

The Identification of Marketing Focused Employability Attributes for Graduates in China

Troy Heffernan, University of Plymouth, UK, troy.heffernan@plymouth.ac.uk

Weizhe Feng, China Agricultural University, China

Robert Angell, University of Plymouth, UK

Yan Fang, China Agricultural University, China

Abstract

The escalation in higher education admissions for university programmes in China has led, unsurprisingly, to a situation where competition for jobs is fierce. At the same time, evidence has suggested that Chinese employers want more from graduates, particularly in terms of employability (Zhang, 2006; Venter, 2003). A key objective of reports such as the 2003-2007 Action Plan in China (State Council, 2004) are to increase the numbers of skilled and employable graduates entering the industry marketplace. However, there have been limited studies in China that explore the concept of employability, particularly in the area of marketing education. Consequently, this study explores and identifies key employability attributes for Chinese marketing graduates from a Chinese employer's perspective. Further, focus groups with Chinese students studying in the UK were undertaken in an attempt to triangulate the findings from Study One. Six employability attributes emerge from the data, representing a small but important first step along the road to the development of a strong theoretical base for employability enhancement of marketing students at Chinese universities.

Keywords: Employability, marketing education, knowledge, skills, China

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Introduction

Governments worldwide are seeing the distinct advantages of training their future workforce to degree-level. This is especially true in China which is actively growing a workforce to operate in the emerging *knowledge economy*. Enrolments at Chinese universities grew from 3.2 million in 1997, to almost 15 million in 2005 (6XueInfo, 2008), with this increase in student enrolment, the subject of *employability* has become a central issue for Government policy makers. It is generally accepted that a highly qualified, flexible, and continuously updated labour force is significantly correlated with a country's economic performance (Knight, 2001). As such, it is widely felt that the responsibility for training employees capable of operating in a global economy falls at the feet of higher education institutions (HEI). The importance afforded to attaining an *employable* nation of workers has therefore been evidenced by the provision of reports such as the 2003-2007 Action Plan in China (State Council, 2004). One key objective of this report is to increase the number of skilled and employable graduates entering the industry marketplace. Agencies such as the Ministry of Education for the People's Republic of China are overseeing this aim. A current concern is that employers are disappointed by the quality of graduates moving into employment. In China it has been reported that employers are satisfied by the academic credentials of their graduates, but are less pleased by the ability of recruits to demonstrate the *key skills* required to successfully move through the business (Zhang, 2006; Venter, 2003).

Within this context, the imperative questions to be answered are: *What enhances a student's employability?* Whilst this question has begun to be addressed in the general context of education in western countries, as of yet, only a small pool of research has been developed that identifies the employability traits of Chinese students, particularly in the more specific field of Marketing. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to generate a list of employability skills important for marketing graduates in China. This is the logical first step in the development of a comprehensive employability strategy for marketing students in the People's Republic of China.

Literature Review

In China, the first university can be traced back to 1306 in the Yuan Dynasty. Guo Zijian was organised to provide the schooling required for the family and friends of government officials, educating them in the areas of Literature and Governance. In more recent times, the first Chinese modern university, Jingshi Grand University (the former Peking University) was founded by the Qing Dynasty in 1898. By adopting the traditional Chinese education with that from Japan, the US and Europe, the university was structured into a Chinese education division, and a western education division. In the early 1920s seven universities were established by the Chinese government and a further sixteen by Christian foundations. The Chinese educational system has continued to experience systematic growth. Modern higher education in China suffered in the Cultural Revolution, led by Mao Zedong, leading to the closure of universities between 1966 and 1976. Higher Education was resumed after 1977 with the economic and social reforms led by Deng Xiaoping. However, until the 1990's, university level education remained a privilege, with only conservative numbers of students admitted onto courses (Shu, 1961; Chen, 1979).

China's expansion of higher education came as a result of increased economic growth in the 1990's. During this period it was realised that the development of higher education should be accelerated to cope with the large demand of human resources entering the 21st century (Mao, 2008). The Chinese government launched the "211" programme to enhance the support for the top 100 universities in terms of funding. A policy for the fast expansion of enrolment numbers was put in place in 1999. Compared with the 1.08 million enrolments in 1998, admissions soared to 1.53 million – a 48 percent increase. Since 1999 exponential growth has continued with a total of 5.99 million new entrants in 2009; more than 5 times than in 1998 (Yuan, 2008). The escalation in higher education admissions for (both undergraduate and postgraduate) programmes in the UK and China has led, unsurprisingly, to a situation where competition for jobs is fierce. At the same time, evidence has suggested that employers want more from the graduates in China (Zhang, 2006; Venter, 2003). The 2003-2007 Action Plan (State Council, 2004) for China's educational system placed emphasis on the improvement of teaching methods and resources in universities. In the fourth of six projects within the action plan, it was stated that educational reforms should drive employment in the graduate sector. Consequently, it is felt that the university system should be the training stage for students making the transition into employment.

The majority of literature pertaining to employability exists in the Western world. This concept dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. At this time, the term was developed predominantly in the USA where it was initially defined in terms of the availability of able bodied workers (de Grip et al, 2004). Over time, this definition has evolved in meaning. Harvey (1999) described employability as "being equipped for a job" (p.98). These notions suggest that employability is more to do with personal qualities than the actual acquisition of employment. At the same time, conceptualisations in the Chinese literature tend to imply the ability to gain satisfactory employment as integral to the definition of employability (Mu, 2006; Fang & Xie, 2006; Zheng et al, 2008). In this regard, it is seen as the capacity of an individual to gain initial employment, maintain employment, and then obtain new employment if required.

In the UK the ESECT report - *Are Your Students Employable*, used the work of Hawkins (1999) and Harvey (1997) to build a 'pool' of employability attributes considered as important to employers of graduate level candidates. A total of fifteen attributes were considered as salient and provide a basic yet useful insight into the components of employability. These are: Team Working; Leadership; Interpersonal skills; Customer orientation; Communication; Foreign Language; Self promotion skills; Networking skills; Problem solving; Action planning; IT Literacy; Flexibility; Numeric skills; Business acumen; Understanding of commercial goals. A number of other groups of employability skills have been proposed from educational institutions around the world; for example in Australia DEST (2002) identified; communication; teamwork; problem-solving; initiative and enterprise; planning and organisation; self-management; learning; technology (DEST, 2006). However, these 'pools' of attributes tend to be generic across all graduates. Consequently, it is timely to access the employability attributes needed by employers of marketing graduates. One study that was conducted identified willingness to learn; interpersonal skills; written communication and problem solving as the four key employability skills for marketing graduates to contain (Gray, Whiten and Knightbridge 2002). However, within the field of marketing little has been undertaken examining employability skills in China.

In the Chinese literature there has been limited discussion identifying the general attributes that represent employability. This is probably because little research has been conducted in the field, and that which does exist tends to define the wider concept inadequately.

Nonetheless, one study by Li, Liu, and Wong (2005) classified 20 personal traits into three distinct categories as shown in Table One.

Table One: Classification of Employability for Graduates (Li et al, 2005)

Inner quality	Deal with work	Social skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Honesty and integrity - Hardworking - Devoted to work - Responsibility - Initiative - Ambition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analyzing and judging - Logic thinking - Problem solving - Independency - Adaptability - Handle change - Learning - Team working 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expression - Leadership - Social activity - Organizing and coordinating - Interpersonal skills - Entrepreneurship

As the above attributes represent general employability it is timely to access the employability attributes needed by employers of marketing graduates in China. With this in mind, the following research question is proposed:

RQ: What are the attributes that will enhance a marketing graduate’s employability in China?

Methodology

In addressing the above research question, a two-stage research strategy was implemented and conducted sequentially to allow for the findings of the first stage to feed into the second. In adopting this approach it was imperative that a rich and broad understanding of the phenomena was analysed. This is especially important in exploratory studies where the goal is to gain insight into unknown areas of the social world (Creswell, 1998); therefore an entirely qualitative approach was applied (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Stage One involved 11 in-depth interviews conducted with employers responsible for recruiting graduate level marketing students into their organisations. Content analysis was performed whereby latent codes were sorted into emerging themes. On completion of the analysis, each emerging employability attribute desired by employers was sorted and placed underneath a wider more general category. These categories represent the employers’ expectations of skills and capabilities of recruits. All but one interview was undertaken by native mandarin speaking Chinese academics. In the second stage, three focus groups were undertaken with Chinese students studying in the UK. The objective of this phase of the research was to ascertain the perceived importance of the employability attributes identified in Stage One and to identify possible teaching strategies that would work in enhancing employability from a student perspective. Quotations from respondents will be weaved through the findings section (shown in *italics*).

Findings

Following the analysis of each of the eleven interviews, six themes or attributes emerged from the data. In many cases, sub-attributes exist within the wider parent attribute – as can be seen below in Table Two.

Table Two: Employability Skills Salient to Chinese Marketing Employers

Dimensions of Employability	Sub-Dimensions (i.e. Attributes)
1. Executive Ability	a. Problem Solving b. Creativity
2. Communication	a. Information collection and analysis b. Persuasive ability c. Information transfer
3. Desirable Persona	a. Reliable b. Trustworthy
4. Working Enterprise	a. Achievement oriented b. Diligence
5. Professional Knowledge	a. External awareness b. Subject knowledge
6. Adaptive Skills	a. Stress management b. Flexibility to change

In a rapidly developing market, fewer opportunities and increased competition mean that companies pursue high rates of growth. This environment requires potential employees to have **Executive Capability**. Elements under this theme include problem solving, creative thinking, and flexibility. An interesting quote that represents this is:

“I like the person who can get things done. We have a popular standard to describe a person: the good cat is the one who can always catch the mice, no matter whether the cat is white or black (Mr. Deng Xiaoping’s popular saying).”

The second employability trait to emerge was **Communication**. Graduates are given large amounts of information and therefore need to communicate effectively for decision making and selling. They also require a high standard of oral and written communication skills for persuasion, client relationship management and forecasting. Market information collection and analysis requires an ability to collect information in both formal and informal channels, and analyse information systematically “*some graduates speak with no points and act with no points too. I believe they don’t know how to find information and find points from that information*”. Further, Chinese social culture attaches a great importance to Guanxi (people connections) and social networks. An excellent graduate is described as being good at looking for connections through different networks composed of different social classes, and one who can persuade the prospective person in an acceptable manner for their social class.

“Talking with clients is a kind of art. I want new staff who can use their mouth for pleasing clients than for eating food. Such ability indeed is a kind of person-to-person Guanxi building, making your client accept your ideas and service comfortably.”

In a rapidly developing market environment a lack of business ethics in manufacturing have caused a number of national problems in China. Marketing managers place a high price on having responsible and trustworthy staff, consequently, this theme relates to the graduates **Desirable Persona**. Two sub themes emerged under this parent attribute; these being

reliability and trustworthiness. The term reliability was considered as someone who can be held accountable to internal work partners as well as external business customers. The trustworthy attribute described by marketing managers is about the ability of post/graduates to build trust among customers.

The fourth theme to emerge from the research was **Working Enterprise**. This relates to the drive of the student. A quote from a Chinese employer highlights this theme: *“They may harvest nothing if he doesn’t have a strong willingness for achievement. For a graduate, to do the marketing, he must have strong desire to win, have passion to work. That is where motivation comes from.”*

All of the marketing managers indicated that experience is more important than theoretical knowledge in the world of marketing. Traditional Chinese higher education arranges only limited field practice opportunities for business students. **Professional Knowledge**, or how the market or industry operates is seen as important to employers of marketing graduates.

As a result of China’s implementation of the family planning policy from early 1980s, more than 90 per cent of current students in education are from single children families. The term “post-80s” is used to describe this generation who grew up in an economically better-off time and are unused to tolerating tough work and living conditions. This is believed by some to have produced a generation less able to deal with stress and change. One area that employers of marketing graduates are looking for, but see as missing are students’ **Adaptive Skills**. Graduates are expected to have appropriate skills in managing their work and life when under pressure for achieving a predetermined sales target.

“In this job (marketing) the first thing you should do when opening your eyes every morning is to count the remaining volumes of sales left incomplete. We like graduates who can smile when they think about it, rather than calling their parents.”

Conclusion

This research project identified six employability attributes important for Chinese marketing students to hold. These were (1) Executive Ability; (2) Communication; (3) Desirable Persona; (4) Working Enterprise; (5) Adaptive Skills; (6) Professional Knowledge. whilst there were some similarities, these findings differed in skill development areas and in the emphasis placed on the development of the skills over the generic ESECT report developed in the UK. Further, in the discipline of marketing, there are some important differences from the findings of Gray et al (2002) which requires further investigation.

In summary, the identification of this list of employability skills allows educationalists in China to design strategies aimed at enhancing these attributes within their marketing graduates. Consequently, this paper is an important first step on the road to the development of student employability in China. However, caution must be taken when reviewing the findings from this paper as the sample size of employers was relatively limited and the study was conducted in and around the Beijing region of China. Notwithstanding this, employability is a concept that is gaining momentum at both Western and Eastern universities, therefore, any attempts to conceptualise and breakdown this concept, particularly industry and culturally specific, can only add to the emerging body of knowledge.

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