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Navigating the host labour market: International graduates need more than credentials

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Navigating the host labour market: International graduates need more than credentials

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Abstract

This study deployed a mixed-method approach to explore how international graduates identified and strategically utilised their resources to negotiate employability in the host country. One hundred and eighty international graduates in various disciplines of Australian universities participated in a survey and in-depth interviews. Findings revealed that employability was determined by various forms of capital including human, cultural social, identity and psychological. More importantly, the graduates had to develop 'agentic capital' to decide how to utilise these forms of capital appropriately. Social and cultural capital emerged as the crucially important elements when the graduates looked for opportunities to get a foot into the labour market. These forms of capital enabled the graduates to mobilise their human capital. However, to navigate barriers in the workplace, the articulation of a sound understanding about the working culture became a 'must' because the graduates found it hard to understand hidden rules and conventions in the labour market. Results from the study indicate that graduate employability should not just be measured right after students' graduation because different forms of capital play their significant roles at different stages of the graduates' career development. Besides, to support graduates to sustain their employability, higher education should equip students with various forms of capital but not human capital.

Keywords: Higher education, Australia, international students, employability, capital, Bourdieu, agency

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Introduction

International education has brought huge economic benefits to Australia (A\$40.4 billion in 2019). COVID-19 has reinforced this argument evidenced by a range of businesses and thousands of jobs having either badly been impacted or gone due to the decline in international students' enrolments. Since international students could bring about both short- and long-term economic benefits (Chew, 2019; Trevena, 2019), it is clear that Australia needs to not only attract but also retain international students. To achieve these goals, Australia needs to enhance international graduates' employability outcomes because post-study career prospects have become an influencing factor in international students' decision to study and retain (Department of Education, 2018; Pham, 2020).

Unfortunately, low employment outcomes of international graduates are a long-standing concern in Australia. It was evident that their high unemployment rate compared to Australia's national unemployment rate (10.6% and 5.7%, respectively) and a large number worked either part-time or in low-skilled occupations (30% and 17%, respectively) (ACTEID, 2019). Karmel, Carroll and Fitzpatrick (2016) analysed the Graduate Destination Survey and found only 15% of international graduates with a bachelor's degree obtained a fulltime job within four months after graduation. Consequently, 29.6% of international graduates went back to studying (Department of Home Affairs, 2018) and an increasing number returned to their home countries a few years after graduation (Pham, 2020).

These unsatisfactory outcomes have threatened Australia's position in the international education market because both traditional (Canada, New Zealand, the US, the UK) and non-traditional (European and Asian countries) immigration countries have actively implemented a range of national and regional policies aiming at attracting or retaining high skilled migrants (Czaika, 2018). For example, Japan surpassed Australia to become the most favourite destination country of Vietnamese students after it launched the Revitalization Strategy in 2014 aiming at employing 50% of international graduates by 2020 (Nguyen, 2019; Temel, 2017). Similarly, after the UK re-introduced the 2-year Post-Study Work Rights, immediately international

students, especially Indians shifted enquiries towards the UK, which takes substantial market share from Australia (IDP Connect, 2019). More seriously, while other competitors offered friendly policies to support international students during the pandemic – for example, the UK allowed international students to access the job-retention scheme, Australia implemented very harsh policies by preventing this cohort from accessing the JobKeeper wage subsidy and bluntly telling them to ‘go home’ (Hunter, 2020). These unsupportive policies have badly impacted Australian education and contributed to the fact that Australia no longer exists in the top five favourite destinations of Chinese students who accounts for 23.1% of the country’s international students (Department of Home Affairs, 2018; Xiong et al., 2020).

To become more competitive in the international education market, in addition to creating a safe environment, Australia needs to better ensure temporary graduates’ employability outcomes because acquiring work experience has become a key goal for many international students (Department of Education, 2018). Very little is known about international graduates’ post-study career trajectories, although a growing body of research has shown that this cohort faced a range of employment issues.

What determines international graduates’ employability?

Employability has been defined differently in the literature depending on researchers’ disciplinary background and underlying philosophy. However, there are currently two main schools of thought. The first mainly focuses on short-term and immediate employment outcomes although employability could be interpreted as either individuals’ responsibilities or consequences of external factors. When employability is seen as an individual characteristic, it depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes individuals possess and how they use those assets and present them to employers and the context within which they seek work (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Hillage & Pollard, 1998). When employability is perceived as a result of external forces, it is claimed to be determined by ‘demand-side’ factors, structure of the labour market, competition for graduate-level work (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2020; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005) and reputation of the institution (Karmel & Carroll, 2016).

Recent changes in the labour markets like globalisation, technological disruptions, restructuring, delayering and downsizing, casualisation, lack of job security and harsh working conditions have created a scarcity of full-time work, an increase in the casualisation of the workforce, prevalence of short-term work and self-employment, as well as rising job and occupation mobility (Oliver, 2015). In such uncertain labour markets, the capacity that individuals develop to negotiate and sustain employability has become crucially important (Pham & Jackson, 2020a). Therefore, more enthusiasm has been shown to the second school of thought which sees employability as the responsibility of the individual to develop and utilise a range of resources like human, cultural, social, identity and psychological capital to obtain and sustain their employment (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Jackson, 2015; Pham, 2020; Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017; Vanhercke, De Cuyper, & Peeters, 2014).

Although Australia has well established the international education sector and heavily depends on this industry, surprisingly very little is known about international graduates' post-study life including their career trajectories (Tan & Hugo, 2017). What contributes to international graduates' unsatisfactory employment outcomes has been continuously under researched. Efforts made by Australia have, therefore, only stopped at granting generous visa schemes and embedding employability skills in teaching programs (Barrie, 2006). These activities have insufficiently prepared international graduates for the workforce (Blackmore et al., 2014) because many needed to use social capital to mobilise qualifications (Pham & Jackson, 2020b). Besides, limited understanding of practices and rules, especially hidden cultural norms at the workplace could cause international graduates many issues that could slow down their career progress (Pham et al., 2019; Xu, 2020). Similarly, many international graduates showed great resilience in navigating obstacles to obtain permanent residency (PR) and immediate employment (Tran et al., 2019; Xu, 2020). But at the same time an increasing number have decided to return to their home countries because of pressures of life and work in the residing country (Pham, 2020). As such, psychological capacities could have an impact on their career fulfilments.

Besides, it is also noted when transiting from education to work, although holding a number of limitations, international graduates have their own strengths like positive

qualities (e.g., diligence, flexibility, resilience), multiple linguistic skills and knowledge of different cultures (Pham, 2021; Pham & Jackson, 2020). Pham (2020) and Pham and Jackson (2020) have, therefore, found that if international graduates were able to develop and utilise agentic capital – that is ‘the capacity to develop strategies to use various forms of capital effectively and strategically depending on one’s ethnic background, areas of expertise, career plans, contexts, and personal qualities’ (Pham, 2020, p. 4) – to strategise their capitals, they were more likely to succeed in obtaining employment, satisfaction and sustainability. Given the current literature dominated by research exploring problems and challenges facing international graduates (AUIDF, 2017; Tran et al., 2019), leading to little solution offered to existing problems, it is very crucial for more research to document the development and utilisation of agentic capital so that more real-life strategies could be generated. Noticeably, although international graduates have high education levels, global competence and strong motivation, they had weaker employment outcomes than skilled migrants; the main reason was the lack of professional and life experience due to their young profile (Chew, 2019). This means researching and informing this young cohort to better strategise their resources is even more important.

Besides, it is often viewed that graduate migrants would have little difficulty in integrating into the local labour markets as they would be accustomed to the social and cultural norms of their host country and master the language associated with their degree (Ma & Abbott, 2006). However, migrants’ career is increasingly featured as staggered and spacial trajectories due to constraints of their wider life aspirations like family commitments and personal growth desires (Robertson, 2019; Tan & Hugo, 2017; Xu, 2020). Therefore, exploring and measuring international graduates’ short-term employment outcomes do not fully reflect international graduates’ post-study career experiences. For instance, it is common to hear that 60%-80% of international graduates intend to work in the host country after graduation but the long-term stay rate across the OECD is only 1 in 4 (OECD, 2011). For host countries like Australia, there was “considerable evidence pointing to the role of migrants in sustaining or fostering strong economic growth over the longer term” (the Treasury and Department of Home Affairs, 2018). The need to unpack and support international graduates to sustain their long-term employability is, therefore,

important but little has been known about the gap between intent and uptake of international graduates in the host country. To fill these gaps, this study aimed to unpack how the graduates utilised a range of capitals to both obtain and sustain employment. The study was guided by the following question.

How do capitals contribute to international graduates' employability outcomes? For example, to what extent do human, social, cultural, psychological, identity and agentic capitals contribute to international graduates' entrance and thriving in the labour market? What kind of social networks do temporary graduates use for employability negotiation? What kind of cultural barriers do they face at the workplace?

Theoretical framework

This study deployed multiple theoretical developments to build new perspectives on the complexity of interactions between capitals and international graduates' employability. First, it drew on Bourdieu's theory which claims that individuals possess four forms of capital: economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Harvey & Maclean, 2008). How they access these forms of capital depends on their habitus and the field. Habitus serves as 'internalised schemes through which the world is perceived, understood, appreciated and evaluated' (Tholen 2015, p. 777). More explicitly, habitus could be seen as attitudes, beliefs and values that individuals develop and possess based on their own experiences and influences of external factors like their family background and parents' expectations. Field is the social and institutional grounds where individuals develop their habitus with the interplay of human action and societal structure (Bourdieu, 1990). Positions of individuals in each field are not equal but range from dominant to subordinate levels because people have different access to capital.

A distinct feature of Bourdieu's theory is the connections between different forms of capital and, in particular, the possibility of converting them into one another (Cederberg, 2015). For instance, possessing cultural capital could enable individuals to access or broaden their social networks since social capital is built on 'long-lasting

dispositions' such as ways of thinking and acting; when people become familiar with particular behaviours and expectations, they have a better chance of enriching their social networks (Bourdieu, 1986). In return, joining social networks could create opportunities for individuals to understand ways of doing things, facilitating the enriching of cultural capital. However, the transmutation from one capital to another capital does not automatically and always progress positively (Harvey & Maclean, 2008). The positive transmutation of different forms of capital tends to occur when individuals exercise agency to make their capital recognised or gain symbolic capital (Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2010). Another distinct feature of Bourdieu's theory is the exclusion of capital: according to him, people possess and can access different levels of capital depending on their backgrounds and positions in society. Inequality occurs because cultural capital carries both standardised values, which are legalised and institutionalised, and embodied values, which refer to one's preferences or perceived 'correct' ways of doing things (Bourdieu, 1986). People may possess the same standardised values but it is very often that only the dominant groups' embodied values are acknowledged and validated.

Bourdieu did not offer a clear account of how capital determined one's employability success but subsequent related research highlighted the significance of capital in employability (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). These authors built on and expanded Bourdieu's theory revealing that graduates needed to enrich various forms of capital which are captured in Tomlinson (2017)'s graduate Capital Model including human, cultural, social, identity and psychological capitals for employability negotiation. Although limited, a growing body of research has consistently reported that international graduates were deficit in these capitals, so faced a range of employability issues.

Departing from the dominant body of research on international students, Marginson (2014, p.14) claimed although international students 'often experience acts of discrimination or abuse', they are not habitually weak or deficient but strong agents. Marginson (2014) also argued international students invest a lot in enriching human capital but the economic attributes and credentials, career and income are rarely the whole of the transformation that they seek. In fact, they are engaged in a self-

formation process in which they collect new academic and social attributes in the residing country and know how to blend these with their ethnic capital, resources, and conditions. They also keep revising their goals, attaining new identities, and developing strategies to acquire embodied cultural capital in the residing context. As such, international graduates should be seen as active actors who know how to manage their employability trajectories depending on various aspects of their life, such as their resources and interests and circumstances in a broad social and political context. Most recently, Pham and Jackson (2020) and Pham (2020) developed the concept of agentic capital which complements Marginson's self-formation notion but is particularly applied to graduate employability. The authors explained agentic capital enables graduates to strategise their resources so that they could obtain optimal employability outcomes. These strategies often aim to maximise strengths and avoid weaknesses based on graduates' ethnic background, areas of expertise, career plans, contexts, and personal qualities. The authors have evidenced that international graduates were more likely to obtain a success in negotiating employability if they could develop and utilise agentic capital.

Methodology

Participants

This research deployed a mixed-method approach using a survey and individual in-depth interviews as data collection methods. Mixed-methods research design was deployed because large-scale quantitative surveys are useful for generalisation but fail to unpack the complexity of international graduates' post-study life.

Consequently, as Lipura and Collins (2020) claimed, large-scale surveys often lead to framing international graduates as 'in deficit', foregrounding '... what they lack, what they need and how they differ' (p. 349). To overcome this limitation, qualitative methods are needed because, as Page and Chahboun (2019) claimed, they are useful for capturing international graduates' experience and agency. A combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods in this study will, therefore, allow for an investigation and collection of useful data about the employability negotiation process of international graduates.

One hundred and eighty international graduates from various degrees and disciplines at Australian universities were invited to participate in this study. The recruited participants met the following selection criteria: (i) had completed school education overseas; (ii) obtained a tertiary degree in Australia (undergraduate, master's or PhD); and (iii) were living in Australia when the research was conducted. To explore the employability negotiation process, the participants were not restricted to how long ago they graduated but the majority ranged from 1-5 years after their graduation. All participants were invited to complete an online survey, then 15 graduates were invited to join individual in-depth interviews.

Instrument development

All participants were invited to complete an online survey which had two main parts. Part 1 consisted of items about the graduates' characteristics. Characteristics of 180 graduates who completed the survey properly are reported in Table 1. Part 2 consisted of items exploring factors that contributed to the graduates' success in obtaining their employment. These items were drawn from survey items and research findings of studies conducted by Pham (2020) and Pham and Saito (2019) examining international graduates' employability negotiation in their home country. This part also included items examining the graduates' productivity and career development prospects. Items examining these aspects were largely informed by emerging work about the role of capitals in graduate employability (e.g., Pham et al., 2019; Pham & Jackson, 2020; Tomlinson, 2017). Interview questions were informed by interview questions and findings reported in several previous studies including Pham et al. (2019) and Pham and Jackson (2020). Exemplar interview questions were: 'What factors contributed to your employment success?' 'How did you deal with matters at the workplace?' and 'How did you prepare for your employment before you graduated?'

Data collection and analysis

An online survey (using Qualtrics) was sent to all graduates via snowball and also posted on social media including Facebook and LinkedIn. Prior to analysis, all variables were examined for accuracy of data entry. Two hundred and twenty

graduates answered the survey but only 180 responses were selected for this research. The rest were excluded because they were not completed fully and did not meet the recruitment selection criteria. The graduates' demographic details are presented in Table 1. Descriptive statistical analysis calculating percentages and means and standard deviations was conducted.

Table 1. Demographic details of the graduates who completed the online survey properly

Variable	Sub-groups	n
Gender	Male	80
	Female	100
Original nationality	Vietnam	47
	China	65
	Thailand	10
	India	12
	Korea	5
	Japan	8
	Indonesia	8
	Malaysia	10
	Singapore	15
Age groups	20-30	90
	31-40	60
	41-50	30
Study level	Undergraduate	110
	Master	45
	PhD	25
Permanent residency status	Obtained	100
	In process of applying	50
	Unsure about whether applying or not	30
Field of study	Non-STEM (e.g., marketing, finance, accounting, management, sales, education, communication, linguistics)	75

	STEM (e.g., IT, engineering, science, medicine, pharmacy)	105
Working status	Full-time and part-time employed related to the area studied	105
	Full-time and part-time employed not related to the area studied	60
	Not employed officially	15
Number of years after graduation	0-1 year	32
	1-3 years	60
	3-5 years	46
	More than 5 years	27

Fifteen graduates participating in the survey were invited to individual in-depth interviews based on their interest expressed in the survey. These 15 graduates were selected carefully to represent the diversity of ethnic backgrounds, disciplines and age. Demographic details of these fifteen graduates were presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic details of the graduates who joined the interview

Variable	Sub-groups	n
Gender	Male	6
	Female	9
Original nationality	Vietnam	5
	China	6
	Singapore	1
	Indonesia	1
	Japan	1
	Malaysia	1
Age groups	20-30	6
	31-40	6
	41-50	3
Study level	Undergraduate	7

	Master	3
	PhD	5
Permanent residency status	Obtained	11
	In process of applying	3
	Unsure about whether applying or not	1
Field of study	Business (e.g., marketing, finance, accounting, management, sales)	5
	STEM (e.g., IT, engineering, science, medicine, pharmacy)	5
	Education	3
	Communication	1
	Linguistics	1
Types of organisation	Educational institutions (e.g., university, college, school, academy)	3
	Government organisations	3
	Multinational enterprises	3
	Private local companies	6
Working status	Full-time and part-time employed related to the area studied	12
	Full-time and part-time employed not related to the area studied	3
Number of years after graduation	0-1 year	2
	1-3 years	6
	3-5 years	7

These graduates were invited to answer open-ended questions which were developed so that they could 'best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings' (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). The interviews were conducted face-to-face and online depending on availability and distance of the graduates. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was recorded for later transcription. Eight hours from interviews with the graduates were collected. All data were transcribed by a research assistant. Both the

researcher and the research assistant participated in coding data and continuously cross-checking the codes until the inter-rater agreement was 100%. The data were disentangled into segments (i.e., a word, single sentence, or paragraph) so that annotations and codes could be attached to them. The interview data were mainly used as further insights to explain responses obtained from the survey.

Findings

Findings are presented as two separate stages of the graduates' career development as follows.

At the entrance point of the labour market

The graduates were asked how they found their first job and their responses are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. How did you find your first job?

Tools	Percentages
Advertisement on employment agents	33%
Social networks (e.g., introduction of friends, peers, family members, supervisors, academics)	32%
Advertisement on the company's website	20%
Advertisement at the university	10%
Others	5%

Descriptive statistical analysis results presented in Table 3 show that the graduates used employment agents and social networks as the two main channels to look for job opportunities. Although the number using social networks was ranked second, the percentage was almost as high as those using employment agents.

The interview results shed more light on their experiences in obtaining employment opportunities. The participants who had extensive social networks expressed that throughout their career development, social relationships had been proven to be a significant factor that contributed to their employment opportunities. For instance,

three graduates expressed gratefulness to their lecturers, tutors and internship mentors who provided them with insights about the industry including future employment opportunities, general procedures and hidden rules of the employment process and how they should respond to these. These insights enabled them to win their first job within a short period after graduation. When being asked how they could obtain support of these mentors, they all shared that they had to demonstrate their positive personal qualities like being hardworking, honest, truthful, proactive and dedicated. Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2014) and Tomlinson (2017) claimed that social capital can play a 'bridging role' in connecting formal education and the industrial world. These graduates used their connections with different stakeholders to both obtain insights about industries and sell their qualities to the potential employers effectively.

To gain more insights about determinants of their first employment success, the graduates were asked to rank the significance of other factors in Table 4 below.

Table 4. The importance of each factor below to the success in obtaining your job(s)

Factors	MD	SD
Have sufficient English proficiency	4.40	.84
Know expectations and culture of industries	4.33	.88
Have working experience	3.71	.90
Have a good academic record	3.23	.95

Note: Strongly disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Undecided = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly agree = 5.

It was not a surprise to see the graduates ranked English proficiency as the most important factor. Previous studies reported unsatisfactory English proficiency as the biggest limitation hindering employment opportunities of international graduates (Jackson, 2016; Pham et al., 2019). Two graduates expressed their disappointment about their positions. They believed they deserved a more exciting position but their limited English proficiency put them in areas where they had less chance to communicate with clients. The high score of the second item 'Know expectations and culture of industries' also aligned well with findings of previous studies (Pham &

Jackson, 2020; Saito & Pham, 2018; Watkins & Smith, 2018). Specifically, Saito and Pham (2018) found that when applying for a job, graduates should obtain knowledge about the types of industries so that they can tailor their application in the most effective manner. Graduates' technical knowledge may signify expertise-fit and a strong sense of profile alignment but to obtain a positive employment outcome, technical knowledge needs to be complemented with cultural knowledge (Tomlinson, 2017). Limited cultural understanding of local working systems could hinder graduates' insights about hidden rules, leading to their failure to present themselves as a fit with the hidden expectations of the organisations.

The low score given to 'working experience' did not align with findings of many studies that emphasised hands-on experiences as a vital determinant of recruitment in Australia (Mann, 2014; Smith, 2009). However, many graduates who had held a part-time position shared that their part-time work was not particularly relevant to the job they applied for (e.g., working at café, supermarket, cleaning). This might be the reason why they did not perceive the importance of having working experience for job success. Kinash, Crane, Judd and Knight (2016) warned that students need to be selective with what they do in their part time work. The value of relevant work experience is also emphasised by Jackson and Collings (2018). Finally, the low scores given to the role of academic record well reflected the recent trend in recruitments where employers place considerable emphasis on graduates' professional capabilities during recruitment but not the academic record (AAGE, 2018).

After entering the labour market

At this stage, the graduates were asked to share experiences in job performance experiences as shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5. The importance of each element below in performing work effectively

Items	MD	SD
Understand the working culture (e.g., rules, conduct)	4.65	.78
Have good personal qualities (e.g., persistent, resilient, reliable, responsible)	4.45	.76
Have good professional skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, independent, confident)	4.45	.86

Note: Strongly disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Undecided = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly agree = 5.

The survey also asked the graduates to rank the challenging level of several factors they faced at the workplace and below are the two most challenging factors they ranked.

Table 6. The challenging level of the items below at the workplace

Items	MD	SD
Working culture	4.65	.89
Communication challenges	4.45	.90

Note: Strongly disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Undecided = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly agree = 5.

The interview results show after transitioning to the labour market, the graduates faced difficulties in both dealing with daily practices and decoding hidden policies. Several shared disappointments about failing to perceive actual expectations of the industries and hidden recruitment rules. For instance, the graduates perceived communication as an important factor but one participant stated:

At the end of the day we need to show what we can do, so yes we need to work with others, so talk but then, hmmm... so much stress and responsibilities. Imagine if you are not resilient, it is hard to cope with and overcome all of these issues.

An important quality several graduates highlighted and emphasised that international graduates should be aware of was 'trust' and 'reliability'. One said:

I was very surprised when my friend was sacked immediately only because she was not honest about taking a long leave. She was offered a new job but then the offer was withdrawn immediately. Well, I could see it was bad but I couldn't imagine it was that important to the employer.

In sum, findings shown in Table 5 and Table 6 and the interview excerpts above show that after entering the labour market, the graduates referred to cultural and identity capital as the most important factors to their job performance. They perceived having a good understanding of the working culture including rules, conventions and codes of conduct could enable them to navigate barriers and unexpected stress. This finding aligned with what Cui (2012) asserted: a lack of understanding about the dynamics of social interactions at the workplace could lead to slow career progression. The graduates also perceived personal qualities which included both psychological capital (e.g., resilient) and identity capital (e.g., reliable, responsible) to be essential to their work performance.

It was noted that although communication was perceived as an important obstacle, it was not ranked as the most challenging factor. This finding did not agree with many previous studies which consistently reported limited communication and professional skills as the toughest barriers facing international graduates and migrants at the workplace (Pham et al., 2018; Jackson, 2017). The excerpt shared by a graduate below disclosed the importance of cultural understanding at the workplace and it actually determined one's communication competencies.

It is very complicated at the workplace when you have to deal with people coming from everywhere. They have their own values, interests and expectations. It is complicated and lots of headaches. Sometimes I feel I don't belong to the team not because I can't speak but because I don't know what to talk about.

This message was significant because it revealed how cultural understanding could determine communication competency. International graduates' unsatisfactory communication proficiency might not simply result from poor English or communication skills but their limited understanding of working culture.

Discussion

What are significant determinants of international graduates' employability?

Employability has become the focal point of higher education in most national contexts, including market-based ones such as Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA). In Australia, from 2020, graduate employment outcomes is the most important factor under the performance-based funding model for universities (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2020). Mass higher education has devalued degrees and caused education to become closely associated with the principle of 'value for money'. There have been concerted efforts to ensure that higher education delivers tangible economic outcomes, including employable graduates. To enhance graduate employability, from the mid 20th century, higher education has tried the skills-based approach that aims to match its training and employers' expectations. The fundamental principle of this approach is to equip students with technical expertise and skills as demanded by employer groups. In spite of significant efforts higher education has made, graduates' employment outcomes improve slowly (GradStats, 2018; Humburg, De Grip, & Van der Velden, 2017). This shows that there is unlikely to be any straight-forward matching up of employability skills and their application and utility in the labour market. The policy-endorsed formula of graduate employability = HE qualifications + key employability skills has limitations when understanding the complex nature of graduates' relations to, and outcomes within, a given labour market (Tomlinson & Tran, 2020).

This study advocated this evidence when revealing human capital was not sufficient enough to facilitate the graduates to navigate the labour markets at their early stages of career development. Instead, social and cultural capital emerged as crucially important and necessary resources that the graduates had to articulate and utilise for job seeking and performance. This finding assured arguments made by Pham and

her colleagues about the need to equip students with various forms of capital for employability enhancement (Pham et al., 2019; Pham & Jackson, 2020). This also implies that in spite of continuous policies aiming to enhance international students' employability by the government, this cohort is significantly disadvantaged by the current recruitment trends and expectations of industries. This is because expertise and technical knowledge are often the international graduates' strength with many outperforming academically compared to their local counterparts. Expertise and knowledge are also the main resources they are equipped with at higher education. Unfortunately, to secure employment outcomes, they needed to articulate social and cultural capital – two areas that they do not have much chance to develop both inside and beyond higher education.

More importantly, as advocated by Bourdieu's theory, the present study's findings show that the graduates struggled with decoding embodied values or what Puwar (2001) called 'subtle codes' (e.g., norms, values, behaviours, and identities). The experiences the graduates shared in the interviews revealed they divulged a sense of difficulty in obtaining the right knowledge, appropriate communication skills, and sensitivity to cultural differences to join small talks in the workplace. They found it hard to find 'proper' behaviours, shared interests, and values when conducting conversations with colleagues. According to Bauder (2003) and Erel (2010), every institution has institutional cultural capital and people without this culture are less protected. In this study, the graduates' experiences evidenced their cultural capital was neither transnational or institutionalised, so they became marginalised.

Social capital emerged as an important factor at the early stage of the graduates' career development. Similar to the findings of previous studies (e.g., Pham & Jackson 2020; Thondhlana, Madziva, & McGrath, 2016), in this study good relationships that the graduates developed with lecturers, supervisors, peers and industry people were crucially important for their immediate employment. It was noted that there was a difference between 'informal social networks' and 'social capital'. Informal social networks are often used for social and entertainment purposes; whereas social capital is likely to refer to significant relationships that could help someone with employment. These relationships often assist someone to

build resources for the target career or to access future employment opportunities. Such resources are often found in what Bridgstock (2016, p. 344) calls 'professional networks' or amongst people having mutual interests. International students tend to build social networks but do not pay enough attention to turning social networks into social capital. As revealed in the interviews, some graduates succeeded in using social networks for their employment outcomes and their success well reflected what Noordegraaf and Schinkel (2011) and Harvey and Maclean (2008) explained about the transmutation of various forms of capital and Pham (2020)'s argument for the significance of agentic capital. Specifically, these graduates activated their agentic capital by using positive personal qualities (e.g., hardworking, honest) as a tool to gain symbolic capital which then enabled them to convert other capitals (e.g., economic, cultural) into social capital. These social networks enabled them to overcome barriers and enhance their subordinate position in the host labour market.

Besides, the findings also revealed that some graduates could use agentic capital to connect their educational, life and job market experience and align these to labour market goals – a common practice that, according to Marginson (2014), international students often experience. The analysis of interview data revealed that some graduates with a clearer career goal could actively decide how to overcome constraints imposed by their personal circumstances and workplace characteristics and developed what Billett and Somerville (2004) called 'goal-directed behaviours'. These graduates proactively approached and nurtured connections with relevant stakeholders for guidance or built career identity at the early stage of their study and career journeys. Three graduates, for example, shared that they did not lock themselves into their community because they found limited opportunities to transform cultural knowledge and apply professional knowledge and skills outside their home country. They purposefully moved from their comfort zones by living with people from different backgrounds and using social media channels, such as LinkedIn and Twitter, with a more global, professional appeal than those limited to their own ethnic groups. These changes enabled them to better integrate with others and broadened social networks, improved language competencies and professional skills, and transformed behaviours and mentality, enhancing their employability success (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2020; Pham et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2017).

In sum, the common feature shared by the graduates who actively exercised their agency was that they were selective and innovative in their approach to employment and how much they should be involved in demands and requests at the workplace and in their life. Billet (2011) explained that human agency enables individuals to know how they mentally and overtly engage with tasks at the workplace; they know how to choose actively from a range of responses between fully engaging in the activities that are suggested by the workplace to (almost) completely ignoring or rejecting this.

How to measure and identify determinants of employability?

The obtained findings challenged the common method of measuring graduate employability based on short-term employment outcomes currently applied by many higher education institutions. Graduates' transitions and their determinants are often measured and explored within six or eight months after graduation. For instance, in Australia the Graduate Outcomes Survey revealed that around 60% of the graduates perceived their qualification was 'important' for employment and around 30% expressed they could not use skills obtained in study programs for their job. As evidenced by this study, such perceptions are very likely to change in one's later career stages. The process towards developing meaningful and useful capitals for employability sustainability is complex. If graduates are not flexible, adaptive and strategic, they do not necessarily eventuate in a successful longer-term career even though they might obtain early employment outcomes. This means policymakers and institutions should develop and endorse more nuanced and broader ways of capturing graduates' education-to-work transitions over time.

The significance of forms of capital was clearly highlighted as crucial components of the graduates' career progression. It is, therefore, appropriate for measures to also focus on the extent to which these forms of capital have been acquired and further deployed during and beyond higher education. It is essential to measure the development of essential capital as early as possible so that students can be guided to enrich them on their way. For instance, in a previous study, Pham et al. (2019) found that the development of social networks often took a short time but to develop

social capital, students needed to invest a long period of time. Students had to develop social capital, not simply social networks, because social capital was more useful to employability opportunities. Such advice should be given to students so that they can prepare early in their study programs. For instance, students can make use of connections with mentors on internships and practicum for job opportunities and insights about the labour market. They should, therefore, nurture such relationships over a long period of time so that they can get mentors' support upon graduation. Students tend to disconnect with their mentors when they complete internships and then struggle to find support for job opportunities upon graduation. Relevant stakeholders should also capture graduates' perceptions of forms of capital they have developed (or otherwise) and their role in shaping career progression after a short and long time subsequent to their graduation. Evidence obtained can inform current students to map out the journey ahead early.

The present study also triggered the need for various stakeholders to share responsibilities in supporting students to develop and nurture forms of capital. To date, higher education is still assumed to be mainly responsible for graduate employability. This is an ineffective approach especially when higher education still focuses on building only human capital for students. Industries should collaborate with universities and vice versa more closely so that students can know industries' expectations and culture more clearly. It was well evidenced in this study about the importance for graduates to articulate a good understanding of industries, so better bridging between universities and industries is essential for graduate employability enhancement. Besides, there also needs to be more bespoke, institutionally-focused forms of engagement with alumni graduates. Connecting with and learning from alumni's working experiences could enable an institution to better inform practitioners and current graduating students. Alumni are able to provide rich qualitative experiential data about career development, including barriers and critical career moments, as well as provide key information and guidance in the form of workshops, guest talks and advice sessions.

Conclusion

The study unpacked the complexity the graduates engaged in to negotiate their employability. Employability was clearly not characterised by one-off employment outcome but continued as a journey which was shaped by a wide range of factors. It is a lifelong process of adaptability and negotiation between the graduate and contextual factors. Employment sustainability was brought about not only by education attainments but also by the development and utilisation of different resources known as social, cultural, identity and psychological capital. The importance of these resources varied at different stages of the graduates' career journey. It was observed that career prospects became more positive when graduates had developed the agentic capital to use various forms of capital appropriately. Higher education needs to engage students in employability programmes as soon as possible, enhance the effectiveness of work-integrated learning programmes, as well as connect with industries and employers. Students and graduates need to learn how to effectively articulate their employability, obtain hands-on work experience, develop and utilise social networks, build up psychological attributes, and manage their career plans closely. This study also discusses new ways to measure graduates' employability beyond the currently used proxy of obtaining full-time employment within a short period of time. To better prepare graduates for employability in today's constantly changing and uncertain labour markets, future research should further explore the roles of different forms of capital at different stages of graduates' career development and in different contexts. It is also important to gain more insights about the significance of capitals in employability of different cohorts of graduates (e.g., local, international, metropolitan and regional graduates) because the nature and richness of capitals possessed by graduates could vary due to differences in their cultural backgrounds.

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