STANDING OUT AND FITTING IN

The Paradox for UK-Educated Chinese Students

A UK-WIDE RESEARCH PROJECT LED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK
Standing Out and Fitting In

Findings from an in-depth UK-wide research project into Enhancing the Employability of UK-educated Chinese students reveals the stark paradox faced by many UK-educated Chinese students - the challenge of both ‘standing out and fitting in’.

The research confirms a clear gap between students’ career expectations compared with the needs of Chinese employers - recruiting employers are looking for Chinese students to ‘stand out’ and sell the benefits of their overseas experience. Similarly, Chinese alumni urge current Chinese students to ‘stand out’ and make the most of their UK experience by embracing UK culture.

Herein lies the conundrum, as Chinese culture, both in the home and the workplace, traditionally places great emphasis on ‘fitting in’. Whilst Chinese employers gave feedback that they wished UK-Chinese students to stand out and make the most of their UK experience by embracing UK culture.

Conversely, during academic teaching, Chinese students are asked to rapidly adapt to a Western way of learning - we expect students to ‘stand out’, to question and have active discussions with both peers and academic staff. This UK approach contrasts strongly with the traditional Chinese way of learning, which is much more focused on ‘fitting in’.

The research reveals a lack of career planning by Chinese students - over 60% of students coming to the UK have only a basic idea of their career aim. How can UK Higher Education Institutions ensure their careers teams have the knowledge and resources to support Chinese students with career planning and return to what is a very rapidly changing labour market in China?

In this report we look at the paradox facing Chinese students of ‘standing out and fitting in’ during their studies in the UK and on return to China, using evidence gained from quantitative and qualitative feedback from Chinese students, recent alumni and employers. The research findings also provide an insight into how we, as Higher Education Institutions, can support our Chinese students with their career planning to enhance their employability outcomes, whatever their chosen career path.

The research project has been a unique collaborative Higher Education endeavour and demonstrates the willingness and value in Higher Education Institution collaboration to support our Chinese students and graduates.

Why Research?

We know that the UK is an important destination for Chinese students seeking an excellent experience of Higher Education and over the past three years, Chinese student numbers studying in the UK have steadily grown to nearly 90,000 in 2014-2015.*

Going forwards, to support Chinese students appropriately, UK Higher Education needs more insight into the career preparation, aspirations and employment outcomes of Chinese students, as well as greater knowledge of the Chinese labour market to which the majority of students will return.

We also know that the number of Chinese students seeking an overseas higher education is increasing and we, collectively as UK Higher Education Institutions, wish to ensure that the UK continues to remain an attractive destination.

At the same time, competition from overseas Higher Education providers is growing and the lure of extensive Post Study Work visas in other countries is enticing. Added to this, the Chinese labour market is rapidly evolving and employers are looking to all Higher Education providers to help equip their Chinese graduates with the skills and experiences to successfully enter these evolving market sectors.

UK Higher Education Institutions appreciate the cultural diversity that Chinese students bring to our institutions and in return we wish to offer an excellent student experience throughout students’ time in the UK, and beyond.

In order for the UK to continue to remain an attractive destination for Chinese students, we are very aware of the need to enhance the employability of our Chinese students and believe that having an in-depth understanding of the career perceptions, from current Chinese students, recent alumni and employers, will enable all of us in UK Higher Education Institutions, to do this in a way that best suits our own institution.

We wish to help UK-educated Chinese students to make the most of their UK experience and be able to articulate these benefits to recruiting employers. We want to help Chinese students to ‘stand out’, to support their career choices and employability success, whilst also equipping them with the resilience and skills to ‘fit back in’ to the Chinese workplace culture.

This research project demonstrates how seriously, we, as UK Higher Education Institutions, collectively take our Chinese graduates’ employment success.
Enhancing UK-Educated Chinese Student Employability

In January 2016, Warwick’s Student Careers & Skills department successfully gained funding from the British Council and the Department of Business, Innovation & Skills to deliver a project focused on Enhancing UK-educated Chinese Student Employability.

**Project Aims**

- To provide employability support for UK-educated Chinese students before, during and after their UK studies.
- To support Chinese student employability in the Chinese labour market by enabling UK Higher Education to be better informed and resourced.

**Project Overview**

**Phase I - Graduate Destination Sharing**
- For the first time in the UK, this project enabled UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to share Chinese graduate Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data.
- Led by AGCAS to ensure data confidentiality and anonymity.
- Providing an evidenced-based picture of UK-educated Chinese graduate destinations.

**Phase II - Research**
- To gather detailed qualitative and quantitative feedback from Chinese employers, students and alumni on graduate success for returning UK-educated Chinese students.
- Insights into the Chinese labour market and how UK-educated Chinese students can enhance their employment prospects.

**Phase III - Education & Resources**
- Development of new workshops, events & online resources for careers professionals, via the AGCAS website.
- Enabling UK HEIs to use and disseminate the online resources to help meet the needs of their students.

**Project partners:**
- Funded by British Council China and Department for Business, Innovation & Skills
- Led by University of Warwick, Student Careers & Skills
- In partnership with
  - Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS)
  - Institute for Employment Research
  - UK Higher Education Institutions and Peking University
  - Chinese students, alumni and employers
Phase I
Graduate Destination Sharing

Chinese Graduate Sample
› 2013/14 graduate destination data provided by 24 UK HEIs
› Sample of 3,787 Chinese graduates
› Compared with 88,000 Chinese students in the UK in 2013/14

Student Sample

Key Findings

1 Destination of Chinese Graduates 2013/14
› Almost 80% of Chinese graduates are in work, studying or due to work, broken down in to 52% in work or due to work and 28% in further study.

This compares with UK figures where 70% of first degree graduates are in work and 13% are in further study (HECSU).

2 Destination of Chinese Graduates by Degree Type
› 62% of Chinese undergraduates go on to further study, in comparison to 13% of UK first degree graduates.

3 Where do Chinese Graduates Work?
71% work in China
11% work in the UK
8% in Hong Kong, Taiwan & South East Asia
Those most likely to stay in UK are male, Postgraduate Research graduates from Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths or Social Study disciplines

4 Most popular subjects studied in the UK

5 Top 5 Industry Sectors Where Chinese Graduates Work
› 50% of Chinese students studied Business or Administration with 26% of Business or Administrative majors going to work in the Financial/Insurance sector.
› In total, nearly half of Chinese graduates who are in employment work in just three sectors – Financial/Insurance (19%), Professional/Scientific (19%), and Education (12%).

base: 1220 ug, 1717 pgt and 219 pgr chinese graduates
Phase II
Student Research

Student Sample
› Quantitative surveys with 2,174 UK-based Chinese students from 54 different UK HEIs
› Majority studying Business & Administration and Engineering courses
› Majority studying Postgraduate Taught degrees
› 20% are the first in their family to attend university
› Majority come from higher social classes.

Key Findings
Student Perceptions

1 Why Did You Choose to Study in the UK?
1st Excellent academic reputation of UK HEIs
2nd To acquire the skills I need
3rd To speak English fluently
4th Academic reputation of my institution

Highlighting the importance of the UK’s Higher Education academic reputation to Chinese students.

2 Why Did You Choose to Study at Your UK University?
1st My university has an excellent academic reputation
2nd My degree course has an excellent reputation
3rd Personal interest in my degree course

In contrast, UK students rank the specific degree course as the most important factor for selecting a particular institution.

For many students, the degree course studied is proposed by their families.

3 Student Career Planning
› 25% of students have a clear future career aim
› 60% have some basic careers ideas

Advice is sourced from parents; online sources and thirdly, careers services.

› 53% had used their university careers service

Most used services were CV checks and events

4 Desired Country to Work and Live
60% would like to return to China
27% would like to live in the UK

Students studying Science less likely to intend to return to China.

5 Student Career Aspirations
1st Doing what I enjoy and am qualified/skilled to do
2nd Importance of work-life balance
3rd Having a high salary and job security are in ranked 5th and 6th place

6 What Careers Advice Would You Give to Current Students?
“Get involved. Do not copy a Chinese life in the UK.”

“Apply for part-time jobs or volunteering, it really does help you to know yourself better.”

“Be prepared for British academic teaching and learning dynamics.”

Compared with the 2013/14 DLHE data where:
71% of graduates returned to China
11% stayed in the UK
Phase II
Alumni Research

Alumni Sample
- Quantitative surveys with 335 Chinese alumni from 43 different UK HEIs

Alumni Destination Outcomes
1) 72% of alumni surveyed were employed
2) 3% self-employed
3) 13% further study
4) 12% travelling or unemployed

Key Findings
Alumni Perceptions
1 Why Did You Choose to Study in the UK?
1st Excellent academic reputation of UK HEIs
2nd Excellent academic reputation of my university
3rd To acquire the skills I need

2 Why Did You Choose to Study at Your UK University?
1st Excellent reputation of my university and my degree course
2nd High quality of teaching staff
3rd My personal interest in studying my chosen degree course

3 What Did You Value About Your UK Experience?
1st International experience gained
2nd Positive learning environment I experienced in the UK
3rd Value of the qualification, skills and knowledge I gained during my time in the UK

4 Who Has Influenced Your Career Decision?
50% More than 50% made their own career decisions
22% were influenced most by their parents
50% Over 50% had been involved in careers-related activities in the UK, mainly volunteering and part-time work

Alumni Careers Advice to Current Chinese Students
“Network more, contacts are important here too. Do not only hang out with the Chinese.”
“Choose the course that you really like and think about your career before choosing a university and country.”
“Try to understand the English teaching context and make sure teachers and students from UK and other countries understand what the Chinese thinking ways are and the true ideas Chinese hold.”
“Use your initiative and be positive, learn to be an independent learner.”
“Try to enjoy the culture, and improve your reading and writing, those are far more important than your scores.”

Phase III
Employer Research

Employer Sample
› Quantitative and qualitative interviews with a broad range of Chinese employers
› From start-up companies to multinationals, to government organisations and state-owned enterprises

Key Findings
Employer Perceptions

1 Employer Awareness of UK Higher Education Institutions
› Academic reputation of the UK is important; less important is a specific UK HEI’s reputation
› Many employers are not aware of the names or rankings of UK universities
› No preference to recruit from specific UK HEIs (except Oxford and Cambridge)

2 Studying Abroad
› Employers perceive an overseas education as an increasingly ‘normal’ part of a Chinese student’s education.
› Students need to differentiate themselves and ‘sell their experience’
› “Studying abroad, without demonstrating extra-curricular activities and experiences, no longer makes a graduate stand out”

3 Overseas Educational Experiences
› Australia, Canada & US offer an increasingly attractive proposition
  - 2 year post-study work visa opportunities
  - Internships are often a core part of undergraduate and postgraduate courses
  - Two year Postgraduate Masters course provide more time to ‘culturally adapt’

4 A Planned Choice
› Employers need graduate applicants to show motivation to work in their organisation
› Plus evidence of research into the role
› A knowledge and desire to work in their sector

5 Career Planning
› Employers would like graduates to show reflection on their career choice
› Be able to curate and narrate their UK experience
› Plus show evidence of career planning

6 Returning to China to Work
› Students and graduates need to be aware of some Chinese employers’ perceptions of UK-educated Chinese graduates, particularly in terms of over-inflated expected starting salaries
› Plus employer attitudes towards recruiting UK-educated graduates and ensuring cultural fit in their organisation

Employer Advice to Students
“Mix with people from as many different countries as you can.”
“Gain internship experience, and connect what you did in the internship to what you could do in the future for our company.”
“Demonstrate you’ve researched our organisation and show a passion to work for us.”
“We value overseas returnees but we expect you to show and tell us how you ‘stand out’.”
“Before going to the UK, be prepared to be ‘chucked in the deep end’ with perhaps not as much support as you may be used to.”
“Do preparatory work to deal with the different approach to education.”
The Paradox of ‘Standing Out and Fitting In’

What do we know?
What should we do next?

This research project has clearly established there is a gap between what employers want and need and what Chinese students are able to deliver into the Chinese graduate labour market.

These findings are echoed by recent Chinese alumni, who consistently encourage current Chinese students to make the most of their UK experience to enhance their career choices, whatever these may be.

UK Higher Education Institutions have a duty and responsibility to understand and translate students’ aspirations into their chosen career and this research project clearly demonstrates UK Higher Education’s collective commitment to Chinese student success.

Secondly, it is evident that Chinese students are generally not career ready when they come to the UK. This lack of career planning is exacerbated for those students who are on one year Postgraduate Masters programmes, where the focus is on academic rigour, within a short one-year timeframe, and there is little time for self-reflection.

The research findings show that there is a real opportunity to enhance UK Chinese students’ career preparedness by supporting their career journey, right from the beginning from pre-entry, through to during their studies and immediately post-study.

This piece of research is the first stage in more fully understanding and then enhancing Chinese student employability. It shows there are significant opportunities to find out more from students, alumni and employers, as well as engage their support to benefit all Chinese students studying in the UK.

What next?

Your Institution:
What will make the greatest difference to the employability of your Chinese students? How will you develop improved resources and train your staff? How will you support your Chinese students from pre-entry, during their studies and post-graduation?

Higher Education Sector:
How can we address the challenges and responsibilities for Chinese student success to ensure the UK continues to be an attractive destination for Chinese students?

The project has revealed a real desire for collective action to ensure the UK continues to remain an attractive destination. As a first step, we will develop a UK-wide Chinese Employability Group delivered through careers practitioners and facilitated through AGCAS (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services) to produce and share resources, labour market knowledge and best practices.

If you would like to find out more about this project, or be involved further in future research and collaborative initiatives, please do get in touch.
University of Warwick

Warwick is a leading university, with an acknowledged reputation for excellence in research and teaching, for innovation, and for links with business and industry.

Student Careers & Skills

Our aim is to support Warwick students to become successful scholars and employable graduates, by providing one-to-one advice, skills workshops tailored to undergraduate, postgraduate and research students, access to job vacancies and opportunities to meet employers from across the globe. We offer careers support after graduation.

AGCAS

The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) is the professional body for careers and employability professionals working with higher education students, graduates and prospective entrants to higher education. AGCAS represents over 165 institutional members and over 2,700 individual members involved in the delivery of careers information, advice and guidance to students and graduates.

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