

The interweaving of diaries and lives: diary-keeping behaviour in a diary-interview study of international students' employability management

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Xuemeng Cao 
and Emily F. Henderson 

Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick, UK

Abstract

This article explores 'diary-keeping behaviour', or the ways in which participants conduct the completion and submission of diaries in diary research. There is a paucity of methodologically oriented literature on diary method and as such this article makes a contribution to extending the existing knowledge of this method. The primary aim of this article is to set out in detail the key issues relating to diary-keeping behaviour, in order to provide a foundation for future critical explorations of this facet of diary research. The research that this paper is based on involved a 12-month diary-interview study. This project explored the employability management of Chinese international Master's students in social sciences studying in the UK during one academic year. The article sets out key facets of diary-keeping behaviour and explores specific considerations for diary studies in higher education contexts, where diary research has been particularly neglected.

Keywords

Diary method, diary-keeping behaviour, longitudinal research, higher education, international students

Introduction

Solicited diaries, i.e. diaries which are written and then collected for a specific research purpose, enable researchers to peek into the everyday lives of participants (Alaszewski, 2006; Bartlett and Milligan, 2015; Hyers, 2018). However diary method is underutilised, particularly in higher education research. This is surprising, when diary method has the potential to produce insightful research into academic practices of students and staff, and when reflective writing already plays such an important role in the academic development sphere (Nevalainen et al., 2010; Vinjamuri et al., 2017; Wallin and Adawi, 2018).

Corresponding author:

Xuemeng Cao, Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK.

Email: Xuemeng.cao@warwick.ac.uk

During diary research studies, especially longitudinal ones, not only the collected diary data, but also the process of how these data were generated, contributes to the empirical analysis (Hyers, 2018). This is because participants' choices of how to represent their stories also contributes to the meaning of the content they include. This article explores this process from the perspective of 'diary-keeping behaviour', which we define as the ways in which participants engage in the completion and submission of diaries. Participants of diary research studies dedicate more time and effort to producing data than those involved in many other research methods. Moreover, participants have higher autonomy than many other methods because participants can process and edit data before submitting the diary entries to the researcher. As such, issues related to participant diary-keeping behaviour are a worthy point of discussion, in terms of validity and nature of data produced, ethics issues, and the relationship between research participation and the daily lives of participants. Although previous articles have touched on issues relating to diary-keeping behaviour (e.g. Bartlett, 2012; Furness and Garrud, 2010; Harvey, 2011; Milligan et al., 2005), to our knowledge, this is the first article to focus specifically on this topic. There is a paucity of methodologically oriented literature on diary method (Bartlett and Milligan, 2015; Hyers, 2018) and as such this article aims to extend existing knowledge of this method. The primary aim of this article is to set out in detail the key issues relating to diary-keeping behaviour, in order to provide a foundation for future critical explorations of this facet of diary research.

The research that this paper is based on involved a nine-month diary study, which was complemented by pre-diary and post-diary interviews, otherwise known as diary-interview method (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977), which was conducted by the first author and supervised by the second author. The research study explored the employability management of Chinese international Master's students in social sciences studying in the UK during one academic year (2017–2018). There were 32 participants asked to record their employability-related experiences for one full week in each month. This longitudinal diary research raised substantial methodological questions; participant diary-keeping behaviour was found to impact the data in many ways. The article therefore highlights the value of in-depth methodological discussions on how diary method can be better used as both a stand-alone method and in tandem with other methods. In this paper, following a literature review on how participant diary-keeping behaviour has hitherto been explored in general and in the higher education research field, the empirical study is introduced. The article then explores diary-keeping behaviour in the empirical study and concludes with suggested avenues for further exploration. Our core argument is that researchers should acknowledge diary-keeping behaviour when planning a diary method study, in addition to retrospectively analysing how the diaries were kept. Planning for diary-keeping behaviour would enhance the potential for diaries to produce salient findings in relation to both content and form.

Exploring diary-keeping behaviour in diary research

Diary research, broadly understood as focusing on personal accounts which are analysed for research purposes, is known to be a useful method across multiple disciplines (Alaszewski, 2006; Bartlett and Milligan, 2015; Hyers, 2018). Diary research in the

Social Sciences commonly takes the form of solicited diaries, which are initiated for the purpose of exploring specific research questions among a target population (Bartlett and Milligan, 2015); this form of diary research provides the basis for this article. In this section we focus on the diary-keeping behaviour of participants, to expand upon this important but neglected facet of diary research.

Diary-keeping behaviour, as we define the term, refers to the ways in which participants participate in diary research. Compared to other research methods such as questionnaires, observations and interviews, diary method often requires more investment and effort from research participants. Keeping diaries for a period of time can therefore lead to perceptible changes in the process of research participation. In Furness and Garrud's (2010) research exploring the experiences of people who underwent and recovered from facial surgery, for example, researchers revealed that participants' pre-surgery stress was reflected in the intensive use and substantial length of diary entries. However, the richness of the diary entries declined during the post-surgery year as participants recovered from the surgery physically, emotionally and socially, with some participants ceasing to write diary entries before the research was completed. Moreover, differences in participant behaviour can also be due to different personal circumstances. One of the Furness and Garrud's (2010) participants always gave very brief accounts because he had already experienced facial surgery and so experienced his second episode of surgery with less intensity. In other studies, differentiated behaviour was also linked to participants' gender (Keleher and Verrinder, 2003), cognitive capabilities (Bartlett, 2012) and effective use of the tools for the diary research (Valimaki et al., 2007). The length of time that diaries are kept influences diary-keeping behaviour (Alaszewski, 2006); importantly, researchers may not be able to discover the features of their participants' diary-keeping behaviour unless diary research is conducted for a relatively long period.

In addition to diary-keeping differences which are specifically related to the research topic, diary-keeping behaviour can also be altered by participants' wider lives. Participants may enjoy writing diary entries when they think it is a good way to document their lives and engage in self-reflection, but they may also suddenly lose the motivation to continue when some unpleasant issues (unrelated to the diary topic) happen to them (Bartlett, 2012). Meanwhile, producing diaries, especially for a relatively long period, may in turn trigger 'reactive effects', which refer to the changes of participants' behaviour in their daily lives because of producing diaries (Patterson and Sechrest, 1983). For example, Stopka et al. (2004) revealed that some of their participants reported in diary entries that participating in a study about drug use made them want to stop drug-injecting, with one of them then joining a programme for this purpose. Moreover, many studies refer to the therapeutic effects of participating in diary research for participants who are recovering from diseases (Furness and Garrud, 2010; Milligan et al., 2005) and developing their well-being (Bartlett, 2012). There is a circularity to indicate here, where diaries affect participants' behaviour in their wider lives, which then in turn influences their diary-keeping behaviour.

Diary-keeping behaviour is influenced by levels of written expression, and different research designs have different requirements of participants, which in turn influence the issues that arise in relation to diary-keeping behaviour. The content, length and styles of diary entries can be different because of participants' different backgrounds, personalities, lifestyles and different extents to which they make time for diary keeping (Bartlett, 2012).

For example, Milligan et al. (2005) found that some of their participants who were highly involved in the research project's social activities gave very brief and repetitive reflections on these activities in their diaries. Participant behaviour can be also different in keeping diaries with different formats. Structured logs, which are highly effective in obtaining brief but direct responses in a questionnaire-style format or through, for example, a simple text message marking an event (Sherliker and Steptoe, 2000), can also reduce the potential for diary-keeping behaviour to be analysed. Furthermore, different tools used for collecting diary data also influence how participants behave in the research process. Working with people who have limited capacity for written expression or a specific condition such as Alzheimer's, researchers have found that writing diaries regularly could be challenging for participants (Valimaki et al., 2007). However, making use of digital tools to generate visual or audio diaries makes diary research more inclusive and friendly to vulnerable groups of people (Carlson et al., 2006; Hislop et al., 2005).

In sum, participant diary-keeping behaviour can be highly varied due to the impact of several factors involved in the diary research process. Furthermore, there is a circular motion through which diaries affect lives, the effects of which are then further revealed in diary-keeping behaviour. Finally, decisions taken by researchers as to the style and form of the diary study affect the ways in which diary-keeping behaviour is manifested as significant. Across these factors, analysing how participants behave in the diary research provides a unique angle for researchers to explore how participants interact with their research studies.

Diary method and diary-keeping behaviour in higher education research

Diary method is under-utilised in the higher education domain. There is a wealth of literature on teaching and learning, which analyses learner or reflective diaries (Nevalainen et al., 2010; Vinjamuri et al., 2017; Wallin and Adawi, 2018), but there is a key difference between these diaries, which are not produced for research purposes, and solicited diary research (the focus of this article) where diaries are produced specifically for the purpose of research.

Many of the diary studies in higher education are quantitative in nature and employ structured diary methods, where diary completion involves selecting from predetermined lists of questions or activities (e.g. Nonis et al., 2006; Peterson et al., 2015). As discussed above, there is less scope for analysis of diary-keeping behaviour with these studies. Higher education diary research is also characterised by a relatively short duration of data collection. While a small number of higher education diary studies cover a relatively long period, such as 21 weeks (Dietrich et al., 2011) or an academic year (Scott et al., 2012), the length of time that diaries were kept in the studies we accessed was relatively short. For example, diaries were kept for one month (Falconer and Taylor, 2017), two months (Burford, 2015) or frequently for one week (Beckers et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2016). Diary-keeping behaviour can be analysed for short diary studies but is more likely to vary and therefore have significance over an extended study. As noted in the previous section, another factor that may have an impact on the analysis of participant diary-keeping behaviour is the medium employed for diary research. Based on our literature review, there were

some examples of alternative diary approaches in the literature of higher education research, such as audio diaries (Neve et al., 2017) and video diaries (Cooley et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2012). However, the papers mentioned here were not specifically about diary research methodology, and therefore they did not include detailed discussion of diary-keeping behaviour during the research process.

In higher education contexts, diary research tends to focus on students as participants, though there are some studies of academic staff, particularly focusing on work patterns (Henderson, 2019; Calvert et al., 2011; Hyers et al., 2012). With regard to international students, the focus of the diary study reported on in this article, they were the target population of some diary studies in terms of their library searching practices (Haley and Clough, 2017) and their English-language interactions (Groves et al., 2016). The closest study to the study that forms the basis for this article is a study of Chinese students' experiences of higher education in the United States, where 18 first- or second-year students from five different public universities completed four journal entries during the course of the academic year (Heng, 2017). However, again diary-keeping behaviour was not explicitly discussed in this article.

The study

A substantial body of literature has already shown that many Chinese students consider studying abroad as a stepping stone towards better career prospects (Bamber, 2014; Cao, 2017; Xiang and Shen, 2009). While some researchers have examined the employment outcomes of Chinese international returnees (e.g. Jia, 2012; Shi et al., 2015; Zhang and Yao, 2014), few studies have drawn attention to the process of how students manage their employability during the period of receiving overseas education. This study researched Chinese students who were enrolled on Social Sciences taught Master's programmes in the UK. This was a qualitative study, which involved a relatively small number of participants but engaged in in-depth explorations of their experiences and perceptions. Thirty-two students were involved in the sample group, with criteria, convenience and snowball sampling being used for recruitment. Diary-interview method (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977) was adopted, involving two rounds of semi-structured interviews (at the start and end of the course) and solicited diary keeping for nine months. The study received ethical approval via the Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick, ethical approval process.

Solicited diaries in this research were adopted for the purpose of responding to the research question that asked how Chinese international students manage their employability in their daily lives during their overseas courses. Employability in this research is understood as a complex concept involving various types of abilities that make people more employable and multifaceted external factors that have an impact on employment outcomes and longitudinal career development (Walker and Fongwa, 2017). Employability management understood thus permeates people's everyday experiences, which is impossible for researchers to fully access by, for example, observation or questionnaires. As such, diaries were considered to be a suitable method for this longitudinal study of employability management. Throughout the academic year (November 2017 to July 2018), participants were asked to record their employability-related experiences during one full week of each

month. Since long-term diary keeping is prone to producing respondent fatigue and generating repeated data, this study reduced the frequency of diary entries through a focus on sampled weeks but maintained the total length of time for diary research.

A semi-structured recording form was designed to help with the diary-keeping of participants. The form was event-based (Hyers, 2018), which means that participants were not required to fill the form every day, but rather they created a record when each employability-related experience occurred and information about the experience. There was also a summary section where diarists could give a general comment for the whole week and also include any notable events/activities that had occurred in the non-diary weeks. The diary research lay the foundation for the second-round interviews, where the diaries served as interview prompts.

During the period working with diarists, the first author noticed changes in the diary-keeping behaviour of the participants over time and in response to specific events. Discussing these issues inspired us to further explore the nuances of diary-keeping behaviour in solicited diary research. For the purposes of this paper, the first author conducted two analysis processes. First, she reviewed the diaries specifically to identify differences in diary-keeping behaviour, for example longer or shorter entries, or more or less intimate detail included, exploring the diaries for issues raised in the literature review and for new issues. Second, she returned to the second-round interviews, which had included a specific discussion of the diary research process, to explore how the diary-keeping behaviour identified in the diaries was then articulated by the participants. These two processes led us to develop a thematically organised discussion of the key issues of diary-keeping behaviour, which is presented in the next section.

The interweaving of diaries and lives

In considering diary-keeping behaviour, we argue that six elements can be addressed: (i) How diaries change over time, both in terms of the length of the study but also in terms of other temporal rhythms that are relevant to the study; (ii) How participants' life circumstances can change the form as well as the content of the diary, for example in submitting shorter entries when experiencing depression; (iii) How diaries change participants' lives, for example enhancing their understanding of the research topic and even altering their behaviour in both positive and negative ways; diary-related changes in participants' lives then in turn impact the diary-keeping behaviour; (iv) How participant behaviour can vary across different methods in a diary-interview study, thus giving a more multi-faceted view of participants; (v) How solicited diaries interact with other forms of diaries which participants may already be keeping, such as personal diaries and appointments diaries; (vi) How participants decide which level of intimacy to include in keeping diaries, in view of the contradiction between the confessional genre of diary-keeping and the fact of writing for the eyes of a researcher.

Changes over time: exploring the consistency of responses

Because the diary data collection took place over a relatively long period, some participants in the study showed signs of fatigue as time passed by, which were evidenced by, for

example, shorter length of entries and delay in submitting. However, in the final diary week of the study, the majority of participants provided substantial diary entries, since they treasured the last opportunity to reflect on their employability management and tried to summarise their overseas experiences for the whole year. While respondent fatigue took a linear form in this study, increasing over time, this cannot be separated from the fact that the participants' courses also progressed in a linear temporality, so that changes in the diary-keeping behaviour cannot be fully attributed either to the fact of participating in a longitudinal study or participating in a one-year Master's course. This is an important point for diary studies in higher education as most higher education students and staff work within temporal rhythms of the academic year; this point also has relevance beyond because of the ubiquity of year-long temporalities including the calendar year, school year and financial year, which may influence diary-keeping in longitudinal studies.

In this study, the one-year course duration also included shorter temporal cycles, which further influenced diary-keeping behaviour. Many participants referred to a cyclical temporality; participants stated that their lives fell into a 'session-holiday-deadline' rhythm, which led to some rather repetitive diary entries. However, some participants disagreed that repetitive experiences resulted in repetitive reflections. One participant reported in the follow-up interview that

I didn't feel there was nothing to write, even though my life had a kind of circularity. I wrote a lot about my real-time thoughts and mental status. Things can be similar, but feelings are not. (P25)

Moreover, different participants held different attitudes towards whether recording repetitive experiences can be meaningful or not. Some tended to exclude repetitive experiences in later entries and only recorded new things, but some others believed that, 'If participants deliberately avoided recording repeated things, they might mislead the researcher' (P5). As can be seen here, while facing a similar situation, different participants held different views on how to record this in their diaries. We therefore must be cautious in interpreting the form of diaries as evidence of a particular phenomenon in participants' lives, as participants are shown here to engage in decision-making processes about how they craft their diaries to represent their lives. We can also point to a specific higher education research finding here: the students in the employability study had an awareness of empirical research, and indeed were engaging in their own research. As such, many participants engaged in the study were using the knowledge they had gained in their courses, regarding representativeness and bias. This in turn affected their diary-keeping behaviour. Arguably all participants bring their own understanding of what participating in research means, but in a study of this kind participants are likely to make informed and reasoned decisions which blur their position as participant (versus researcher). Follow-up interviews can therefore be seen as a vital site for the discussion of diary-keeping behaviour, which enables participants to articulate the rationale behind their diary-keeping behaviour.

Lives change diaries: exploring how responses are impacted by participants' lives

As shown in many diary research studies (e.g. Lepore and Evans, 1996; Furness and Garrud, 2010), especially those which adopted semi-structured and free-response formats,

participants often record some events that are not closely connected to the research topic. Nearly all participants in the research study noted that writing diary entries was troublesome when a diary week clashed with an assignment deadline week. One reason for this challenge is that participants were too busy to write entries, which led to perfunctory diary entries and delays in submitting entries. The other reason for participants' struggle between diaries and assignments is that the whole week of the assignment deadline could be occupied by assignment writing, so that participants had few employability-related things to record.

A similar situation could be found when participants went on their travels. Understandably, participants were rather reluctant to reflect on their employability during a sightseeing journey! Some participants believed that travelling was totally irrelevant to employability, while others found that activities such as making travel plans, dealing with emergencies and intercultural understanding could be very useful for developing employability. Delays in submitting entries were more likely to occur when participants travelled during the diary week, in part because they did not have their laptops with them. As reported in the follow-up interviews, some retrospectively wrote down their experiences after coming back, which produced delays between experiencing and recording activities. Some others made notes on their phones while travelling and copied them out on the recording forms, which practice highlights the fact that diaries are already somewhat processed and edited by the time the researcher receives them (Hyers, 2018).

Since participants were required to complete diary entries only in specific diary weeks, another issue commonly reflected by them is that they happen to have had 'nothing to record' in some diary weeks. As one participant reported, 'The weeks before and after were colourful, but unfortunately, nothing happened in the exact diary week!' (P2). The research design of sampling only one week per month prevented respondent attrition; however, it triggered another problem that some information would be potentially missed. The design of the 'summary section' on the recording form was for the purpose of diminishing this disadvantage, but the extent to which participants made use of this varied.

In addition to effects of their daily lives on their diary-keeping behaviour, a few participants proposed that their mental state also influenced their diary-keeping behaviour. Negative emotions can be a barrier to diary keeping, as shown by one participant:

I felt I didn't want to write diary entries. . . actually I didn't want to do anything when I was down. I felt that I completed the entries by my willpower. (P11)

This situation is similar to what has been found from Furness and Garrud's (2010) study on patients undergoing facial surgery, where participants did not only record their emotional distress in diaries, but also were prevented from diary writing due to their depressive state.

As can be seen from this section, in diary studies participants' lives are not only recorded as the content of diaries, the form of the diary entries also reflects developments in their lives. In a higher education context, the episodic and cyclical nature of the academic year is likely to affect diary-keeping behaviour overall, but we can also see here how specific incidents and phases in participants' lives lead to particular effects on the form as well as the content of diaries.

Diaries change lives: exploring how research participation impacts upon participants' lives

The majority of participants reported in the second-round interview that participating in the research made them pay more attention to their employability management and self-reflection, which echoes the findings of Milligan, Bingley and Gatrell's (2005) study where participants believed that the act of diary-keeping in itself served as a meaningful activity (see also Bartlett, 2012). In health sciences research, such as these two cited studies, diary-keeping is constructed as a research tool, which also acts as an intervention of sorts. In other social sciences fields, including higher education research, there is less acceptance of a research study having a deliberate impact on participants' lives – rather, research is supposed to operate with minimal interference. However, it is worth acknowledging, as in health sciences, that all research participation, let alone solicited diary-keeping, has an effect of sorts on participants' lives (Malone, 2003), so perhaps viewing diary-keeping as a deliberate and carefully planned intervention of sorts is a worthy consideration. In this study, the student participants in the employability management study reported that participation in the study had enhanced their awareness of employability issues, stating that they were 'more sensitive to the word "employability"' (P21); their 'understanding and knowledge of employability has been developed' (P27); they 'thought about their career plan earlier' (P23); they 'actively reflected what they did, whether it is useful, and how it works on employability' (P28).

Diary research can also impact participants in negative way, as suggested in Bartlett's (2012) study on dementia and activism, where some participants reported that keeping diaries took up a lot of time and had a negative impact on their motivations to engage in activism. One participant in the employability management study who struggled a great deal during the year stated:

I didn't feel any employability enhancement. Participating in this research could not save me. Writing down my experiences could not cure my pain. I felt more sorrowful afterwards. (P32)

Evidently diary-keeping may work as a booster for some people, but it cannot be viewed as a panacea which can help everyone through challenging experiences. This is an ethical risk which is identified in other diary studies, for example Harvey's (2011) study of sexual relations but is also not an issue that is restricted to diary studies as opposed to other forms of research (Malone, 2003).

The format of diary-keeping for one week per month is highly unusual, and we have not come across this in other diary studies. It is noteworthy that some participants felt they were simulated to engage in more employability-related activities in the diary weeks so as to have more material to write on the form. As one participant wrote in the weekly summary section,

Sometimes I felt 'I don't want to get out of my room', but once I realised that it was a diary week, and that I needed something to write, I urged myself to attend a workshop or something like that. (P7)

This situation is defined by Patterson and Sechrest (1983) as ‘reactive effects’, which means that keeping a diary about a phenomenon can also alter the phenomenon being recorded. However, this may not apply to every participant. Some participants in the employability management study explained that in the first few diary weeks they tried to attend more employability-related activities, but could not keep this up as time passed by. Some other participants said the reason why their acts were not influenced by the diary weeks is that they are ‘very organized persons’ who ‘always make plans in advance’ and cannot change their schedule because of the diary weeks (P14). Interestingly, one of participants proposed a ‘delayed’ influence of the diary weeks on her life:

Diary weeks did not encourage me to do more activities. What usually happened to me was that, after the diary week, I realized ‘oh my god, I wasted a week’. I needed to cheer up. (P18)

In addition to the participants whose lives were impacted by the diary weeks, other participants consciously avoided changing their behaviour in the diary weeks to prevent data inaccuracy: ‘I have also done my own research. I know it is very important for participants to provide truthful data’ (P5). Participants in a diary research study engaged, to various extents, in more thinking and activities in relation to the research topic in their daily lives, with the impact being both positive and negative. It is impossible to extricate diaries from lives and vice versa – they are truly interwoven. This is perhaps more emphasised in higher education research on students where students exhibit a growing consciousness of research processes through their own coursework, and as such are conscious of the ways in which they are weaving together their diaries with their lives.

Different behaviour for different methods: exploring the variation in responses between diaries and interviews

As noted above, both interviews and solicited diaries were used for this study, and it is interesting to compare how participants adjusted to these two methods. Some participants behaved consistently, writing substantial diary entries and providing substantial answers in interviews. As one participant stated,

I really enjoy discovering myself and expressing myself no matter in a spoken or a written way. Doing an interview, I tried to answer questions in detail. Writing diaries, I tried to express myself elaborately and accurately. I may write everything I want to share, regardless whether I think it is directly linked to the research topic. I just feel the more information I provided, the more likely you can find something useful. (P12)

However, some participants behaved quite differently across these two methods. Some participants were gregarious in interviews but gave very brief diary entries, which is similar to Furness and Garrud’s (2010) findings. One of such participants in our research said:

I don’t think people who making lots of descriptions are really self-reflective. They just describe or narrate. My entries seem to be brief but actually I put every word after careful consideration. (P1)

Her explanation resonates with Furness and Garrud's (2010) idea that, even if diary entries are brief, they may add new insights to research due to the time that participants can take to develop their reflections. On the contrary, a participant who struggled during the year wrote long entries about her state of mind but was very quiet in the follow-up interview, because reflecting on her overseas experiences made her feel sorrowful.

By contrasting participants' behaviour across different research methods, as in diary-interview method, researchers can develop a multi-faceted view of participants. In a diary-only study, particular patterns of diary-keeping behaviour may lead to a particular interpretation of a participant's character or experiences; the contrasting participation styles revealed by the use of diary-interview method in this study showed that caution should be exercised in interpreting diary-keeping behaviour as evidence of a particular experience or phenomenon.

Solicited diaries, personal and appointment diaries: exploring how research diaries are affected by other diaries kept simultaneously

In this diary research, one third of participants said that they already kept personal diaries or appointments diaries in their daily lives, which to some extent influenced the way in which they kept the solicited diaries. This runs contrary to some other diary method literature, which warns researchers that participants may be unaccustomed to keeping a diary (Alaszewski, 2006). In this study, and this is also linked to the study's location in higher education, the participants were already accustomed to high levels of life-recording and planning. Here we see a new kind of interweaving of lives and diaries, where lives are interwoven with the solicited diary as well as with other diaries.

One participant described how her appointment diary helped with her solicited diary keeping, and compared the differences between her appointment, personal and the solicited diaries:

I had an appointments diary to record what I do every day. In diary weeks, I just picked up things which were related to employability from this diary and copied them to the recording forms. Both the appointments diary and the solicited diaries are objective. I also have a personal diary to write something emotionally. I don't write that every day. And for the appointments diary and solicited diaries, I use English, but for the personal diary, I write in Chinese. (P1)

In accordance with P1, for many participants their appointments, private and solicited diary-keeping behaviours were separated by different languages, frequency of writing, level of detail and intimacy. The solicited diary thus entered participants' lives as a diary with a new format, function and set of requirements. One participant who had never indicated her relationship status in the solicited diaries revealed:

I keep a personal diary. When I fell in love with a boy but was rejected, I wrote that diary very frequently. However, I didn't write about it in the solicited diary. I don't think it is relevant to employability. I shouldn't let my emotional state influence my work. (P2)

This shows how participants' decisions about relevance to the research topic influence their diary-keeping behaviour. Another participant who had a habit of keeping diaries thought the most significant difference between her personal diary and the solicited diary was that her own diary was handwritten but the solicited one required typing the entry onto the laptop. This participant found the typed diary keeping unsatisfying because 'handwriting is more conducive to expressing emotions' (P17).

Unlike participants who kept two or three types of diaries in parallel, one participant used the solicited diary as a personal diary this year:

I wrote personal diaries before. This year I just took the solicited diaries to record my life. For the time other than diary weeks, I wrote something briefly using the recording form. (P3)

Some participants in fact formed a habit of keeping diaries because of participating in this diary study. One participant who had never kept diaries before illustrated the process by which he developed this habit, stating that

In the early stage of this research, I felt it was novel and interesting. Gradually it became a routine, which continued in the non-diary weeks. (P15)

Another participant also developed a diary-keeping habit over the year, realising the significance of recording her life in this way; she decided to 'continue doing that' in her future life (P10). Here we return to the question of how far a research study should 'intervene' in participants' lives. The present study had a demonstrable effect on participants' lives, both in terms of their understanding of employability but also in terms of initiating a new behaviour.

Intimacy of data: exploring how participants report intimate or sensitive information

Participating in a solicited diary study, participants' diary entries were written with a clear awareness of the researcher-as-reader, and a possible concern from participants about how their narratives would be evaluated. This affects diary-keeping behaviour in terms of the selection of information to share with the researcher. In this study, one participant started to write about her relationship in diaries after a mid-year meeting with the first author took place. Initially, when the participant submitted the entries where she first talked about her relationship, she asked for this to be kept secret and for it to be omitted from the research write-up. However, several days later, she changed her mind. This situation was discussed in the follow-up interview, where she stated:

I felt kind of ashamed because the relationship for me was a bad experience. I just wanted to share my sorrow with you [the first author] but didn't want you to present it in public. But later I felt that 'I am a participant of your research, I trust you will only use it for research purposes. I should allow you to use it'. (P12)

While the selection of information is a concern for any qualitative method, in diary method the issue is heightened by the diary genre, which is culturally established as a

confessional mode (Hyers, 2018). There is an inherent contradiction in solicited diary research, where participants are required to balance the confessional mode with the fact that their diaries will be read and analysed by a third party.

In Milligan, Bingley and Gatrell's (2005) diary research on how social activities potentially support older people to maintain their health and emotional well-being, they found that the self-consciousness of diarists decreased over time; in our research we also found that the level of intimacy of data that participants were willing to provide was also influenced by their personalities. One participant, who was sensitive by nature and experienced a strong need to express her feelings during the year, cried when she talked about how important the diary had been to her during the year: 'I feel the diary is like a "hollow tree", where I can say anything that I cannot tell others' (P22). Moreover, the intimacy of diary data is also influenced by the rapport and level of trust between participants and the researcher. One participant told the first author that she was the only person to know that he suffered from depression:

I wrote a lot in diaries because we are quite familiar with each other. I am not afraid to let you know my real thoughts and emotions. If we were not that close, I may have only filled the forms objectively. (P15)

It is believed that sensitive data are more likely to be reached by the diary approach than with other methods (Harvey, 2011). However, researchers need to be very cautious about dealing with intimate data. In the employability management study, participants were informed in advance and were reminded during the study that they had right to withdraw permission for data to be shared in the research write-up if they felt the data were too private to be published. When the researchers felt there might be ethical concerns related to some data, this was double-checked with participants. However, these ethical issues cannot be simply ruled out by careful adherence to best practice (Malone, 2003; Turner and Webb, 2012). The diary's greatest advantage – its recognised status as a cultural form of personal expression – is also its most prominent ethical concern. It is important to note that, while this study was conducted by a doctoral researcher, these issues can become more fraught if a higher education study on students is conducted by an academic – even if the academic is not involved in teaching the students concerned, the roles may prevail when the student is considering which information to share in the diary with an academic researcher-as-reader. This is, of course, also of relevance for other studies of for example the health profession or schooling.

Conclusion

The principal aim of this article was to map the important issues of diary-keeping behaviour, in order to develop a more nuanced methodological knowledge of diary research. We argue that diary-keeping behaviour should be acknowledged by researchers when they are planning and conducting diary studies as a feature of diary method, which can be explored rather than minimised. In the article, we reviewed how participant diary-keeping behaviour has been explored by existing literature, and specifically how these issues are reflected in higher education diary research. The advantage of the

diary-interview method study that the article focused on was that the interviews enabled the first author to interpret diary-keeping behaviour with the participants and thus gain a further understanding of how diaries and lives become interwoven in this type of research; furthermore, a multi-faceted understanding of participants could be developed by comparing diary-keeping with interview participation.

In this article, we argue that there are some specific considerations for higher education diary research, which may also have relevance to other domains. (i) There is a likelihood that diary-keeping behaviour will reflect cycles and patterns of the academic year in addition to patterns of diary-keeping relating to respondent fatigue. (ii) Participants in a higher education study are likely to have an enhanced understanding of what research entails, which may lead to diary-keeping behaviour decisions that are based on explicit research-based principles. (iii) Given the emphasis placed on schedules in higher education, participants are likely to already be keeping at least one diary and to have existing highly developed practices of life-recording. This means that participants will already be adapted to the practice, but participants may be resistant to adapting their practices to meet specific requirements of the solicited diary. (iv) Finally, there is the possibility that roles may collide in diary-keeping, where for example a student may be reluctant to write honestly for an academic researcher, even if the researcher is not directly involved in their education.

From our exploration of diary-keeping behaviour in general and in relation to higher education research specifically, we find that there are many possibilities for further development of these discussions. For example, the ethical issues of diary-keeping behaviour can be further explored, in relation to diaries impacting upon lives and in relation to intimacy of data shared. It would also be beneficial to consider how different forms of diary (e.g. audio, collage, video) shed light on differences in participant diary-keeping behaviour. Finally, there are questions of how to analyse diary-keeping behaviour in short-term diaries. This article has laid out the groundwork for this fascinating area of enquiry and this article is only the beginning of a conversation about the interweaving of diaries and lives.

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ORCID iDs

Xuemeng Cao  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1779-0809>

Emily F. Henderson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5723-9560>

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Author biographies

Xuemeng Cao is currently a doctoral researcher at the Centre for Education Studies, the University of Warwick, funded by China Scholarship Council (CSC). She is also an early career fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study, the University of Warwick. Her PhD research used diary-interview method to focus on the employability management of Chinese international students, using the capabilities approach to theorise graduate employability. Xuemeng is also a co-convenor and the blog editor for Academic Mobilities and Immobilities Network (AMIN) at Warwick. Her research interests include higher education, graduate employability, academic (im)mobilities, Sino-foreign cooperation in education and internationalisation/cross-cultural studies in education.

Emily F. Henderson is an associate professor in the Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick. She is author of *Gender Pedagogy: Teaching, Learning and Tracing Gender in Higher Education* (Palgrave, 2015) and *Gender, Definitional Politics and 'Live' Knowledge Production: Contesting Concepts at Conferences* (Routledge, 2019 in press), and co-editor of *Starting with Gender in International Higher Education Research* (Routledge, 2019). She is co-editor of the academic blog *Conference Inference: Blogging the World of Conferences*.