

Chinese graduates: the employability disconnect

As more and more Chinese students study internationally, business schools must look at how they enable graduates to obtain jobs in China.

Martin Lockett and **Xuan Feng** look at the challenges facing students, employers and business schools

A decade or two ago, foreign graduates from mainland China were rare and highly sought after by domestic and international firms. Good jobs were easy to find and a foreign degree carried a distinctive advantage.

Today, it is much tougher with greater competition for jobs despite sustained rapid growth, at least by Western standards. For example, the 2019 Chinese university graduate employability report shows that the undergraduate employment rate has declined continuously over the last five years.

According to a recent *Financial Times* report, given the restrictions on post-study work in many countries such as the US and UK more and more Chinese graduates study for a masters degree overseas and then look for a job in China.

On the surface, China's economic slow-down relative to the past (6% rather than 10% annual growth) can be blamed. However, our research and experience show deeper issues.

The employment challenges Chinese students face are the products of two major disconnects: first, between students' focus on degree studies and their personal career preparation; and, second, between students' study at university and what employers value in practice.

The student/employment disconnect

Chinese students are renowned for their tremendous efforts in acquiring subject knowledge, getting good grades and obtaining degrees from prestigious universities. However, compared with their Western counterparts, they take less initiative in personal career management.

In a collective hierarchical culture such as China, students are encouraged to learn what their teachers say rather than develop self-management and critical thinking. They are also heavily influenced by family, peer groups and wider society. This favours qualifications and certificates more than actual learning experiences and prefers prestigious university-level brands rather than programme quality and fit with the individual student.

As a result, many Chinese undergraduates are not used to making decisions based on their own aptitudes and values and do not have clear personal plans for their career even after four years of study. For some, studying a masters is an opportunity to delay career decisions.

While this disconnect benefits many business schools financially, it has created major new challenges of career planning and employment for Chinese students that are of growing importance for business schools.

The university/employer disconnect

As well as the lack of personal career preparation by students, Chinese universities have tended to grow general degree programmes that are typically relatively theoretical. There is a preference for subjects with "right" answers among both students and academics, especially subjects that favour the quantitative skills in which Chinese students so often excel.

Also, increasing subject-area knowledge is seen as the way forward by students, an approach with which many academics are complicit, especially if students want to study in their academic specialism.

While there is much more to higher education than getting a job, the disconnect between the university learning experience and what is needed in real-world companies is often striking.

Today, who in the world of work sits down with no internet or communication with others then writes for two or three hours with pen and paper?

2018

Starting in late 2018, we launched an extensive research project aiming to compare student and employer perceptions as well as critically analysing our curriculum and extracurricular activities

“

Hiring based on current knowledge and past accomplishments is not a guarantee of employee success

Understanding the disconnects

Given these disconnects and the importance of employability for international graduates in China, we have focused on understanding the challenges posed by these two disconnects.

Starting in late 2018, we launched an extensive research project aiming to compare student and employer perceptions as well as critically analyse our curriculum and extracurricular activities in Nottingham University Business School (NUBS) China. Our goal was to develop an employability framework that involved students and employers that answered three questions:

- What are Chinese students' expectations about careers and employment?
- What are Chinese employers looking for when recruiting graduates?
- What can universities do to improve the effectiveness of personal career development?

Underlying this was our vision of NUBS China graduates who are not only highly competent but also:

- Have an international mindset
- Are highly employable locally and globally
- Capable of personal and career development



We held focus groups with both students and a variety of employers from Shanghai and elsewhere in east China. These showed that students had high expectations regarding their first job, believing that the key to obtaining such a job was individual academic performance and internship experience.

In contrast, employers emphasised “soft qualities”, such as learning agility and sense of responsibility, plus an ability to work with people and in teams. They saw gaps in students' knowledge of personal strengths and self-awareness, such as career goals and areas for development.

This showed the depth of the student/employer disconnect as students generally lack knowledge of themselves, as well as of careers and industries. Prioritising discipline knowledge and grades above soft skills and personal career planning meant that they fall short in meeting their first job expectations as well as advancing their future careers.



23

The 23 factors included: degree and disciplinary knowledge; employability skills; personal and professional attributes; work attitudes and experience

We then developed, together with our colleague Joon Hyung Park, two comprehensive surveys for Chinese employers and students from University of Nottingham Ningbo China respectively. Both surveys used the same 23 employability related factors derived from the literature and the employer perspectives from the focus groups.

The 23 factors included: degree and disciplinary knowledge; employability skills; personal and professional attributes; work attitudes and experience. One hundred and thirty-seven students from University of Nottingham Ningbo China and 38 employer HR professionals completed the survey.

This showed some distinct differences between employers and students. Taking the top five factors stressed by employers (Table 1), those more highly rated by employers than students are in bold. While discipline knowledge was in the top five, the other four factors were all personal “soft” skills.

Most notable was employers’ emphasis on “learning agility”, a person’s ability and willingness to learn from experience and apply this to improve future performance.

Given the accessibility of information on the internet and rate of change of specific knowledge in many fields, employees need to be able to keep pace with real-world change through learning and getting ready to take on and succeed in unfamiliar tasks.

Hiring based on current knowledge and past accomplishments is not a guarantee of employee success. Rather, the ability to learn from past experience, proactively initiate action, and apply ongoing learning enable graduates to stand out. This explains why internship experience by itself is not on the top priority list of the employers even though it was ranked in the top five by students.

Rank	Top employability factors for employers
1	Generic skills (eg communication skills or teamwork skills)
2	Learning agility
3	Discipline specific knowledge or occupational expertise
4	Proactivity
5	Social and interpersonal compatibility

Table 1 Employability factors. **Bold text** indicates factors rated higher by employers than by students

Students and employers also shared their view on the activities employers and universities can develop to enhance graduate employability. Traditional career development events such as company internships and campus job fairs were recognised as useful.

Apart from internships, students expressed strong interest in non-internship projects (such as company-sponsored dissertations) and employer-driven career training programmes. Most of the Chinese employers were willing to provide company visit opportunities for students. This indicates the need to blur the boundary between academic study and careers activities.

These insights have helped us to develop a clearer career framework to guide students and business schools (see Table 2).

Connecting students, employers and business schools

How can we solve the two disconnects we have discussed? It is not easy and it will require change among students, employers and universities.

Implications for students

Employable students need to be self-aware “can-doers”, not just subject-specific learners. They need to recognise the importance of career preparation and have genuine self-awareness of strengths, core work values and career goals. They also need to understand current and future job and market trends, what employers are looking for and above all to understand concretely what they can offer their chosen industry.

They need to present a “personal brand” to future employers that aligns with their ambition and competences and builds on their business school image.

Personal qualities

- Learning agility
- Proactivity & personal responsibility
- Resilience & learning from failure
- Adaptability
- Innovative and entrepreneurial mindset

Self-awareness

- Clear career interests
- Personal passions and goals
- Core personal and work values
- Know own potential

Domain understanding

- Scanning the environment
- Specific domain knowledge for the industry
- Ability to match personal strengths and competencies with employer

Working with people

- Compassionate and mindful
- Collaborative
- Ability to work with global teams
- Integrity

Table 2 The NUBS China career framework core components

Implications for business schools and universities

To make “employability” of graduates a true strategic priority, universities and business schools need to play a stronger role as guides to students in developing both self-awareness and understanding of employment and industries. This requires a more holistic development framework that bridges the curriculum and extra-curricular activities. It needs to make the world of work real.

It is also important that career services and academic areas work collaboratively to integrate work experience and application of knowledge into programmes.

Finally, it is vital to define what is distinctive about your graduates from an employer viewpoint and communicate this.





Implications for employers

An important implication is that employer engagement in student employability development can create a virtuous circle that benefits both the curriculum and graduate employability.

Employers need to clarify and communicate their hiring priorities. They need to diversify their student engagement activities, actively participate in curricular activities, create experiential learning opportunities for students beyond internships, provide realistic role models for alumni and explain their career progression paths.

Finally, Chinese domestic companies going global have to place a higher priority on employer branding to attract highly competent graduates returning to China.

gf

About the Authors

Professor Martin Lockett is Dean of Nottingham University Business School China, at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, the first Sino-foreign university in China

Dr Xuan Feng is Director of Personal and Career Development and Assistant Professor in Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour at Nottingham University Business School China