attempts to extend the application of this theory within international contexts. Also, regarding this study's argument about vulnerable groups, further exploration could be directed at employing CA in research into other cohorts that are not traditionally recognised as vulnerable, to achieve more insightful understanding of their current – and otherwise unknown – dilemmas. Finally, specific to issues of graduate employability of international students, this research raises an important question: how can the contributions made by HEIs to local students be equalized between Chinese students (the largest group of international students) and international students from other (possibly marginalized) countries at cohort and, also, individual levels? Researchers could develop the exploration of international graduate employability from the lens of educational equality that is emphasized by CA.

#### 8.4. Methodological contributions of this research

As informed by the theoretical framework and philosophical standpoints of constructivism and interpretivism, this longitudinal qualitative research adopted a

diary-interview methodology comprising two rounds of semi-structured interviews and nine-month solicited diaries to explore the research questions. The diary-interview approach enabled comprehensive data collection in this research: the first-round interviews collected data from participants about their demographics, motivations for receiving HE abroad, their initial understanding of employability, and expectations about employability enhancement from overseas experiences; the diary entries simultaneously reflected participants' employability-related experiences together with the holistic contexts in which these experiences were situated; the second-round interviews, using the diary data as prompts, investigated participants' further interpretations of their experiences and their ongoing ideas about employability, career choices and broader future lives on the basis of their personal circumstances. This research design achieved a rich dataset through which to provide a comprehensive account of participants' EM whilst studying at a UK university.

The methodological design of this research enabled the researcher to reach invaluable findings which could not have been achieved without the diary-interview approach. Diaries, as an artificial production for recording life events, encouraged participants to locate EM in their holistic lives, rather than isolate the research-specific topic from their integrated experiences. This research thus finds that participants' EM practices were not only related to specific events, but also permeated the minutiae of their everyday lives overseas. Furthermore, the longitudinal diary entries uncovered changes in participants' behaviour, as well as the reasons behind them, in the course of the research. This research therefore manifests the dynamics of participants' commitment to EM at different stages of their overseas year, and indeed in response to specific events, such as assignment deadlines and holidays. Thirdly, the real-time diary-keeping enhanced the rigour of the data, by reducing the inaccuracy of information captured by retrospective methods, and enabling this research to trace how participants' perceptions were shaped by their ongoing experiences.

Diary-interview methodology is underutilized in the field of HE research, which is surprising when reflective writing is an effective way in which to facilitate academic work (Cao and Henderson, 2020). This methodology is also marginalized in employability research: to the best of my knowledge, this study is the first to employ solicited diaries in this area. I argue that the effectiveness of this methodology lies in allowing graduates' or employees' voices to be heard in terms of their understanding and performance of EM; further, employability diary-keeping in turn arguably supports employees' employability enhancement.

In addition to enriching the empirical practices of using the diary-interview approach in the areas of HE and employability research, this study also makes significant contributions to the development of the diary-interview methodology per se. This research set the frequency of diary tasks at *one full week of each month* in order to reduce the workload on participants, while ensuring the longitudinal nature of data collection was maintained. This strategy, which appears to not have been used in previous diary research, sets an example for researchers to be innovative in manner in which they design diary-based research. Moreover, working with a relatively large participant group for a relatively long period, this research has determined a number of methodological implications relating to participant recruitment and retention and their diary-keeping behaviour. Regarding participant recruitment (within a limited time in particular), I assert the significance of simultaneously advertising the research in multiple places to gain as broad a population as possible, and the effectiveness of accessing potential participants via specific organizations or persons they trust (Cao, forthcoming). For participant retention, efforts can be made to ensure a participant-friendly research design, making participants aware of the benefits of participating in the research, providing incentives which can trigger their self-motivation to engage with the research, and in establishing good researcher-participant rapport (ibid). In terms of participants' diary-keeping behaviour, this research addresses the interweaving of diaries and lives, finding that participants diary-keeping behaviour is differentiated by the cycles of the academic year, specific events that happened in their lives, existing habits of recording life events (e.g., private diaries), research experiences as

researchers, and trust and rapport with the researcher (Cao and Henderson, 2020). The methodological ideas achieved by this research are invaluable in the development of the diary-interview methodology in HE, and also have numerous implications for other research areas.

While making methodological contributions, this research also has certain limitations with regard to the utilization of the diary-interview methodology. Many participants wrote diary entries in Chinese, which facilitated the expression of their ideas and feelings. However, it is regrettable that some of the emotional meanings are unavoidably lost in translation to English. Secondly, some participants reported in the follow-up interviews that the participants sometimes filled out the whole-week diary forms on the last day of the diary week (based on their working agenda or memory only), which negated the most significant advantage of the diary method, namely that of providing data as close as possible to when the events in question occurred. Lastly, this research was particularly successful in terms of participant recruitment and retention, and many participants provided data that was rich in terms of both quantity and quality. However, the researcher spent large amounts of personal time interacting with the participants, and the process of data management and analysis was extremely time-consuming.

The diary-interview approach has excellent potential for broader use in HE-based research. Researchers could expand the scope of research topics to which the diary-interview method can be applied. Also, the target population for diary research needs to involve more HE players in addition to students. Further work might also try additional diary types and formats to capture the phenomena in HE settings, for example, digital-based diaries or online diaries may be effective in collecting data from the current teaching-learning context, which can be facilitated by high tech and digital media. Besides, there are numerous methodological issues that remain to be explored further, such as the impact of the existing power relationship on the establishment of researcher-participant rapport in HE diary research, and ethical issues for diary research into marginalized groups or sensitive topics (Cao and Henderson, forthcoming).

## 8.5. Practical implications of this research

As a vital force for global talent cultivation, HEIs bear the responsibility of supporting international students' employability enhancement. If international students fail to achieve a successful transition from their overseas HE to domestic employment (and/or employment in other regions), so-called international HE does not truly break national and regional boundaries. The findings of this research, while emphasizing the embeddedness of participants' EM in daily lives, have shown the significance of the role played by HEIs in shaping participants' employability-related experiences, in terms of the opportunities (curriculum, extra academic activities, career-related events, volunteer jobs) provided by the university and departments for participants to develop their employability, and the impacts of HE players (teachers, staff, local students, other international students) on participants' EM. This research has determined a number of practical implications by which HEIs could improve their performance in terms of supporting Chinese international students. Recommendations derived from bottom-up research aligned with the students affected are arguably more poignant and effective (Moya et al., 2017).

First of all, based on the findings presented in section 6.2.1, more Chinese-specific career fairs are needed to allow Chinese students to keep in touch with the Chinese labour market while receiving HE abroad. Employment-related skill-training (e.g., CV writing and interview skills) specific to Chinese students might also be helpful, where students can learn how to meet the requirements and criteria set by Chinese employers. Both career fairs and training events would better service students if they have *disciplinary foci*, paying greater attention to students in the social sciences (and also arts and humanities) who receive insufficient support in terms of subsequent employment and employability development. Further, these career-related events need to be accommodating in terms of students' academic workloads at different stages over the year, as this research found that participants show greater passion and have more free time to attend non-academic activities in

term one, when they are curious about almost everything relating to UK HE, and are less occupied with academic tasks. It is hence suggested to hold high-quality employability-related events around the start of the academic year, raising students' awareness of EM as early as possible and inspiring them to engage, and remain engaged, in related activities. In the meantime, effort also needs to be made to provide Chinese international students with more opportunities for local employment or internships, since some may wish to stay in the UK after graduation, but even for returnees a UK work experience may help them considerably in terms of subsequently finding work in China.

Secondly, there are also some recommendations for HE staff, since they are identified as important "others" involved in participants' EM. Academic staff need to learn more about Chinese international students, in terms of their motivations for receiving HE abroad, their learning experiences, and their academic learning needs, and required support for the development of their knowledge and skills. Academic staff also need to be aware of Chinese students' expectations regarding receiving HE abroad on their employability enhancement, helping them to bridge academic achievements and employment practices. Personal tutors need to interpret Chinese students' choices and behaviour based on an awareness that their overseas year(s) is, for them, *living* abroad, rather than merely *studying* abroad. It would be helpful for personal tutors to have a greater understanding of the reasons behind students' actions (e.g., travel) and to help them to consciously manage their employability during specific events and also throughout their everyday lives.

These suggestions, as derived from the research findings, can help with HEIs' career services, but one should be aware that these ideas may also be challenging for HEIs to translate into practice. For example, it would take some considerable time for HEIs to build their connections with Chinese employers; career specialists familiar with the Chinese labour market may be difficult to find; it is also challenging for local staff to understand every international groups, or even each individual international student's requirements in terms of enhancing their employability.

There is still considerable room for career services and related research to develop, in order to better facilitate Chinese (and other) international students' EM and broader overseas experiences.

#### 8.6. Limitations of this research and recommendations for future work

This research contributes to the empirical knowledge of HE and graduate employability, the theoretical development of CA, and the methodological development of the diary-interview approach. Nevertheless, there are a number of limitations to this research that need to be addressed. The first limitation is the generalizability of the findings. This research is a qualitative study which involves a relatively small number of participants but explores their experiences and perceptions in depth. Rich data, as collected by the diaries, were analysed alongside the interview data, which provides rigour and trustworthiness in this research. The generalizability of findings, however, was neither the aim nor the basis of the validity of this research. In undertaking this study, the researcher expected to achieve a deep and holistic understanding of participants' EM within their own context-specific settings, which does not enable generalization of experiences and perceptions to Chinese international students in the UK as a whole.

In the second place, in conducting a longitudinal diary-interview research, this study recruited participants from only one UK university, which enabled the researcher to have more frequent interactions with the participants. However, this research was thus unable to make any institutional-level comparison of data, which is regrettable as the different strategies for supporting Chinese international students' employability enhancement used by different UK universities cannot then be explored and compared. The chosen university is a research-based university with high reputation, and whose admission criteria have screened students at least from the perspectives of academic performance and English proficiency. Although the findings have shown differences in participants' academic experiences, this research, to a certain extent, was conducted among Chinese international students with relatively privileged academic backgrounds. Further, Chinese international

students in the social sciences faculty of the chosen university are limited in number and unbalanced in terms of disciplines studied. This research is, as such, also unable to form any reasonable disciplinary comparison of its data. These issues have limited this study's empirical contributions to the research area and any practical implications for HEIs. However, despite these limitations, the study nonetheless has gained rich data about, and provided insightful analysis of, participants' employability-related experiences, which has enriched the knowledge of international HE and graduate employability.

In addition, this research, due to time limitations, did not follow participants' career development after studying abroad for a longer time. As a key argument of this study, employment outcomes are not the end of one's EM, so the second-round interviews were conducted at the end of participants' courses to explore their reflections on their employability experience during their overseas year, rather than some period after their graduation to gain information about their employment outcomes. Nonetheless, this research, advocating that one's employability plays a significant role in human development and wellbeing, could be furthered to explore how participants' employability, as shaped by receiving HE abroad, actually works within their lives in a longitudinal manner.

Based on the discussion of the limitations of this study, I suggest four directions for the subsequent development of research into the employability issues experienced by Chinese international students. First of all, a larger scale of study could be conducted for UK-educated Chinese students, involving more types of UK HEIs and more participants with more diverse backgrounds, so as to achieve a more comprehensive picture of the employability-related experiences of Chinese students in the UK. Secondly, it would be worthwhile to undertake comparative studies among Chinese international students in different countries to investigate how their employability issues are addressed by nationally distinct HE sectors, and to determine more effective ways to support Chinese international students in their study-to-career transition. Comparative studies could also be conducted on Chinese international students and international students from other countries to explore

how the interaction between socio-cultural origins and overseas learning experiences may impact students' employability issues. Also, a comparison between Chinese international students and Chinese domestic students in terms of their EM in receiving HE could be undertaken, which might contribute to HEIs in both China and the receiving countries increasing their understanding of how to better support graduate employability. The third recommendation for future work in this area is to conduct longer-duration research to trace international graduates' career development, in addition to exploring their EM in HE, which is beneficial for bridging overseas experiences and career preparation, and beneficial to human development and broader lives. The idea of keeping longitudinal records of graduates' career development can be also applied to the practical work of alumni management. Finally, as graduate employability involves various other stakeholders (e.g., governments, HEIs, employers) in addition to graduates, future research needs to investigate their perceptions of how graduate employability could be enhanced, in order to realize both individuals' intrinsic values in leading their working and broader lives as they wish, and their instrumental value in terms of making positive contributions to societal development.

To conclude, this research has produced a body of knowledge about the EM of Chinese international students, in particular regarding why current Chinese students in the social sciences choose to receive HE abroad, how they expect their employability to be enhanced by overseas experiences, how they manage employability during their year in the UK, and what key factors shape their EM practices and career choices. Chinese international students in the social sciences are an under-explored group, and the area of international graduate employability still has great potential in terms of further exploration. Also, this research adopted the diary-interview methodology, which is an under-utilized approach in the HE area, and it expands the application of CA to research that has international characteristics. These innovations have allowed this research to contribute to related areas empirically, theoretically and methodologically, and call for more attention to be given to these fascinating areas of enquiry.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1 Schedule for the first-round interviews

#### **Interview schedule (Round 1)**

The interview will be conducted in two stages, with one at the beginning of the academic year 2017-2018 (October-November in 2017) and the other one at the end of the academic year (August-September in 2018). Since the interview is semi-structured, designed questions have been divided into groups. The interview will base on the question groups but not strictly accord to them. All the themes will be discussed and the specific questions will be skipped or added if necessary.

Questions may also be changed on the basis of different situation of interviewees.

#### **Issues need to be discussed before the interview:**

- Provide project information sheet to participants
- Ask participants to sign the consent form
- Ask permission of audio recording
- Any questions or concerns?

#### **Demographic information :**

- What is your name?
- What your date of birth?
- Where is your hometown?
- Which university did you graduate from?
- What course did you learn in undergraduate study?
- What course are you learning at present?
- Did you have gap year(s)?

#### **Family background:**

- What are the occupations of your parents?
- Are you the first generation receiving higher education in your family?

- What is the education background of your parents/ grandparents/ siblings?
- Are you the only child in your family?
- How are you funded?
- How do you think the cost of this year will influence the financial conditions of your family?
- Do your parents support you to learn abroad?

**Previous experience:**

- What types of overseas experiences did you have?
- What types of overseas experiences did your parents have?
- What types of working experiences did you have?

**Motivation towards studying in the UK:**

- What are your initial motivations for studying abroad?
- When did you get the idea of studying abroad for the first time?
- Why did you choose the UK as the destination?
- Why did you choose this university?
- What is others' (e.g. parents, teachers and friends) attitude towards your choice?
- Did you change the course?
- What are your university classmates' choices after achieving bachelor's degree?

**Experiences in the first (a few) month(s)?**

- Did you attend pre-sessional language class?
- What difficulties have you met?
- Are you satisfied with the university so far?
- Have you found differences between this university and your previous university?
- Can you feel the international atmosphere here?
- What are your advantages and disadvantages compare to your classmates?

**Expectations of employability enhancement:**

- What is your career plan?
- Will you come back to your hometown to work?
- How do you understand employability?
- Whether you think overseas experience will benefit your career future or not?
- In what respects do you think overseas experience will or will not benefit your career future?
- What skills are you expected to develop through learning in the UK?
- Do you have any ideas about how to develop these skills?
- What factors do you value the most when you choose an employment?
- Except skills, what other factors do you think may influence your employability?

Appendix 2 Diary recording form (version 1)

<b>Employability Management Recording Form</b>	
<b>Week Ending Date</b>	
<b>Organizer of the Activities</b>	
<b>Content of the Activities</b>	
<b>Skills Developed by the Activities</b>	
<b>Evaluation of the Activities</b>	
<b>Other comments</b>	

Appendix 3 Diary recording form (version 2)

<b>Employability Management Recording Form</b>	
<b>Week Ending Date</b>	
<b>Monday</b>	<p><b>Please describe your experience.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Daily life in a foreign country:</b></li> <li>• <b>Curriculum learning:</b></li> <li>• <b>Extra-curriculum activities:</b></li> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Who organized the activities?</b></p> <p><b>What skills were developed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Professional skills:</b></li> <li>• <b>Generic skills:</b></li> <li>• <b>Personal attributes:</b></li> <li>• <b>Directly employment-related skills:</b></li> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</b></p>
<b>Tuesday</b>	<p><b>Please describe your experience.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Daily life in a foreign country:</b></li> <li>• <b>Curriculum learning:</b></li> <li>• <b>Extra-curriculum activities:</b></li> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Who organized the activities?</b></p>

	<p><b>What skills were developed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional skills:</li> <li>• Generic skills:</li> <li>• Personal attributes:</li> <li>• Directly employment-related skills:</li> <li>• Others:</li> </ul> <p><b>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</b></p>
<p><b>Wednesday</b></p>	<p><b>Please describe your experience.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily life in a foreign country:</li> <li>• Curriculum learning:</li> <li>• Extra-curriculum activities:</li> <li>• Others:</li> </ul> <p><b>Who organized the activities?</b></p> <p><b>What skills were developed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional skills:</li> <li>• Generic skills:</li> <li>• Personal attributes:</li> <li>• Directly employment-related skills:</li> <li>• Others:</li> </ul> <p><b>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</b></p>
<p><b>Thursday</b></p>	<p><b>Please describe your experience.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily life in a foreign country:</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum learning:</li> <li>• Extra-curriculum activities:</li> <li>• Others:</li> </ul> <p><b>Who organized the activities?</b></p> <p><b>What skills were developed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional skills:</li> <li>• Generic skills:</li> <li>• Personal attributes:</li> <li>• Directly employment-related skills:</li> <li>• Others:</li> </ul> <p><b>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</b></p>
Friday	<p><b>Please describe your experience.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily life in a foreign country:</li> <li>• Curriculum learning:</li> <li>• Extra-curriculum activities:</li> <li>• Others:</li> </ul> <p><b>Who organized the activities?</b></p> <p><b>What skills were developed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional skills:</li> <li>• Generic skills:</li> <li>• Personal attributes:</li> <li>• Directly employment-related skills:</li> <li>• Others:</li> </ul>

	<p>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</p>
<p><b>Saturday</b></p>	<p>Please describe your experience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily life in a foreign country:</li> <li>• Curriculum learning:</li> <li>• Extra-curriculum activities:</li> <li>• Others:</li> </ul> <p>Who organized the activities?</p> <p>What skills were developed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional skills:</li> <li>• Generic skills:</li> <li>• Personal attributes:</li> <li>• Directly employment-related skills:</li> <li>• Others:</li> </ul> <p>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</p>
<p><b>Sunday</b></p>	<p>Please describe your experience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily life in a foreign country:</li> <li>• Curriculum learning:</li> <li>• Extra-curriculum activities:</li> <li>• Others:</li> </ul> <p>Who organized the activities?</p> <p>What skills were developed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional skills:</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Generic skills:</b></li><li>• <b>Personal attributes:</b></li><li>• <b>Directly employment-related skills:</b></li><li>• <b>Others:</b></li></ul> <p><b>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</b></p>
<b>Summary of this week</b>	

## Appendix 4 Schedule for the second-round interviews

### Interview schedule (Round 2)

#### General satisfaction of experiences

- How do you evaluate your experiences this year? (Course? Assignment results? Extra-curriculum activities? Relationship? Travel? Friendship? What else)
- Are your expectations of learning abroad fulfilled? In what aspects yes or no?
- What are your most important achievements?
- Any unexpected achievements?

#### Employability-related experiences

- Are you more confident about your employability? In what aspects?
- What aspects of employability have been developed?
- What aspects of employability are still need to be improved?
- What new skills were developed until you studied in the UK?
- Who helped you the most in terms of your employability enhancement?
- Are you satisfied with your employability management in this year? In what aspects yes or no?
- What factors do you think influenced your employability management? (list factors)
- Did you come back to China during this year?

#### Job hunting/ career plan

- What your career plan at present?
- Any changes compared to that in last year?
- What stage are you in for the job hunting?
- How you find or plan to find a job?
- Are you familiar with Chinese labour market? (policy, competition, salary)
- Are you going to seek help from others? Who?
- What aspects are most important to you in terms of an employment?

- What factors may influence your choice of an employment?
- How do you understand employability?

### **Diary research**

- How do you feel about the diary research?
- To what extent enjoy or not enjoy it?
- Drop out?
- Fatigue?
- Relationship with the researcher?
- Influence your activities?
- Length
- Delay

## **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

*version 2, 11/04/17*

**Study Title:** Enhancing the Employability of International Students:  
Chinese students on taught Master's programmes in social sciences

**Investigator(s):** *Xuemeng Cao, Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick*

### **Introduction**

You are invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Talk to others about the study if you wish.

(Part 1 tells you the purpose of the study and what will happen to you if you take part. Part 2 gives you more detailed information about the conduct of the study)

Please ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

### **PART 1**

#### **What is the study about?**

This research aims to investigate Chinese international students' experience of employability management during their postgraduate learning, including their initial motivations for studying abroad, employability-related experience in classroom learning and extra-curriculum activities, the deepening of understanding to the relationship between overseas experience and employability development, and the evaluation of how personal circumstances influence the approaches to employability management. The

results of this study hope to benefit Chinese international students' employment outcomes and sustainable employability, making theoretical contributions to related studies in broader contexts.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is entirely up to you to decide. I will describe the study and go through this information sheet, which I will give you to keep. If you choose to participate, I will ask you to sign a consent form to confirm that you have agreed to take part. You will be free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and this will not affect you or your circumstances in any way.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

As a participant of this research, you will be involved in individual face-to-face interviews and diary keeping. The interviews will be conducted in two stages, with one at the beginning of the academic year 2017-2018 (October-November in 2017) and the other one at the end of the academic year (August-September in 2018). During the period between two interviews, you need to record your employability-related experiences in a weekly diary.

**What are the possible disadvantages, side effects, risks, and/or discomforts of taking part in this study?**

This is a low-risk project. The first potential discomfort that I can think of is the risk of criticizing the university and being recognised by readers of the study. In order to protect participants as much as possible, the names of departments and participants will be carefully anonymised. Secondly, participating a long-lasting research, especially keeping a diary for a whole year can be time-consuming and may make participants realise that they are struggling or having difficult emotions through the reflections that they share for the project. Participants will be given detailed guidelines helping with their diary keeping, and participants' personal tutor may be sought for recommendations for personal support if completing the diary leads to participants discovering difficult issues about themselves. In addition, the interview will be audio-recorded which may make interviewees feel uncomfortable, but it is important for data collection and analysis.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**

Employability management is an important issue for every student. Through participating in this research, especially by keeping a employability-related diary, you will record your international experience, clarifying your progress and shortages, deepening the understanding of how to make yourself more employable. In addition, it is a good opportunity to see how an academic study is conducted, which is helpful for you to do your own research in the future.

### **Expenses and payments**

No payments or reimbursements will be made for this study as participants will not be asked to travel.

### **What will happen when the study ends?**

Once the study has ended, data will be securely stored for a minimum of 10 years, and then the data will be securely destroyed. No data will be stored in your real name. You will be informed of any dissemination activities and materials resulting from the study.

### **Will my taking part be kept confidential?**

Yes. I will follow strict ethical and legal practice and all information about you will be handled in confidence. Further details are included in Part 2.

### **What if there is a problem?**

Any complaint about the way you have been dealt with during the study or any possible harm that you might suffer will be addressed. Detailed information is given in Part 2.

**This concludes Part 1.**

**If the information in Part 1 has interested you and you are considering participation, please read the additional information in Part 2 before making any decision.**

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## **PART 2**

### **Who is organising and funding the study?**

This research is organized by Xuemeng Cao, as the project for my PhD study at University of Warwick. This project is fully funded by China Scholarship Council (CSC).

### **What will happen if I don't want to carry on being part of the study?**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Refusal to participate will not affect your place on the course or your grades in any way. If you decide to take part in the study, you will need to sign a consent form, which states that you have given your consent to participate. If you agree to participate, you may nevertheless withdraw from the study at any time without this affecting you in any way.

You have the right to withdraw from the study completely and decline any further contact by study staff after you withdraw.

### **Who should I contact if I wish to make a complaint?**

Any complaint about the way you have been dealt with during the study or any possible harm you might have suffered will be addressed. Please address your complaint to the person below, who is a senior University of Warwick official entirely independent of this study:

#### **Head of Research Governance**

Research & Impact Services

University House

University of Warwick

Coventry

CV4 8UW

Email: [researchgovernance@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:researchgovernance@warwick.ac.uk)

Tel: 024 76 522746

**Will my taking part be kept confidential?**

You will be given pseudonyms from the moment you agree to participate in the study, and no data (including audio recordings) will be marked with your real names, or any identificatory names of eg. dependents, colleagues, institution, city. Place-related details will be replaced with general identifiers eg. university in England. The names of participants will be replaced by codes (e.g. student A) in the transcripts and in any other places where the data is stored or referred to.

All data provided by participants will be securely stored. Printed data will be stored in a locked location. Electronic files will be password-protected and stored on a safe server (University of Warwick). Data will be kept for at least 10 years and then securely destroyed.

My two supervisors and me are the only persons who can access the anonymized data. The information gathered from participants will not be used for any other purposes except for the research.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

It is anticipated that results from this study will be presented at conferences and seminars, and in my PhD thesis, in a written report and in academic publications such as articles, blogs and book chapters. You will receive a draft copy of publications using data from your interview and will be invited to comment within a given time frame.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been reviewed and given favourable opinion by the University of Warwick's Centre for Education Studies.

**What if I want more information about the study?**

If you have any questions about any aspect of the study, or your participation in it, not answered by this participant information sheet, please contact:

Xuemeng Cao



Dr Emily Henderson (supervisor) [REDACTED]

Dr Ian Abbott (supervisor) [REDACTED]

**Thank you for taking the time to read this Participant Information Sheet.**

## Appendix 6 Participant consent form

### CONSENT FORM

*version 2, 11/04/17*

**Participant ID:**

**Title of Project:** Enhancing the Employability of International Students: Chinese students on taught Master's programmes in social sciences

**Name of researcher(s):** Xuemeng Cao; Emily Henderson (supervisor); Ian Abbott (supervisor)

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet (*version 2, 11/04/17*) provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

3. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded, and my correspondence will be quoted (anonymized) in the thesis of the researcher.

4. I understand that the content of my diaries will be quoted (anonymized) in the thesis of the researcher.

5. I understand that my data will be securely stored for a minimum of 10 years, in line with the University of Warwick's Research Data Management Policy.

6. I agree to take part in the above study.

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Name of Participant

---

Date

---

Signature

---

Name of Researcher  
taking consent

---

Date

---

Signature

## Appendix 7 Example of email sent before diary weeks (Chinese)



## Translation of the example of email sent before diary weeks

Dear all,

Happy new year!

19<sup>th</sup> (Monday) – 25<sup>th</sup> (Sunday) February is the fourth diary week of this study. Please record your employability-related experiences in this week on the diary form, and send the completed form to me by 23:59 of 26<sup>th</sup> February.

One-third of our nine-month diary research study has been conducted, and almost half of your Master`s studies in the UK have passed. I believe that you have made progress during this period of time. Thank you for your trust and your willingness to share your experiences with me. Thank you all for the contributions you have made to this diary study.

All best wishes for your studies and lives in the new year.

Best regards,

Xuemeng

## Appendix 8 Example for diary keeping

<b>Employability Management Recording Form</b>	
<b>Week Ending Date</b>	23th April 2017
<b>Monday</b>	<p><b>Please describe your experience.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Daily life in a foreign country:</b></li> <li>• <b>Curriculum learning:</b></li> <li>• <b>Extra-curriculum activities:</b></li> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p>I am going to attend a conference at University of Edinburgh. I made a plan of my journey, booking flight tickets and contacting landlord on Airbnb by emails. I compared the location, security and prices of different accommodation and chose the one I prefer.</p> <p><b>Who organized the activities?</b> Myself.</p> <p><b>What skills were developed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Professional skills:</b> Written communicating</li> <li>• <b>Generic skills:</b> Planning, decision making</li> <li>• <b>Personal attributes:</b></li> <li>• <b>Employment-specific skills:</b></li> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</b></p>

	<p>It is common that people use emails to contact with colleagues and people in other institutions. It is important to practice how to communicate by writing efficiently.</p> <p>A good plan helps people be organized and efficient in doing a task.</p> <p>Making a decision bases on careful consideration and analysis is important for an individual to mange his work. It is also a necessary ability for a leader.</p>
<p><b>Tuesday</b></p>	<p><b>Please describe your experience.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Daily life in a foreign country:</b></li> <li>• <b>Curriculum learning:</b></li> </ul> <p>I worked on my research today. I did comparison between diaries written by my colleague and myself, finding differences on how we understand employability-related experience and how we record it. It is good for me to improve my research design.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Extra-curriculum activities:</b></li> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Who organized the activities?</b></p> <p>Myself</p> <p><b>What skills were developed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Professional skills:</b></li> </ul> <p>data analyzing, English writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Generic skills:</b></li> <li>• <b>Personal attributes:</b></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Employment-specific skills:</b></li> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</b></p> <p>Data analysis is one of the most important part in doing a research. It directly contributes to what conclusions can be reach.</p> <p>English writing is an essential skill for a person working in an international context.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday</b></p>	<p><b>Please describe your experience.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Daily life in a foreign country:</b></li> <li>• <b>Curriculum learning:</b></li> <li>• <b>Extra-curriculum activities:</b></li> </ul> <p>I had an appointment with an expert in career service. He helped me with my CV improvement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Who organized the activities?</b></p> <p>Career service.</p> <p><b>What skills were developed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Professional skills:</b></li> <li>• <b>Generic skills:</b></li> </ul> <p>Communicating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Personal attributes:</b></li> <li>• <b>Employment-specific skills:</b></li> </ul> <p>CV writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul>

	<p><b>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</b></p> <p>Communicating is one of skills which is most commonly required by employers. Good communication skills help people cooperate happily and efficiently. It benefits the group work.</p> <p>A good CV gives people more opportunities to succeed in job applying.</p>
<p><b>Thursday</b></p>	<p><b>Please describe your experience.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Daily life in a foreign country:</b></li> <li>• <b>Curriculum learning:</b></li> <li>• <b>Extra-curriculum activities:</b></li> </ul> <p>I went to swim with my friend. Swimming is my favorite exercise. It makes me active.</p> <p>I am a member of CES PG Conference group helping with the conference organization. We had a meeting to finalized the logics for the conference.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Who organized the activities?</b></p> <p>My friend and I.</p> <p>CES PG Conference group.</p> <p><b>What skills were developed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Professional skills:</b></li> <li>• <b>Generic skills:</b></li> </ul>

	<p>teamwork, organizing an event, communicating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Personal attributes:</b> persistence, vitality</li> <li>• <b>Employment-specific skills:</b></li> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</b></p> <p>I know some employees regard whether an employer has a wide range of hobbies as an important issue, coz it reflects one's attitude to life.</p> <p>People who are good at teamwork are more attractive for an employer, coz most tasks needed cooperation among people specializing in different respects.</p> <p>Organizing an event requires lots of works and abilities. People have experiences of helping with it can propose more detailed ideas, and they also have more advanced executive ability.</p> <p>Communicating is one of skills which is most commonly required by employers. Good communication skills help people cooperate happily and efficiently. It benefits the group work.</p>
Friday	<p><b>Please describe your experience.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Daily life in a foreign country:</b></li> <li>• <b>Curriculum learning:</b></li> </ul> <p>I prepared my presentation for CES PG Conference today. I reviewed what I have done for my research, selecting</p>

the information I would like to involved in my presentation, and made a PowerPoint.

- **Extra-curriculum activities:**
- **Others:**

**Who organized the activities?**

Myself.

**What skills were developed?**

- **Professional skills:**  
Presentation (public speaking)
- **Generic skills:**  
information selecting and organizing, PowerPoint making
- **Personal attributes:**
- **Employment-specific skills:**
- **Others:**

**How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?**

People need an ability to find the most important issue among a great deal of information and set up a good structure of the information.

Making a PowerPoint is a basic IT skill that everyone need to give a presentation or to show his work.

Public speaking is an important skill for a lecturer or a leader for a task. Good presentation skills also give people more opportunities to show themselves in interviews or other occasions.

<p><b>Saturday</b></p>	<p><b>Please describe your experience.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Daily life in a foreign country:</b></li> <li>• <b>Curriculum learning:</b></li> </ul> <p>I asked the colleague participating my pre-pilot to give me her second-week diary and got her feedback of the research. I made comparison between her diaries for two weeks and got some interesting findings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Extra-curriculum activities:</b></li> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Who organized the activities?</b></p> <p>Myself.</p> <p><b>What skills were developed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Professional skills:</b></li> </ul> <p>data analyzing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Generic skills:</b></li> </ul> <p>communicating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Personal attributes:</b></li> <li>• <b>Employment-specific skills:</b></li> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</b></p> <p>Data analysis is one of the most important part in doing a research. It directly contributes to what conclusions can be reach.</p> <p>Communicating is one of skills which is most commonly required by employers. Good communication skills help</p>

	<p>people cooperate happily and efficiently. It benefits the group work.</p>
<p><b>Sunday</b></p>	<p><b>Please describe your experience.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Daily life in a foreign country:</b> I had a party with my flatmates. We cooked together and had a great time for dinner.</li> <li>• <b>Curriculum learning:</b></li> <li>• <b>Extra-curriculum activities:</b></li> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Who organized the activities?</b> My flatmates.</p> <p><b>What skills were developed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Professional skills:</b></li> <li>• <b>Generic skills:</b> Communicating, intercultural understanding</li> <li>• <b>Personal attributes:</b> Active, self-confidence</li> <li>• <b>Employment-specific skills:</b></li> <li>• <b>Others:</b></li> </ul> <p><b>How useful are the skills in terms of your employability?</b> Communicating is one of skills which is most commonly required by employers. Good communication skills help people cooperate happily and efficiently. It benefits the group work.</p>

	<p>Intercultural understanding can be a great priority for international students. Employers love the person who are open-minded and can smoothly communicate and cooperate with people from diverse culture background.</p> <p>Good personalities help people succeed in job interview and also make people popular among colleagues.</p>
<p><b>Summary of this week</b></p>	<p>I worked on my research for 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>. The content is similar.</p> <p>I routinely do some things benefitting my employability, for example, watching English video and reading English news to enhance my language proficiency, chatting with my colleagues to train my communication skills, and getting job information from websites or applications such as Linked-in.</p>