

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Lau, Josephine

**Title:** International Graduates' Exercising of Agency for Employability : A Decade-Long Journey

**Year:** 2022

**Version:** Accepted version (Final draft)

**Copyright:** © 2022 The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Singapore Pte Lt

**Rights:** In Copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

**Please cite the original version:**

Lau, J. (2022). International Graduates' Exercising of Agency for Employability : A Decade-Long Journey. In T. L. H. Nghia, B. C. Bui, J. K. Nachatar Singh, & V. N. Lu (Eds.), *Graduate Employability Across Contexts : Perspectives, Initiatives and Outcomes* (pp. 309-325). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-3959-4\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-3959-4_16)

## Chapter 15:

### International graduates' exercising of agency for employability: A decade-long journey

Josephine Lau (*The University of Jyväskylä, Finland*)<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

*Different factors drive students to pursue overseas study, such as better employment opportunities. Employability is used to describe the qualities needed for obtaining employment. It is an 'active social process', as one's capitals and career identity transform with the labor market and job obtained. Using an open-ended questionnaire with five international graduates who pursued master's level study a decade ago, this chapter investigates their enacted employability agency and related hindrances upon graduation. It also explores how the relations between the overseas study, their employability agency, and their present career. International graduates deployed various forms of capital when searching for employment in their home and host countries, and also when coping with personal and structural hindrances. Important aspects of exercising employability agency include the utilization of different capitals and social networks in the labor market, in addition to staying perseverant and flexible in coping with hindrances. Recommendations on bridging expectations and skills with the labor market are made in the chapter.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: [jolau.pw@gmail.com](mailto:jolau.pw@gmail.com)

## **Introduction**

Pursuing higher education abroad is prevalent among students worldwide. From 2000 to 2017, the number of students studying in tertiary institutions abroad has grown from 2 million in 2000 to over 5.3 million in 2017 (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2019). Studying in foreign countries could provide students with international experience, which helps them broaden their horizons, improve their linguistic ability and develop their global awareness and intercultural competency (Dywer & Peters, 2004; Huang & Turner, 2018). Many students and families are willing to invest time and money into overseas education, as they envisage extensive career prospects in other countries. Several research studies (for example, Cai, 2012; Crossman & Clarke, 2009; A. Pham, 2018) have indicated that employers welcome the skills and competencies of candidates with international experience, as graduates with an overseas degree are believed to possess characteristics that make them suitable for various jobs (Cai, 2012).

However, except for those whose study and training leads to specific professional licenses, most international graduates in fields such as arts, humanities, and sociology, must make an effort to determine their career paths and apply for eligible jobs locally or internationally. Securing employment requires more than the possession of an overseas academic degree, as individuals have to manifest their agency to enhance their employability in the competitive labor market. In other words, graduates need to take action and decide how to deploy their resources to attain desirable work positions and develop their career path. Moreover, international education might not result in employability immediately after graduation, but its outcomes may be more visible in subsequent years (Tomlinson, 2010). Although some studies have investigated employability among international students in English-speaking countries (for example, Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Cai, 2012; Crossman & Clarke, 2009; Huang & Turner, 2018; Pham et al., 2019), there is a paucity of research on the topic in countries speaking other languages. It is also worthwhile investigating how study experiences abroad are related to development along career trajectories.

This chapter aims to investigate the individual agency enacted by graduates of an international master's program in relation to their employability, focusing on the capitals that graduates deployed and the hindrances facing the students when looking for and taking up employment in local and international labor markets amidst and after the financial crisis in 2008. The study also explores how the overseas educational experience impacted graduates' employability and career paths after a decade. This chapter enriches existing employability literature by discussing the employability of international graduates in the context of their social structure and individual agency.

## **Motivations for studying abroad**

Besides personal expenditure and monetary support from families and donors to cover tuition fees and living expenses, seeking higher education abroad also requires an individual to bear the cost of delayed income, and investment with time and effort. Despite the high price tag, students are driven into studies overseas by factors from the socio-cultural, economic, and political aspects. Previous studies have indicated that students' motivation to study abroad is pushed and pulled by various factors in their home and host countries (for example, Nghia, 2019; Liu et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 2010). Home country factors that push students to go abroad are limited study places, the absence of the desired subject, and poor education quality (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Factors that attract them to overseas study include an interest in the host country's culture, better living standards, immigration opportunities and job prospects expected after study in the host country or at a specific institution (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Regarding career development, students are concerned with enhanced employability and the positive employer attitude associated with study abroad experiences, which enable them to obtain desirable jobs, establish ideal career paths and adapt to labor market needs. The overseas learning experience can be considered an investment leading to a better career outlook and higher financial returns in the future (De Wit, 2015; Trooboff et al., 2008). Depending on a region's strategy for retaining foreign talent, an overseas degree might also lead to a higher probability of employment and even permanent residency (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016; A. Pham, 2018).

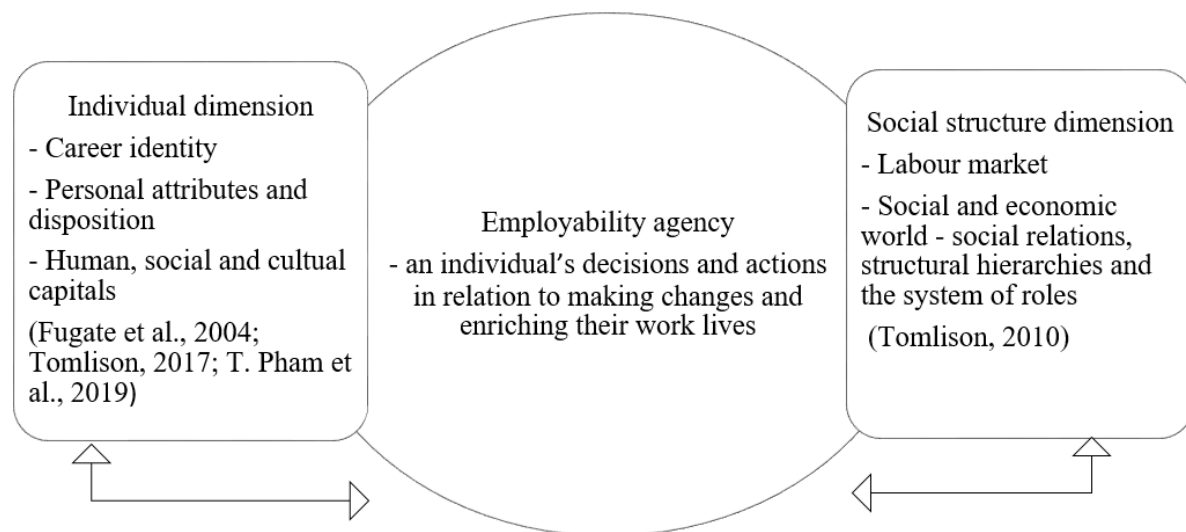
## **Employability and the personal attributes and capitals approach**

As mentioned, career prospects and employment opportunities are major concerns for those pursuing international studies. They are part of 'employability' denoting the individual qualities and graduate skills that make a person successful in the labor market (Thijssen et al., 2008). Employability components are human capital, social capital, cultural capital, career identity, and psychological attributes such as resilience and adaptability (Fugate et al., 2004; Pham et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). The personal attribute and capital approach to employability emphasizes how well people invest their resources to acquire or improve their skills, knowledge, social networks, and other personal characteristics following labor market demands (Tholen, 2013). Being abroad provides an authentic environment that might not exist in the home country for students' development of skills, such as foreign language skills or soft skills related to intercultural competence and global awareness. The personal attribute and human capital approach is a relatively assertive and popular account of graduates and the job market, and it emphasizes graduates' qualities and potential to be brought into the workplace. Graduates are, thus, encouraged to invest in building up their capitals through further education and training to enhance their employability in the labor market. However, employability is not a one-sided concept merely emphasizing the individual's human capital. The agency and social structure approach provides a theoretical lens to analyze the dynamics and complexity of the interplay between graduates and the labor market.

## **Employability in the agency and social structure approach**

The agency and social structure approach sees employability as an active, relational, and socially mediated process, which involves positioning oneself in a dynamic job market (Tomlinson, 2010). The approach is based on structuration theories from Bourdieu, Giddens, and Straus (see Tholen, 2015; Tomlinson, 2010). It focuses on the relationship between individuals and their social structure as well as the agency used in the process of negotiation between people and their social world. Preparing for employment is comparable to entrepreneurship. In both, people must make decisions and take action to maximize the utility of limited resources in line with their own incentives while facing the risks and uncertainties of the context in which they are situated. Similarly, the agency and social structure approach to employability suggests a dynamic interplay between internal and external dimensions. The former consists of an individual's background, skills, knowledge, competencies, and experiences; the latter is the employment market and the social and economic world. The agency and social structure approach to employability is illustrated in Figure 15.1. Employability agency has been defined as how individuals make decisions and take action when seeking employment and educational opportunities to change and enrich their work lives, which are bounded by the structural contexts. The process is fluid, recursive, and evolving (Tomlinson, 2010). Individuals internalize external indicators, gradually developing a sense of what they consider suitable according to their propensities, experiences, and resources. The temporal aspect of employability suggests that individuals continually adjust their positioning in the job market and negotiate their identity for future meaningful employment.

**Figure 15.1. The conceptual framework: The agency and social approach to employability**



### **Employability in international graduates and the international employment context**

Studying abroad provides an opportunity to develop human capital in foreign contexts. Despite the potential advantages in the competitive job market conferred by studying abroad, most graduates are described as 'hidden gems' with potential waiting to be unleashed (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016), and it takes effort and other support to bridge their skills into the market. Even before entering the labor market, students engage in various activities, such as acquiring relevant skills and establishing networks so as to polish their capitals to enhance their employability. In times of rapid change in society, it is important to emphasize employability as an agentic social process, in which one must utilize different capitals to take action in pursuit of employment (Tomlinson & Nghia, 2020). When international graduates enact their agency in looking for jobs and making decisions on work locations, they must assess various personal and social factors, such as their own dispositions and resources available, employment preferences against the market situation, rewards in monetary and non-monetary terms, their desire to stay in the host country and other considerations, like family background and peer aspirations (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Pham et al., 2019). All could serve as endowments or constraints to an individual's employability upon graduation. Depending on the personal affordances against the situated employment context, it is common to see educated international students take up jobs in different locations and end up with jobs unrelated to their qualifications or past experiences. The path to the desired career is not often straightforward, and success requires time and various capitals (Pham et al., 2019).

In addition, structural factors in the international employment context strongly affect international graduate employability. Such considerations include but are not limited to a country's immigration and education policies, the knowledge and expertise demanded by employers and the new economy, and the strategies higher education institutions use to engage graduates into the job market. Both developed and developing countries are eager to recruit and retain highly skilled labor to strengthen their competitive edge. Top talented graduates are welcome to stay in host countries with attractive schemes for permanent residency and citizenship. The deployment of knowledge could contribute to the workplace and redress the shortage of workers in aging populations and knowledge-intensive economies (e.g., De Wit, 2015; Giousmpasoglou & Koniordos, 2017). Correspondingly, traditional sending countries and emerging states are eager to attract highly educated and skilled labor to serve their growing economies. For example, China, India, and Vietnam recognize the 'brain drain' problem

and work on policies that encourage educated elites to return to and stay in their home country (Bhandari, 2019; Ho et al., 2016).

## **The present study**

### ***Research context: Erasmus Mundus joint master's program***

This study investigates the employability agency of graduates from the European Master's in Lifelong Learning: Policy and Management (MA LLL). This Erasmus Mundus program was supported by the European Union, promoting the co-operation of institutions in Europe and the mobility of academics and students. This program's original consortium was Denmark, Spain, and the United Kingdom, and later joined by an Australian university. The MA LLL aimed to give professionals expertise in analyzing, developing, and implementing policies concerning lifelong learning. The program hosted students from over 40 countries who had the opportunity to study at least two of the four institutions in the consortium. Depending on their chosen locations, tuition fees and living expenses for the 2-year program could cost as much as € 49 000. The European Commission offered a range of scholarships for both European and non-European students to promote student mobility. The first batch of students commenced their studies in 2005, and the program ended with the final batch admitted in 2015. Completing this program, students received an international master's degree in educational sociology.

### ***Research questions***

The current study aims to investigate the employability agency of graduates with an overseas degree, especially the interplay between their individual agency and the social context in which they sought employment. Additionally, the study explores how the overseas experience impacted graduates' employability and career paths after a decade. Research questions (RQ) are as follows:

- RQ1. How did international graduates enact their employability agency upon graduation?
- RQ2. What were the obstacles they encountered when enacting their employability agency upon graduation?
- RQ3. What is the relation between overseas study experience and employability agency a decade later, if any?

### ***Method and participants***

The data for this chapter was collected from the reflection reports of five MA LLL graduates. A decade after graduation, international alumni engaged in different kinds of activities and resided in different countries, which created significant barriers to conducting physical interviews. Instead, reflection reports guided by open-ended questions were used to elicit graduates' employment experiences.

Invitations were sent to MA LLL alumni via email and messaging inboxes in the MA LLL community closed group in a social media platform in January 2019. At the end of February, five alumni agreed to participate in the study and returned the reflection reports. Of these, three were female, and two were male. Three participants originated from Asia, while the other two were from Europe. At the time of study, participants were working either in their home countries, the host country, or another country where they did not study the master program. Table 15.1 shows the profile and current locations of the anonymized participants.

Participants were asked about their motivations for studying abroad, their experiences with looking for employment after graduating from the international master's program, and their reflections on their career paths throughout the decade. Follow-up questions were sent for clarification or further exploration of issues where relevant.

Qualitative data from the reflection reports were imported to *atlas.ti* for data analysis. A deductive thematic analysis approach was adopted, as it is an appropriate and flexible approach for examining respondents' perspectives to generate insights into an issue (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The coding cycle started with coding the expressions in the reflection reports. These initial codes were grouped into themes like human capital, social capital, how employability agency was enacted, etc. Finally, a report was written to inform the findings of the research project.

**Table 15.1. Profile and current locations of participants**

	Name	Gender	Origin	Current location
1	Heather	F	Europe	Foreign country
2	David	M	Asia-Pacific	Home country
3	Nicole	F	Europe	Home country
4	Brian	M	Asia-Pacific	Foreign country
5	Jessica	F	Asia-Pacific	Foreign country

## **Findings**

### **Summary of participants' career trajectories after graduation**

Before investigating the relationship between overseas study experience and employability agency, a summary of participants' career trajectories is provided. It serves as a background for understanding the findings in the research questions.

Heather graduated with a teaching qualification and worked as a teacher in her home country. She went overseas and engaged in youth voluntary work before undertaking the MA LLL. After graduation, she became an English instructor at an international college in the host country. Later, she moved to the Asia-Pacific region, where she pursued and completed doctoral studies. After her study, she moved to another foreign country to undertake post-doctoral work.

David was a researcher in the education field in his home country before completing the MA LLL. After graduation, he stayed in the host country and worked in the financial sector for 3 years. He then pursued doctoral studies in the Asia-Pacific region. At the time of this study, he finished his degree and started a consultancy career in education development in his home country.

Nicole was an artist from one of the host countries in the consortium. She wanted to move to the field of education before the MA LLL. After graduation, Nicole worked in part-time and short-term jobs at her home university. She then took a job as a carer to achieve more stable earning. She has now returned to her career as an artist.

Brian was a teacher and was an overseas visiting student before the MA LLL. While completing his master's thesis, he started a small business in the tourism industry with his connections in the host country. He also worked in sports-related part-time jobs. At the time of this study, he had just become a father and was currently working on his doctoral studies in the host country.

Jessica was a graduate with a language background and worked in different fields before the MA LLL. After graduation, she returned to her home country and worked in the marketing industry. Three years later, she moved to North America, where she studied adult education. She was in the process of completing her doctoral degree.

### **International graduates' enactment of employability agency upon graduation**

As illustrated by the theoretical framework, employability is an active social process in which graduates deploy their capital in interaction with the structure of society and labor market. Employability agency is enacted when one makes decisions and takes action to seek employment. After completing the MA LLL program, three graduates stayed in their host countries and looked for jobs there, and two students returned to their home countries. The first research question focuses on how employability agency was manifested by the graduates to obtain their first job role in the host or home country. In other words, it emphasizes how the graduates took action and made decisions when integrating their capital into the labor market. The analysis of participants' reflections showed how they exercised agency during their job search as below:

#### *Utilizing human and social capitals actively when seeking employment*

As mentioned in the summary of participants' trajectories, several participants had diverse work experiences, personal networks, and other resources that could enhance their employability. When translating these forms of capital into the job market, their skills and qualifications were perceived differently in the home and the foreign countries. Jessica, who returned home to seek employment, saw her foreign experience as an advantage, as she recognized that potential employers might perceive her foreign degree as 'better than the local candidates'. Heather, who obtained a teaching job in the host country, considered her international degree an entry ticket to the job market, especially when compared to foreigners with similar qualifications. Social capital also plays a significant role in their process of seeking employment in both local and foreign environments. Jessica received her job in marketing and sales through someone she knew at home, and Brian started his side business thanks to the connections he had with his countrymen in the host city. The following is an example in which David explains how he made himself competitive in the job market by utilizing and showing his capital, such as improved language proficiency and management skills:

I think (getting the employment is due to) my English-language proficiency, which greatly improved in my two years with MA LLL program... Also, my 'management' skills, which I partly acquired through the MA LLL program...I am also very persistent and diligent in accomplishing my tasks. I also like to mentor junior staff under my watch, but I have exacting standards in terms of their work. (David)

#### *Deploying psychological capitals when positioning oneself in the labor market*

When positioning themselves and interacting with an adverse job market, participants enacted employability agency by managing their career expectations and making flexible decisions. Although the 2-year MA LLL program offered the students academic know-how and skills for the intercultural environment, the international degree did not necessarily meet graduates' expectations for employment and career prospects. Before completing the program, Heather expected to get a job abroad related to learning and management, while Jessica desired to work in the field of learning and development. Nicole thought that a higher degree would enable her to find a job easily. However, none of the respondents obtained the first employment related directly to the lifelong learning area. After graduation, Heather received a job as an English instructor at an international school in the host country, mainly due to her past teaching credentials. Other respondents also adjusted their expectations of getting jobs in the education sector. For instance, David worked in the operation department of a financial company, in which he had no experience, while Jessica joined the marketing industry. Brian, who thought of returning to his teaching job at home, also accommodated his expectations and combined his financial and social capital to start a small business in the host country:

Well, I was thinking to start working again as a teacher [in the home country]. However, I got a chance to be in [the host country], and the economy was in good shape. Therefore, I started a business, which was unnatural if you look at my education qualification. (Brian)

In addition, psychological capital, such as perseverance, also played an important role when respondents deployed their agency to seek employment in the job market. The employment process



could take months or even years. Before the program, Heather and David envisioned themselves obtaining jobs in their host countries. They were determined to seek jobs, enduring disappointment during the job application process amidst the global economic downturn in 2008. Heather was 'frustrated' when seeking employment after a number of failed job applications, and it took two months to obtain her teaching role. Similarly, despite many efforts, David 'ended up doing odd jobs' for three years in the host country. It was also difficult for participants who looked for degree-related jobs in their home country. Nicole, whose home country was one of the countries that founded the consortium, was determined to search for jobs related to her international master's education. Yet, she could not obtain a full-time position, and landed on only part-time employment in the field. She shared her experience as below:

I spent two years trying to get a job within the area. I estimate that I applied for 100–200 jobs during this period of time. I never managed to get a full-time job within the area of my education. I have done some translation and transcription work, but besides from that, I have turned to other areas (which are unrelated to the degree) in order to make a living. (Nicole)

### **Obstacles in the enactment of employability agency upon graduation**

Despite participants' enactment of employability agency, searching for their first jobs was difficult. During the job-seeking process, respondents faced myriad difficulties, such as the economic downturn, inadequate fluency in the local language, and the job market being unfamiliar with a degree in lifelong learning. This section illustrates obstacles, which were difficult or even impossible to change or manipulate, encountered by respondents when enacting their employability agency to navigate the job market.

#### *Personal obstacles: The disadvantage of being a foreigner*

The possession of a master's degree issued by the host country's institution did not necessarily enhance foreign graduates' employability. Most respondents mentioned the disadvantage of being a foreigner in the host country's job market. David wished that he had had 'better language command' when seeking employment. Jessica had the impression that her ethnicity was not 'stereotypical' for her desired jobs. Heather summarised the difficulties of navigating the host country's job market as a foreigner as below:

Local international companies did not hire a candidate without business experience. Local enterprises and schools only hired locals fluent in the language and familiar with the local set up. (Because the jobs) had to do more with solving real-life problems in (the host country) context. As in my view, employers tend to favor local work experiences. (Heather)

#### *Higher education institution obstacles: Lack of career vision in the program*

Despite the strong competence and international co-operation promoted in the MA LLL program, participants pointed out that the program did not link well to the labor market. All participants acknowledged that the master's program equipped them with academic and research techniques regarding human learning and development as well as the communication competencies needed to work in an international environment. However, the program was too academically-focused and inadequately prepared students to take up practical jobs. Brian and Heather commented on the degree as a program that 'lacked focus' and with merely a 'policy jargon'. Nicole described her views on the degree as she bridged it to the job market:

I did not find it easy to apply the learned skills into the job market. Perhaps the program was too broad in its topics (from psychology to sociology/from university administrative matters to workplace learning). (Nicole)

#### *Labour market obstacles: Employers' lack of knowledge of the emerging field*

When integrating the capitals acquired from the international program, participants perceived that employers were not aware of the skills and knowledge they could offer. Respondents found it difficult to promote themselves to potential employers who had no idea about lifelong learning. As the idea of lifelong learning was new to employers and the labor market, there were few job offers related to the field. From the interviews, Heather commented that 'the degree was vaguely formulated', which did not help her advertise herself, and she felt that she 'did not have the right qualifications' to enter into the corporate world to deal with people's extended learning beyond school. David described the master's degree in lifelong learning as difficult to 'translate' into 'chewable' and 'digestible' information for hiring staff. This feeling was shared by Nicole, who said that employers 'had no clue' about what she had learned. Jessica mentioned that employers in her home country were negligent about the reputation of the institution and the international degree program:

Employers from other countries outside of Europe are not aware of the program's reputation and the universities' reputation. I could have got the same job regardless (of the international master's degree). (Jessica)

#### *State economy obstacles: Financial disturbance in the world*

When respondents graduated from the international program, the 2008 global financial crisis was affecting world economies. There were few employment opportunities available in the market for the local labor force and fresh graduates. Heather expressed that 'the job market was at its worst' at the time of the recession, while David said that his time in the host country was 'amidst the worst recession and global economic downturn'. Even as a local, Nicole expressed her frustration in seeking employment during the financial crisis in 2008:

The job market was still influenced by the financial crisis, and I managed only to get into one job interview. (Nicole)

#### **Overseas experience and career development a decade later**

After graduating from the MA LLL, participants undertook jobs as English instructors, financial or marketing sector workers, small-scale business entrepreneurs, or part-time workers. A decade later, two participants were engaging in doctoral studies, two were working in the research and development field of education, and one graduate returned to her original profession, which was unrelated to the study program. The following section shows the relation between participants' overseas experiences, employability agency and the achievement of their current careers.

Although the international master's program did not provide graduates with immediate advantages in seeking employment in the field of lifelong learning or education management, the knowledge, skills, and competencies they developed during their international study experiences were integrated into their employability agency, paving the way for them to walk their current career paths. Besides academic expertise in education policy and management, participants mentioned soft skills and competencies as essential for working with different cultures, such as cultural understanding and sensitivity and intercultural communication and co-operation. Heather and David's career trajectories both reflected the integration of professional knowledge and scholarly training from the international program, which enabled them to pursue an academic and education consulting career some years after graduation. David explained how he manifested his capitals from the MA LLL program, which were desirable and applicable to his current employment:

I think the sheer range of content I was exposed to during the MA LLL program (remember I mentioned above the huge swath of lifelong learning coverage) helped me navigate the education consulting work. But one thing stands out; the immense training I received in academic writing under MA LLL tutors greatly improved my skillset in doing analytical pieces in my current profession. (David)

Apart from the human capital obtained from the overseas study, employability agency is strengthened through the integration of social networks established from past experiences and during the study in the host country. For example, David maintained connections from his home country, which enabled him to obtain his current consultancy work combined with the knowledge and competencies acquired from the MA LLL. Brian enacted agency by integrating his positive attributes in approaching people and seeking academic help from his social network, as he began doctoral studies in the host country:

With the help of friends (at home and abroad), I make sure that I had good (academic) work, and I have always been positive whenever I approach people. (Brian)

As such, career success or at least career progress appears to result from how international graduates utilized human and social capitals obtained from their overseas study with their personal resources to enhance their employability agency. All of these drove their actions to move in different career paths.

## **Discussion**

This chapter explored the employability agency of the graduates of an international master's program in a European context. The first research question looked at how respondents enacted their employability agency after graduation in the situated social structure. Graduates actively utilized human and social capitals, including credentials, skills, competencies, and social networks from the past or experiences abroad in the target labor market. The findings echoed previous studies related to the different forms of capital that Chinese students and graduate migrants used to enhance their employability in the United Kingdom (Huang et al., 2014) and Australia, respectively (Pham et al., 2019). As mentioned in the literature review, employability agency includes the actions and decisions taken in an active, relational, and socially mediated process when seeking employment in a dynamic job market (Tomlinson, 2010). Whether pursuing a career at home or in a foreign country, credentials alone are insufficient to evidence high productivity and superior skills (Tholen, 2013; Tomlinson, 2010). Other human capital and social networks are required to secure employment opportunities (Fugate et al., 2004). In this study, graduates faced a choice between survival and their ideal career path when diving into the labor market after graduation. They demonstrated their flexible positioning and psychological capitals, such as perseverance and persistence, when navigating in adversity in the labor market. That is they exercise agency in using their employability capital in the target market in a way that fit their choice.

The second research question enquired about the obstacles that graduates encountered when enacting employability agency in the social structural context. There were four categories of obstacles from the findings are personal factors, the higher education institution, the labor market, and the state economy. Participants viewed these hindrances as uncontrollable or unchangeable. They encountered challenges when they first attempted to find employment in the labor market, especially those seeking employment in foreign countries. These challenges included the disadvantage of being a foreigner compared with local candidates, poor local language skills, cultural background, and a lack of interest in foreign candidates (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). Respondents pointed out the missing links between the study program and the labor market and corporate world. Previous studies (for example, Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Tomlinson, 2010) suggested that higher education institutions must construct international programs that increase employability skills and provide career guidance to help students transition into competitive labor markets. Additional efforts have been recommended to develop employability capitals for international students, who commonly lack a social network, local work experience, and a cultural understanding of the host country. Employers and the private sector might be unaware of the competencies and skills graduates from programs offer, especially in emerging fields such as lifelong learning. To narrow the gap between school and work in the higher education sector, companies and governments must communicate closely to exchange information, formulate policies and adjust their expectations of graduates' skills, knowledge, and competencies. The last obstacle mentioned by respondents in this study was the unexpected global financial disturbance in 2008. The unstable world economic situation posed additional challenges for respondents in navigating the job market, which offered limited opportunities.

Linking the findings of the second research question to Bourdieu's concepts of social, habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), the target labor market acted as a social field in which the graduates utilize the capital accumulated from their international education. That social field was unfamiliar to them and contain several expectations that was out of hand for foreigners like them, mostly in terms of language proficiency and cultural understanding. Within that new social field, their way of thinking and acting in related to utilizing employability capital for employment purposes appeared to misalign with what was expected in that social field. They also do not have enough capital or access to resources to make them more employable, even the degree – the basic employability signal – was not much known by employers. This is contrast to Bourdieu's notion of "fish in water" (Bourdieu, 1990) to denote a favourable condition where one's habitus is aligned with the social field, making that person function well. Graduates in this study mostly was "fish out of water", facing so many struggles. As such they had to exercised agency to help them overcome the challenges, survive and move on with their career plans, to be discussed in the next paragraph.

The last research question is on the relationship between graduates' overseas experiences and their career development. Past studies on international education (for example, Brooks et al., 2012; Crossman & Clarke, 2009) indicated that overseas experiences equipped students with essential skills for an international work environment, such as intercultural competence, cultural awareness, and commination strategies. In this study, graduates displayed employability agency as a continuous integration of human and social capitals from abroad and different experiences into personal resources when constructing their current career pathways. Of the five respondents, four had engaged in doctoral studies and integrated the skills and knowledge they acquired from the academic program into their professions at certain points. This study did not aim to illustrate a causal relationship between undertaking an international master's and the completion of doctoral studies. Rather, it explores how study abroad experiences have been integrated into participants' human and social capitals in the enactment of agency for employment and career development. Regardless of whether they were living in their home country or a foreign country, respondents in this study took jobs that might not be expected or desirable, and some had tried for years to engage in a career aligned with the skills they gained from studying abroad. This shows that employability is an active social process that requires the agency to mediate between human and social capitals in the constantly changing job market.

The study abroad experience and the international academic program enhanced respondents' human and social capital when enacting employability agency upon graduation and after a decade. Employability is an active social process integrating personal qualifications, past experiences, and human and social capital. When facing a challenging job market, graduates demonstrated their employability agency by merging their relevant capitals and showing perseverance and flexibility when coping with adversity. Shaping a career along the life course requires a proactive approach. The capital and social networks acquired from the overseas study might be deployed when enacting an employability agency in pursuing career goals. This study suggests that individual students should prepare themselves mentally to persevere and be flexible in the job market and familiarise themselves with their host countries' immigration policies and opportunities for foreign workers. Higher education institutions must strengthen their career services to bridge the academic world with the world of work. Employers should communicate with institutions and describe the qualities they are looking for in candidates. At the state level, it is essential to align education policies with industry demand and the economic situation, as these all impact the future intake of students and the potential workforce.

The present study has some limitations. First, this chapter analyzed only five reflection reports of international master's students. Although the cases demonstrated unique experiences and provided insights into international graduates' employability agency, findings from these cases should not be generalized. Second, data were based on participants' memories, which might not have covered all events happening in the past. Longitudinal studies could be helpful for investigating how employability agency is shaped along graduates' pathways.

## **Conclusion**

The study reported in this chapter depicted how graduates of an international master's program enacted their employability agency and the hindrances they experienced in doing so after graduation. Additionally, it explored how study abroad helped graduates exercise employability agency to construct career pathways. This study shows that employability is a dynamic relational process of an individual interacting with the job market. When enacting an employability agency, an individual must assess their own resources and capitals against the employment environment. In turn, the job market signals job seekers, who must adjust their positioning and future career plans. Echoing previous studies, this study confirms that studying abroad is a worthwhile investment that positions students well and gives them better prospects for future employability. International experience broadens a student's horizon and equips them with intercultural communication and multicultural knowledge, which strengthens their human capital and social networks when enacting employability agency. However, employability is a unique and individualized experience, which is associated with how one enacts one's agency in translating these capitals into employment outcomes. Further studies should explore the role of agency in shaping one's career trajectory.

## References

- Arthur, N., & Flynn, S. (2011). Career development influences of international students who pursue permanent immigration to Canada. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance, 11*(3), 221-237. doi:10.1007/s10775-011-9212-5
- Bhandari, R. (2019). Global student and talent flows: Re-examining the brain drain equation. *International Higher Education, 99*, 6-7. doi.org:10.6017/ihe.2019.99.11643
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Practical reason: On the theory of action*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Brooks, R., Waters, J., & Pimlott-Wilson, H. (2012). International education and the employability of UK students. *British Educational Research Journal, 38*(2), 281-298. doi:10.1080/01411926.2010.544710
- Cai, Y. (2012). Graduate employability: A conceptual framework for understanding employers' perceptions. *Higher Education, 65*(4), 457-469. doi:10.1007/s10734-012-9556-x
- Crossman, J. E., & Clarke, M. (2009). International experience and graduate employability: Stakeholder perceptions on the connection. *Higher Education, 59*(5), 599-613. doi:10.1007/s10734-009-9268-z
- De Wit, H. (2015). Recent trends and issues in international student mobility. *International Higher Education, 59*, 13-14. doi:10.6017/ihe.2010.59.8481
- Dwyer, M. M., & Peters, C. K. (2004). The benefits of study abroad. *Transitions abroad, 37*(5), 56-58.
- Fugate, M., Kinicki, A. J., & Ashforth, B. E. (2004). Employability: A psycho-social construct, its dimensions, and applications. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 65*(1), 14-38. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2003.10.005
- Giousmpasoglou, C., & Koniordos, S. K. (2017). Brain drain in higher education in Europe: Current trends and future perspectives. In C. Giousmpasoglou, V. Paliktzoglou, & E. Marinakou (Eds.), *Brain drain in higher education: The case of the Southern European countries and Ireland* (pp. 1-34). NOVA Science Publishers.
- Ho, N. T. T., Seet, P. S., & Jones, J. (2018). From brain drain and brain gain to brain circulation: Conceptualizing re-expatriation intentions of Vietnamese returnees. In L. Tran, & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education* (pp. 201-215). Springer International Publishing. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-78492-2\_11
- Huang, R., & Turner, R. (2018). International experience, universities support and graduate employability – perceptions of Chinese international students studying in UK universities. *Journal of Education and Work, 31*(2), 175-189. doi:10.1080/13639080.2018.1436751

- Huang, R., Turner, R., & Chen, Q. (2014). Chinese international students' perspective and strategies in preparing for their future employability. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 66(2), 175-193. doi:10.1080/13636820.2014.894933
- Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2002). "Push-pull" factors influencing international student destination choice. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 16(2), 82-90. doi:10.1108/09513540210418403
- Nghia, T. L. H. (2019). *Building soft skills for employability: Challenges and practices in Vietnam*. Routledge.
- Nilsson, P. A., & Ripmeester, N. (2016). International student expectations: Career opportunities and employability. *Journal of International Students*, 6(2), 614-631. doi:10.32674/jis.v6i2.373
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 160940691773384. doi:10.1177/1609406917733847
- Pham, A. (2018). Employers' perspectives on Vietnamese returnee students. In L. Tran, & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education* (pp. 201-215). Springer International Publishing. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-78492-2\_11
- Pham, T., Tomlinson, M., & Thompson, C. (2019). Forms of capital and agency as mediations in negotiating employability of international graduate migrants. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 17(3), 394-405. doi:10.1080/14767724.2019.1583091
- The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2019). *Education: Outbound internationally mobile students by host region*. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics. <http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?queryid=172>
- Thijssen, J. G., van der Heijden, B. I., & Rocco, T. S. (2008). Toward the employability—link model: Current employment transition to future employment perspectives. *Human Resource Development Review*, 7(2), 165-183. doi:10.1177/1534484308314955
- Tholen, G. (2013). The social construction of competition for graduate jobs: A comparison between Great Britain and the Netherlands. *Sociology*, 47(2), 267-283. doi:10.1177/0038038512444815
- Tholen, G. (2015). What can research into graduate employability tell us about agency and structure? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36(5), 766-784. doi:10.1080/01425692.2013.847782
- Tomlinson, M. (2010). Investing in the self: Structure, agency and identity in graduates' employability. *Education, Knowledge & Economy*, 4(2), 73-88. doi:10.1080/17496896.2010.499273
- Tomlinson, M. (2017). Forms of graduate capital and their relationship to graduate employability. *Education & Training (London)*, 59(4), 338-352. doi:10.1108/et-05-2016-0090
- Tomlinson, M., & Nghia, T. L. H. (2020). An overview of the current policy and conceptual landscape of graduate employability. In T. L. H. Nghia, T. Pham, M. Tomlinson, K. Medica, & C. D. Thompson (Eds.), *Developing and utilizing employability capitals: Graduates' strategies across labour markets*. Routledge.
- Trooboff, S., Vande Berg, M., & Rayman, J. (2008). Employer attitudes toward study abroad. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 15, 19-33.