

Unveiling the Employability Landscape: Chinese International Doctoral Students in Malaysian Universities

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Abstract

Malaysia has been actively striving to establish itself as an international education hub, and has successfully attracted a significant influx of Chinese international students pursuing their doctoral degrees. However, doubts persist regarding the quality of Malaysia's higher education and the employability of its graduates, particularly when viewed through the lens of stakeholders in China's labour market. This research sought to address these concerns by delving into the essential graduate attributes highly regarded by Chinese doctoral students enrolled in Malaysian universities and identifying aspects of Malaysian higher education that might influence students' employability. Employing a qualitative approach, the research underscores the significance of various types of capital, with a considerable emphasis on human capital, encompassing academic qualifications, research competence, and English proficiency. Additionally, it sheds light on the pivotal role of quality research supervision, the availability of continuous training opportunities and psychological support within the programme, and the degree of collaboration between Malaysian universities and Chinese industry as factors critically impacting the participants' perceived employability. These findings aim to offer essential guidance for educational institutions and policymakers in aligning academic programmes with the evolving demands of the global labour market.

Keywords: employability; graduate attributes; higher education; international students; Malaysia



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Introduction

In an era characterised by the globalisation and internationalisation of higher education (HE), the pursuit of advanced degrees transcends geographical borders. Malaysian higher education providers (HEPs) have steadily emerged as favoured destinations for international students seeking quality education. Among these global learners, Chinese international doctoral students represent a substantial demographic, drawn by Malaysia's favourable educational policies and opportunities for advanced research, as well as local universities' competitive tuition fees, high global rankings, and flexible learning pathways (Bing 2022; Cynthia and Chong 2023). Yet, beneath this veneer of growing internationalisation lies a complex challenge: the perception of Malaysian universities in the eyes of key stakeholders, particularly in China.

Despite the numerous advantages that Malaysia offers as a higher education hub, the academic reputation of its HEPs, especially among the Chinese academic community, remains a subject of scrutiny. Malaysian institutions have embarked on ambitious journeys to enhance their global standing, but the narrative of their quality and prestige has yet to fully permeate international academic circles (Fadzil et al. 2022; Yusof, Asimiran, and Kadir 2022), including those in China—a tacit concern not addressed in academic literature but notably prevalent and discussed within Chinese social media platforms (see, for example, Li 2022; Lyu and Xiao 2022). This ongoing debate over the recognition and quality of Malaysian HE is particularly relevant to Chinese returnee students who choose Malaysia as their academic destination, as it directly impacts their graduate employability prospects in China's labour market, another concern central to their academic journey (Kiong et al. 2019; Othman et al. 2021).

This disconnect between Malaysia's growing appeal to international students and its perceived educational quality and employability outcomes underscores the need for a comprehensive exploration of the employability prospects and experiences of Chinese international doctoral students in Malaysian universities, a research gap that has been relatively understudied in the existing literature. As such, this study endeavours to explore the intricate dynamics between the perceived quality of Malaysian HE, the employability concerns of Chinese returnee students, and the broader implications for their academic and professional futures. A qualitative paradigm is employed to address the following questions:

- What are the specific skills, knowledge, and competencies that Chinese doctoral students enrolled in Malaysian HEPs believe are essential for enhancing their graduate employability, particularly within their intended career fields?
- How do the target students evaluate the impact of their academic experiences on their perceived graduate employability?

Literature Review

Graduate Employability

The concept of graduate employability, the ability of graduates to find and secure gainful employment that aligns with their qualifications, skills, and aspirations, has evolved into a central concern in the realm of HE (Ma'dan, Ismail, and Daud 2020). As the world experiences dynamic changes in the job market, universities and stakeholders are increasingly focusing on preparing graduates to thrive in an ever-competitive and rapidly evolving professional landscape.

Graduate employability encompasses a broad spectrum of skills, knowledge, and attributes. There is a growing recognition that employability is not solely a product of academic excellence but also depends on the development of practical skills and a capacity to respond to dynamic labour market demands. Tomlinson et al. (2017) and Pham (2023) have underscored the pivotal role of capital in comprehending and enhancing graduate employability, which is viewed as essential reservoirs of resources that bestow advantages upon individuals and equip them with the readiness and capabilities to navigate the intricacies of entering the job market. Particularly, six types of capital have been proposed, including human capital (i.e. academic knowledge, technical and hard skills, and qualifications), social capital (i.e. developing networks, relationships, and social connections), cultural capital (i.e. gaining cultural knowledge and confidence), identity capital (i.e. self-confidence and self-awareness), psychological capital (i.e. the ability to stay resilient, motivated, and adaptable), and agentic capital (i.e. the ability to take initiative, set goals, and actively shape the career path via strategic use of different capitals). This holistic approach to employability has been acknowledged in academia (Eimer and Bohndick 2023; Hu 2023; Pudyanti, Redioka, and Devana 2022; Tang 2022), highlighting the importance of cultivating a diverse range of resources and capabilities that collectively empower individuals to thrive in the dynamic and competitive labour market.

While the capital-based approach emphasises the role of graduates in shaping their employability, it is essential to recognise that the development of graduate capital is not solely the responsibility of the individuals themselves but a lifelong process involving different stakeholders (Bui and Nghia 2022). Thus, in a complementary perspective, Hardin-Ramanan et al. (2020) have foregrounded the concept of career readiness while shedding light on the broader ecosystem in which universities, governmental and parastatal entities, and employers play crucial roles in enhancing students' employability, with universities grappling "with the demands of multiple stakeholders" and exploring the pedagogical possibilities (e.g. developing and integrating curricular innovations that feature skill enhancement, fostering industry collaborations, and providing career guidance services) within HE (Clarke 2018, 1934). Although other interpretations of graduate employability exist, the capital-based approach and the perspective of career readiness represent two significant paradigms that underscore the multidimensionality of employability and the exploitation of "the potential it holds for

higher education” and vice versa (Eimer and Bohndick 2023, “Practical Implications”, para. 3), thereby underlying the present study.

HE and Employability in Malaysia

Malaysian HE has witnessed substantial growth and transformation over the years, with a significant emphasis on enhancing the employability of graduates (Kiong et al. 2019; Ma’dan, Ismail, and Daud 2020). As a result, graduate employability has become a prominent concern within the Malaysian educational landscape (Othman et al. 2021), especially considering graduates’ unemployment and underemployment (Kadir, Naghavi, and Subramaniam 2020). Although there is a dearth of research specifically focusing on Chinese international students, other studies in this area have identified several attributes that students in Malaysian HEPs are expected to have and critical factors contributing to employability outcomes for Malaysian graduates.

For instance, the systematic review done by Nasreen, Halili, and Razak (2022) identifies the significance of various attributes for Malaysian university students, including soft skills (e.g. communication and interpersonal skills), hard skills (e.g. literacy skills), and attitudes (e.g. commitment). This finding aligns with the results of Azmi, Hashim, and Yusoff’s (2018) qualitative research, Majid et al.’s (2020) quantitative research, and Nadarajah’s (2021) large-scale survey, all of which was done with students in public Malaysian HEPs. These studies also highlight the importance of a range of attributes, encompassing hard skills (e.g. subject knowledge, language proficiency, literacy, and information skills), soft skills (e.g. teamwork, leadership, and innovation), and ways of thinking (e.g. stress endurance and positivity) as key factors influencing employability. While these studies encompassed various levels of university students, Hoon et al.’s (2019) quantitative study primarily centres on doctoral students, which, on the other hand, emphasises academic competence (e.g. research skills) and emotional state (e.g. resilience and motivation) as important factors in professional development.

In contrast, Wafi et al. (2022) approach employability from the perspective of industry experts and leaders, while their qualitative investigation reveals similar graduate attributes expected by the industry, such as communication, leadership, problem-solving, teamwork, information management, and entrepreneurship. Among these attributes, Selvaratnam (2018, 18), through analyses of Malaysia’s educational policies, emphasises the significance of hard skills, especially English proficiency, as an integral component of human capital, and suggests that developing “a modern, technological savvy, and export-driven nation depends on strengthening its human capital”. This aligns with Kiong et al.’s (2019) quantitative research finding that the employability of Chinese international students enrolled in Malaysian HEPs is positively related to their English proficiency.

With essential graduate attributes now identified, the Malaysian government, in its pursuit of transforming the nation into an international education hub, has encouraged HEPs to develop curricula that not only impart academic knowledge but also equip

students with practical skills and competencies for employment (Nadarajah 2021). However, previous research has demonstrated a demand-supply mismatch between industry requirements and the offerings of current curricula, both in public and private HEPs (Ibrahim and Nashir 2022; Nawai 2021; Penang Institute 2022; Selvaratnam 2018). In particular, large-scale surveys by Misni, Mahmood, and Jamil (2020) and Roslan and Hamid (2020), involving students from different types of HEPs, confirm the positive relationship between employability competence and curriculum design, which encompasses vision, organisation, delivery, and evaluation. For international Chinese students, notably, Kiong et al.'s (2019) quantitative analysis suggests that their employability in China's labour market is significantly related to the quality of education in Malaysia. However, Noah and Aziz's (2020) analysis of university curriculums, for example, reveals that the current university curricula remain traditional and fail to adequately equip students with the necessary hard and soft skills required for success in the job market, underlining Hoon et al.'s (2019) argument that the programmes in Malaysian HEPs might be less structured, including doctoral ones.

Therefore, the alignment between the skills and knowledge acquired during a university programme and the requirements of the job market is essential, which can be fostered through curriculum development, work-integrated learning opportunities, and collaboration with industry partners. The qualitative study conducted by Ma'dan, Ismail, and Daud (2020) involving deputy vice-chancellors and graduate employability directors from eight public universities emphasises the significance of developing and implementing appropriate educational programmes. These programmes were intended to equip students with the essential employability skills and underlined the necessity of collaborating with the industry to better align with its needs. This proposition was similarly underscored in Fahimirad et al.'s (2019) systematic review and Baqutayan et al.'s (2019) qualitative research involving local academicians and industrialists, which supplemented employability-focused and industry-integrated programme and curriculum design with the need to establish an assessment system managed by universities and involving industry participation.

Nevertheless, research specifically focusing on Chinese international students' professional development remains scarce within the Malaysian context (Kiong et al. 2019), despite the increasing numbers of Chinese international students pursuing advanced degrees. Furthermore, there is a notable absence of investigations into the quality of doctoral programmes in Malaysian HEPs (Hoon et al. 2019), the understanding of which is vital for both academic institutions and prospective students. These gaps in the literature justify the research presented below, which aims to provide a preliminary understanding of the experiences of Chinese international students involved in doctoral programmes.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological research design, aiming to explore and understand the lived experiences and perceptions of Chinese doctoral students

enrolled in Malaysian HEPs concerning their perceptions of graduate employability and the quality of HE, as demonstrated in the aforementioned research questions (RQs). The phenomenological approach aligned with the exploratory nature of the study and could allow for an in-depth examination of the participants' subjective experiences, beliefs, and perspectives to provide rich insights into the RQs (Churchill 2021).

The study involved a purposive sample of Chinese doctoral students currently enrolled in Malaysian HEPs. Participants were selected based on their willingness to share their experiences and perceptions, from various academic disciplines and across different stages of their doctoral programmes (see Table 1), which was essential to ensure a diverse representation (Moser and Korstjens 2018). A sample of 15 students was recruited, a size considered sufficient for a phenomenological study and achieving qualitative saturation (Alase 2017).

Table 1: Demographics of student sample

Participant (PA)	Gender	Age	Type of HEP	Field	Year Level
1	Male	29	Public	TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language)	3
2	Male	26	Public	Management	1
3	Male	35	Public	Computer Science	2
4	Male	30	Public	Engineering	3
5	Male	28	Private	Information Technology	2
6	Male	29	Private	Architecture	3
7	Female	27	Public	Education Economics	1
8	Female	33	Public	Curriculum and Pedagogy	3
9	Female	36	Public	TESL	3
10	Female	28	Private	Criminal Law	2
11	Female	27	Private	Higher Education	1
12	Female	30	Public	Linguistics	1
13	Female	28	Public	Sports Management	2
14	Female	27	Private	Psychology	1
15	Female	31	Public	Accounting	2

Data was primarily collected through online semi-structured interviews due to the diverse geographic locations of the participants. This method could provide the participants with the opportunity to share their unique experiences and perspectives and allow for flexibility and deeper exploration of the participants' responses (Elhami and Khoshnevisan 2022). An interview guide was developed, focusing on the specific skills, knowledge, and competencies essential for enhancing graduate employability, as reflected in the first RQ, and the evaluation of the impact of academic experiences on perceived graduate employability, the core of the second RQ.

The participants were interviewed in their native language, Chinese, to ensure the clarity of their expressions. The interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed by

a native Chinese speaker. Subsequently, the transcripts were translated into English by a professional interpreter and reviewed by another to ensure the accuracy of their meaning. Thematic analysis was then employed to analyse the interview data. This method involved taking notes of items of interest, coding across the entire dataset, searching for themes, reviewing themes by mapping their relationships, defining themes, and reporting patterns, which were relevant to the RQs (Maguire and Delahunt 2017). Data analysis was conducted using qualitative analysis software (i.e. NVivo 14) to manage and code the interview transcripts systematically.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were adopted based on recommendations found in the literature (Grenier and Merriam 2019). Triangulation was accomplished by collecting data from a diverse range of participants representing various backgrounds and perspectives, aimed to provide a comprehensive and well-rounded view of the RQs. Additionally, the study incorporated member checking as a critical component of the validation process to confirm their experiences and perspectives had been faithfully captured. This iterative process involved sharing the preliminary findings with the participants and soliciting their feedback, allowing for a valuable validation of the data interpretation and ensuring that their voices and insights were accurately and faithfully represented in the study. Lastly, the article offers a rich description, providing readers with a detailed and immersive understanding of the research context, methodologies, and findings.

Findings

Human Capital: Academic Qualifications and Research Skills Come First

The participants identified a variety of attributes essential to their ideal career paths (e.g. being a university lecturer or civil servant, and working in an enterprise), while the central focus seemed to revolve around academic knowledge and research skills. Across the interviews, it became evident that the participants perceived academic qualifications, research competencies, and English proficiency as the foundation of their human capital. They emphasised the importance of a solid educational background in their respective fields, highlighting that it not only enhanced their job prospects but also their potential for career advancement. Also, research skills, including but not limited to the selection of research topics, research design, data analysis, critical thinking, and problem-solving, were frequently cited as indispensable assets, enabling them to adapt to the evolving demands of their professions. Furthermore, many participants believed that impressive English proficiency would gain them more career prospects. They believed this emphasis on scholarliness, research, and language prowess aligned with the contemporary labour market's growing demand for individuals who can engage in knowledge-intensive work and contribute to innovation and problem-solving within their fields. Some example quotations are as below.

The degree is important for my future employment, and it will definitely offer me much more career prospects than what my current position can provide. (PA2)

Completing a degree in a top-ranked Malaysian university will make me a qualified and competitive teacher in China. (PA7)

Competency in academic studies goes before anything for me to find a teaching job when [I go] back to China. (PA8)

Research always comes first, not only for my current studies but also for my employment. ... You know, prolific research output is always a central indicator in China for job-hunting and promotion. (PA14)

Without an impressive qualification and research output, I will never be a qualified candidate in China's labour market. (PA15)

Although my English is not good, it is essential to my future employment. (PA3)

In addition, the participants recognised the value of specialised expertise within their disciplines. They emphasised that staying updated with the latest developments, publications, and research trends was crucial to remain competitive in the academic and professional arena. Investing time and effort in continuing education and professional development was seen as a proactive strategy to continuously enhance their human capital. This emphasis on staying current and expanding specialised knowledge was closely tied to their ability to contribute meaningfully to research, education, and professional practice, ultimately enhancing their employability and career prospects. Participants revealed the following:

Disciplinary knowledge and expertise are vital for my current education and research, which is also true for my future teaching work. (PA1)

Self-improvement through developing expertise in my subject and research is crucial for my professional development. (PA5)

It is important to keep improving my knowledge and reading academic publications about my field of study. Only in this way can I boost my employability and career prospects. (PA9)

You live, you learn! Keeping updated with the latest developments in my subject and continuing learning are essential. (PA11)

Hard and technological skills are always prioritised in China's labour market, and I need to improve them. (PA15)

Psychological Capital: Resilience and Motivation Are a Big Deal

The interviews consistently revealed that maintaining a high level of resilience is critical to navigating the challenges of academic and research careers. The participants described how they often faced setbacks, rejections, and moments of self-doubt in the highly competitive and demanding academic and research environments. However,

their ability to rebound from these setbacks and maintain a positive outlook was cited as a defining characteristic of their psychological capital. Resilience enabled them to persist in the face of adversity, learn from failures, and ultimately thrive in their academic and professional pursuits. The participants stated the following:

I am going to graduate soon and have submitted my resume to a few recruiters, who have never replied to me. So it is important to keep resilient. (PA1)

Recovering quickly from difficult situations, both in studies and employment, is significant. (PA8)

It is inevitable to come across difficulties and challenges, especially considering that many Chinese employees somehow have a prejudice against Malaysian universities. ... I am trying to adjust my mental attitude [to this issue]. (PA10)

I have been buffeted from pillar to post since I started to study in Malaysia while trying to find a job in China. So I am trying to stay resilient in this tough situation. (PA14)

Motivation emerged as the other crucial component of psychological capital. A few participants expressed the need to maintain strong intrinsic motivation to excel in their fields, driven by a passion for their subject matter and a genuine desire to make a positive impact. They believed this internal motivation could not only sustain their efforts but also fuel their commitment to continuous learning and professional development. They noted the following:

When facing difficulties, it is important to maintain motivation from the inner being. This is an important attribute for employment. (PA4)

Being passionate and motivated is key in the job-hunting process. (PA8)

Through the tough process of conducting research abroad, I have learned the importance of staying motivated for my professional development. (PA9)

It is important to be internally motivated for education and work. (PA14)

Identity Capital and Agentic Capital: The Importance of Reflection

Although not as prominently discussed as the previously mentioned types of capital, identity capital and agentic capital were also identified by select participants, who sometimes reflected upon their identity and agency as doctoral students and for future employment. This recognition underscores the significance of self-awareness and personal agency in their employability outlook. Identity capital, identified by certain participants as the unique qualities and characteristics that make them distinct, encompassed their personal values, beliefs, cultural background, and experiences. They believe that these attributes might be invaluable when it comes to employability, which could influence their ability to fit into diverse workplace cultures and contribute in

unique ways. Moreover, a few participants underscored the importance of their capacity to act, a symbol of agentic capital, and mentioned that their perception of employability hinged on their ability to set and pursue career goals, make decisions, and take initiative. They suggested that those who possess a strong sense of agentic capital feel more in control of their career paths and are better equipped to navigate the complexities of the job market. The participants shared the following:

It is important to have a clear understanding of myself—my ability, experience, and so on—then I can know which career path is more suitable. (PA3)

Knowing who I am and what I am good at is essential to paving my career path and making a decision when finding a job. (PA7)

My own characteristics will help me stand out in employment. (PA9)

I always reflect on my own identity and ability as a future job-hunter. ... Knowing who I am is important. (PA15)

Social and Cultural Capital: Solicited Answers with Mixed Views

During the interviews, it was noteworthy that only one participant explicitly emphasised the significance of maintaining strong social connections in the context of future job-hunting and employment by maintaining: “Expanding my social connections may offer me more opportunities in employment” (PA13). In contrast, the remaining participants did not provide any substantial clues or observations regarding the role of social or cultural capital in their employability considerations. Recognising the potential impact of these types of capital, the researchers decided to remind the participants of their importance and subsequently asked for their opinions on the matter.

As the conversation delved deeper into the role of social capital, some participants began to recognise its value more clearly and expressed an understanding of how personal relationships, professional networks, and social interactions could influence their career opportunities. While acknowledging the importance of building and nurturing connections with academic staff (e.g. supervisors) in host universities, they emphasised more the necessity of building connections with their Chinese peers and the professionals in their respective fields back in China, who were potential sources of information, advice, and opportunities for future employment. The interviews revealed the following views:

It is important to keep in touch with the staff at the university, especially my supervisors, who may give me suggestions for future employment. (PA2)

I find it vital to keep in touch with Chinese students here and seek to build connections with professionals in China. (PA10)

China is a *renqing*-based [relationship-based] society. ... After all, someone in my social connections will somehow help with my future employment. (PA14)

However, despite the researchers' efforts to highlight the significance of social and cultural capital, a significant portion of the participants still struggled to fully grasp their importance in the context of employability. Some participants continued to harbour doubts about the relevance of social capital, especially given the perceived lack of connections between Malaysian HEPs and their Chinese counterparts in the fields of study. Their reservations were often rooted in the belief that academic merit and technical skills should suffice to secure job opportunities. This was the same for cultural capital. Although many participants mentioned that studying abroad improved their cross-cultural awareness and understanding, their relevance to employment prospects in China was not obvious. Thus, they perceived social connections and cultural understanding as less significant in the fields they were pursuing, which primarily involved academic and research-oriented roles. The participants stated:

Social connections are not as important as hard skills for me. (PA2)

Currently, I cannot see how social connections will help me with my employment. (PA11)

I do not think cultural competence is important for employment in China. ... My academic and research ability tends to be more important. (PA13)

Quality of Programme: Insufficient Research Supervision

Although the participants had mixed views on the relative importance of their graduate attributes, one common thread that emerged as a surprising consensus was the significance of research supervision and assistance in shaping their employability prospects. The participants recognised that the quality and effectiveness of research supervision played a fundamental role in honing their research skills, critical thinking abilities, and subject matter expertise, which could provide invaluable insights into the academic and professional landscape. Also, sufficient support was deemed to be motivational for some participants, which could enhance their confidence in future employment. The participants revealed:

Good research supervision is important to improve my hard skills. (PA4)

Getting enough support from supervisors will improve my academic ability and confidence in my future employment. (PA10)

Good supervision is academically and emotionally beneficial. (PA15)

However, almost all the participants lamented the fact that the high student-to-supervisor ratio as a result of the increasing number of students in Malaysian HEPs had led to stretched resources and full schedules for their supervisors. While they valued the

expertise of their supervisors, they often found it difficult to secure regular one-on-one meetings or obtain timely feedback on their research work. This shortage of individualised attention could hinder their progress, affect the quality of their research output, and hamper their ability to develop critical research skills, thereby influencing their future employment. The participants noted:

My supervisors are professional but always busy. Without their support, I cannot make enough progress. (PA3)

Learning from supervisors is important to improve hard skills key to employment. ... Unfortunately, I cannot see my supervisors much often. (PA9)

It is a pity that I cannot get enough supervision, which will impact my academic competence and even my future work. (PA10)

Quality of Curriculum: Unsystematic Training

While participants continued to underscore the importance of human capital in shaping their employability prospects, a notable consensus emerged regarding the limitations of the current curriculum design for doctoral students, irrespective of whether they were enrolled in public or private HEPs. These limitations stemmed from the perception that the existing curriculum did not offer comprehensive support for their professional development. The participants acknowledged that while they were required to complete methodology and academic English courses as prerequisites for postgraduate studies, there existed a noticeable gap in terms of continuous training opportunities. Some participants suggested that a more holistic curriculum could better prepare them for a broader range of careers, whether in academia, industry, or other sectors. They yearned for courses, workshops, and other activities that delve deeper into research methodologies, grant writing, project management, teaching, publication, and communication skills, among other critical areas. The lack of these continuous opportunities was perceived as a limitation, as it restricted their ability to adapt to the dynamic demands of the job market and to stay competitive in a rapidly evolving academic and professional landscape. The participants stated:

I would like to attend more courses, which are actually missing from my university, to sharpen my research skills. (PA3)

There is a lack of opportunities for continuous training and professional development, which may restrict my career prospects. (PA5)

The curriculum should be more comprehensive, and more activities like workshops and seminars should be organised. (PA9)

My career prospects may be limited because of my poor academic skills, which can be increased through a more systematic curriculum in university. (PA10)

Quality of Education: Lack of Sino-Malaysian Communication

It was intriguing to observe that, while social capital was not commonly identified as a significant attribute, some participants began to acknowledge its potential importance during the course of the discussions. They started to recognise that the lack of effective communication and collaboration between Malaysian HEPs and Chinese counterparts and industries could potentially restrict their career prospects and employability. They expressed concerns that their geographic separation from the Chinese job market and academic community might lead to a disadvantage in terms of accessing opportunities and realised that being less connected to Chinese institutions and networks could hinder their ability to tap into resources, collaborations, and industry contacts. In contrast to doctoral students enrolled in Chinese HEPs, they began to perceive that they might have fewer employment opportunities. The participants stated the following:

Compared with my friends enrolled in Chinese universities, I, now in Malaysia, have little contact with China's labour market, which is a disadvantage. (PA5)

I guess promoting China-Malaysia co-operation in the field of HE is beneficial for my employment. (PA10)

There should be more co-operation between Malaysian universities and Chinese universities and industries so that I can expand my social connections. (PA13)

Quality of Service: Psychological Support Needed

While acknowledging the academic stress they encountered, some participants mentioned the significance of a supportive and holistic university environment that addresses not only academic needs but also the psychological well-being of international students pursuing doctoral degrees. They desired to have access to psychological support services on campus, a resource notably absent in universities, and emphasised that such support played a crucial role in enhancing their resilience and motivation for professional development. They shared the following:

My university should provide some counselling services to enhance our motivation. (PA8)

If the university can offer us some counselling services when we feel sad, we will be more motivated for our professional development. (PA10)

Resilience is important for employment. ... As a doctoral student undertaking high stress, the university should give us some comfort to improve our resilience. (PA14)

Discussion

While well-established theories underscore the synergy of a range of graduate attributes for promising employment (Pham 2023; Tomlinson et al. 2017), the present study brings to light a nuanced perspective within the context of Chinese international doctoral

students enrolled in Malaysian HEPs. In their quest to enhance their employability, participants consistently highlighted the significance of human capital as the most influential attribute requiring immediate improvement, though they had various career paths. This emphasis aligned with prior research findings indicating that Chinese students studying in Malaysian HEPs held human capital in high regard (Sahuri et al. 2022; Zhao et al. 2023), but often grappled with optimising it (Arandas, Ling, and Sannusi 2021; Sulong and Othman 2020; Zhang and Wahab 2022).

This finding is rational, given that Chinese employment requirements traditionally place a significant emphasis on academic qualifications (Xu, Luo, and Tan 2021). As such, Chinese international doctoral students involved in the study were acutely aware of the value of their academic qualifications. Moreover, the participants recognised that academic competence, accompanied by rigorous research competence, was of utmost importance. Employers in China, particularly those seeking to hire highly educated individuals with doctoral degrees, typically prioritise candidates who have a robust research background and possess the ability to foster innovation and contribute to knowledge generation (Xu and Wei 2023). Consequently, the acquisition of technical skills and research expertise during the participants' doctoral studies was viewed as a strategic investment in enhancing their future employability. Furthermore, English proficiency was another critical component of human capital, which aligned with prior research findings indicating that Chinese international students place substantial importance on English proficiency for their professional success (Kiong et al. 2019). This finding was likely attributed to the growing significance of English as a lingua franca in China's labour market within the context of globalisation (He 2020).

With the participants primarily emphasising the significance of human capital in their perception of employability, they attributed its development to various aspects and issues within HE environments. The challenges related to supervision and mentorship played a crucial role in shaping participants' human capital. Many participants voiced concerns about the limited access to their supervisors due to high student-to-supervisor ratios, an issue documented in the literature (Muthukrishnan et al. 2022), which could hinder their ability to fully develop their research skills and subject expertise in Malaysia and prevent them from graduating on time. The dearth of continuous training opportunities also hampered their development of human capital, suggesting that the programme and curriculum design in Malaysian HEPs might not be comprehensive enough and should be adjusted as per student and industry needs (Fadzil et al. 2022; Hoon et al. 2019).

Furthermore, psychological capital emerged as another attribute that participants perceived to be of import in employment. The participants recognised that resilience and motivation garnered substantial attention as essential psychological attributes for employability, emphasising that a strong sense of drive and enthusiasm were key determinants of their potential success in the job market. These attributes were emphasised within Malaysian HEPs (Azmi, Hashim, and Yusoff 2018; Majid et al. 2020;

Nadarajah 2021). Interestingly, some participants' psychological capital seemed to be derived from their experiences of encountering challenges and difficulties during their academic studies and research abroad. This reflection highlighted the transformative role of adversity in building psychological resilience and motivation (Pradhan and Kumar 2021). As such, some participants mentioned the necessity of accessing psychological support in universities as part of the service, which, unfortunately, is not common in Malaysian HEPs (Arifin et al. 2022).

However, the participants' mixed views of social and cultural capital were unexpected. On the one hand, social capital as emphasised by some participants was considered important in employment. This perspective aligned with existing research underscoring the role of social capital in career development, especially in China's relationship-based society, which could facilitate access to job opportunities, collaborations, and support (Wang 2023). Thus, some participants spotlighted the lack of social connections between Malaysia and China and proposed that strong ties with institutions and professionals in China were vital in leveraging their academic qualifications and research skills. This represents an ongoing effort that Malaysian HEPs should aspire to initiate in the long journey ahead (Welch and Postiglione 2020).

On the other hand, the participants who did not highlight social capital might consider it less relevant, possibly due to the perceived limitations of their connections or the belief that their qualifications and skills could compensate for a lack of extensive networks. This was an unexpected finding, since previous research shows that social capital was emphasised by university students in the contexts of both Malaysia (Noah and Aziz 2020) and China (Wang 2023).

Regarding the absence of emphasis on cultural capital in the participants' responses, one contributing factor could be that the students felt their cultural background and adaptability were not significant barriers to employment in China, which was understandable considering previous research findings that human capital might overshadow the other attributes (Xu and Wei 2023; Xu, Luo, and Tan 2021). However, as China's labour market continues its internationalisation process, the lack of focus on cultural capital could potentially lead to misunderstandings or challenges when transitioning to work settings with different cultural norms (Liu, Ling, and Fishtein 2021).

Regardless of which attributes the participants emphasised or did not, the paramount importance of self-awareness and self-reflection, indicators of identity capital and agentic capital, in their prospective employment journeys was acknowledged, pinpointing the crucial role of understanding their unique identity, experiences, and capacity to act as an agent in shaping their professional development (Pham 2023). This introspection, to a large degree, co-ordinated the participants' perceptions and utilisation of other attributes as integral elements in their career preparedness,

prompting their proactive engagement in planned, motivated, and purposeful behaviour aimed at enhancing the realisation of future career goals (Tang 2022).

Despite these insightful findings, the study did have several limitations, which could be addressed in future research to delve into the findings presented above. For instance, the study did not account for the diverse fields of study that the participants were pursuing, nor did it consider the distinctions between various types of HEPs in Malaysia or other factors, such as age, gender, and employment experience. An examination of these factors might yield more nuanced and detailed findings, especially considering the divergent perspectives revealed in previous research (Basir et al. 2022). Additionally, several attributes were not strongly emphasised in the present study, in contrast to findings in other research, creating a potential contradiction in research outcomes. Therefore, future research could delve deeper into these attributes, examining their relevance and significance in the employability and professional development of Chinese doctoral students in Malaysia. Further investigation could also shed light on the factors contributing to these variations in emphasis and potentially uncover additional dimensions of employability that were not fully explored in the current study. Last, due to the qualitative nature of the study, the findings could not be readily generalised to a broader population (Churchill 2021). Hence, future research could take a quantitative approach, potentially assessing the levels of employability and exploring the relationships between different attributes and various aspects of HE among Chinese international students.

Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, the findings of this study illuminated the multifaceted nature of employability perceptions among Chinese doctoral students and their views of the quality of HE in Malaysia, which underscore several key implications for supporting their employability and professional development, particularly from the standpoint of the broader ecosystem, wherein HEPs should assume a proactive and co-ordinating role (Hardin-Ramanan et al. 2020). Firstly, the emphasis on human capital highlights the significance of equipping students with advanced subject knowledge, research skills, and English proficiency, which should be integrated into educational programmes to ensure that curriculums and training opportunities address these critical areas in Malaysian HEPs. Addressing issues related to research supervision is also imperative, as this can significantly impact students' academic and professional development. Moreover, in light of students' desire for psychological support services, Malaysian HEPs must also prioritise the provision of these services to bolster students' resilience and motivation to contribute to the overall well-being and success of Chinese doctoral students during their professional journeys. Furthermore, fostering better communication and collaboration between Malaysian HEPs and institutions in China is crucial for facilitating a smoother transition for students entering the workforce, and establishing strong connections and partnerships can enhance students' social capital and expand their employment opportunities both domestically and internationally.

Lastly, the promotion of a culture of self-reflection should be encouraged, and this involves the engagement of both students and university stakeholders in introspection and self-assessment aimed at fostering personal growth, adaptability, and a deeper understanding of their strengths and areas for development.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Consideration

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

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