

# ***Motivating Chinese Students in UK Higher Education Through Constructivism to Help Improve Their Employability***

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**Abstract:** Many studies have shown the enhancement of competitive advantage is one of the main reasons Chinese students study in the UK, but most of them do not have clear career goals, and the demand of the labour market have become stringent. In this context, Chinese students need to be helped to carefully assess and reflect on their employability during their studies. The Graduate Capital Model, which categorises the skills that graduates need to acquire into five capitals; Constructivism, a theory that promotes student autonomous learning and co-operative learning, has been effective in helping Chinese students to develop a sense of reflection and improved employability. This study explores the importance of employability and Constructivism through a literature review and research comparison; and discusses the combined application of Constructivism and the Graduate Capital Model in practice. To provide Chinese students and UK universities and educators with the opportunity to think more creatively about learning and teaching, rather than continually following previous experiences.

**Keywords:** Employability, Graduate Skills, Constructivism, Graduate Capital Model

## **1. Introduction**

An increasing number of international students, particularly Chinese students, are opting to study in the UK within the current framework of globalised higher education (HE). This phenomenon poses a serious challenge to educators and institutions: not only to impart academic knowledge, but also to train students to acquire relevant skills in their professional fields [1]. The development of individual academic accomplishment in the field of HE is significantly impacted by students' capacity for autonomous learning [2].

According to Zhao and Cox [3], one of the main reasons why Chinese students decide to study in the UK is graduate employability, which is a major goal of HE for a marketized educational system. Overseas educational experience is considered a competitive advantage in the Chinese labour market and is highly valued by employers. Huang and Turner [4] demonstrated that many Chinese students believe that the UK educational experience enhances their competitive advantage. However, in the Chinese labour market environment, many employers have not increased their recruitment quantity in response to the increasing number of graduates with overseas educational experiences [5]. This

phenomenon has instead led employers to critically assess the development and value of candidates' academic and other potential skills. As a result, Chinese students no longer have a clear advantage in the labour market, leading to difficulties in finding suitable positions after graduation. Furthermore, the goal of employability in HE is to get students ready for the uncertainties, changes, and difficulties they might encounter in the process of their employment. The issues raised by Mok and Wu [5] above fall into the category of changes and challenges that students may encounter during their careers. The labour market is dynamic, but students' employability skills should be transferable. Therefore, both local and Chinese students should start their career readiness and career planning to develop their graduate skills while they are still in HE, and not wait until they complete their programmes. At the same time, it becomes crucial to motivate students to enhance their approach to learning.

Among the various learning approaches, constructivism promotes students' autonomy in learning and helps them to create a sense of self-reflection and gain more skills and competencies during HE learning [6]. So far, there are a lot of studies on the application of constructivism in HE and the employability of graduates respectively. However, there are very few studies that combine the two. Therefore, the focus of this research is to illustrate how the theoretical basis of constructivism can be applied in a practical educational setting. And to effectively develop the skills and competencies necessary for students to be employable. Explore the relationship between constructivism and employability and critically analyse it through a literature review and survey research. It provides practical advice to educators and institutions and provides valuable insights into the employment prospects of Chinese students.

## **2. Current Situation of Employability under the UK HE system**

### **2.1. Graduate Employability**

The views and definition of employability have been discussed for many years. Earlier Hillage and Pollard [7] defined graduate employability as the idea that graduates need to be able to show the knowledge, skills and attitudes they have acquired from HE. Harvey [8] argues that employability is a continuous progression that requires the accumulation of new knowledge and experience to increase the possibility of obtaining a position. While Fugate et al. [9] consider that depending on the social environment, employability is more about the development of an individual's talents in combination with the demands of the community or business.

In recent years, researchers have developed a more complicated understanding of graduate employability skills, which encompasses a variety of attributes associated with skills. And, most research has focussed on how to develop and maintain it at the level of a student's potential abilities to ensure long-term career prospects [7], such as soft skills in graduate skills. Soft skills can be a demonstration of communication skills, information, communication technology and cultural skills, as well as related competencies such as creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving that can demonstrate personality, attitudes and behaviours [10]. These soft skills can be seen as a distinct competitive advantage in the labour market. Gruzdev et al. [11] argue that most employers view candidates' soft skills as a potential reflection of their personal qualities and the value they can bring to the organisation in the long term. The increasing pressure on different industries due to intense global competition and rapid technological advances has led to the particular importance of soft skills development in HE.

For Chinese students, Nilsson and Rimmeester [12] argue that international experience and employability are related. In other words, the experience gained during HE studies can be converted into unique personal strengths that can have a positive impact on career development. Similar arguments are made by Tharenou [13], who states that overcoming the difficulties of living and studying abroad enables people to develop greater adaptability and cultural awareness, both of which

can enhance employability. These views mean that Chinese students with international experience can improve their skills and knowledge by improving their social and cultural capital.

## **2.2. Developing graduate employability**

Improving the employability of graduates has become one of the central concerns of many universities around the world. Traditionally, knowledge belonging to the field of HE can be described as hard skills. Criteria for practising, assessing and applying hard skills can be quantitative tests, teacher assessment and the ability to obtain a diploma. However, students may not be aware of the abilities graduates need to succeed in the labour market. For example, graduate qualities, transferable skills, interdisciplinary abilities, soft skills, and general skills [7,14]. These skills are often intangible, latent, and have no objective measurements or requirements. This makes it difficult for students undergoing career readiness to fully reflect on and assess the employability skills they currently possess.

For Chinese students, research by Huang and Turner [4] found that during their international study, they would place more emphasis on enhancing skills that are different from their previous study backgrounds, such as understanding themselves better and developing confidence and flexibility. The findings of this study suggest that whilst these benefits will support them in the future, it is also necessary for universities to support students with employment resources and to strengthen students' qualifications for internships in various organisations. Tran [14] found that research informants from stakeholder groups, including educators, agreed that universities have a responsibility to support the employability of their graduates creatively and enthusiastically.

## **3. Graduate Capital Model**

The Graduate Capital Model established by Tomlinson [15] provides a way of understanding and examining 'how graduates succeed in the labour market'. It creates a space for students to reflect and develop their personal employability during and after HE. There are five types of capital in the model, and they are human capital, social capital, cultural capital, psychological capital and identity capital. All five capitals are dynamic and can influence and overlap each other. This model and the "Employability" previously mentioned have a close connection: Human capital is associated with the consolidation of individual hard skills, while the remaining four capitals are associated with the enhancement of students' soft skills, graduate attributes, cross-curricular skills, and transferable skills, particularly the application of soft skills. This study will utilise this model as a framework for thinking about how individual capitals have been analysed and discussed in other studies, and for exploring how these capitals can enhance the employability of Chinese students.

### **3.1. Human Capital**

Berntson et al. [16] suggest that personal capability development is an example of how human capital is generated. Access to HE, overseas experience and the development of other competencies can enhance graduates' income and promotion opportunities. Furthermore, awareness of employability and career readiness can be influenced by human capital. For example, application of subject knowledge, interpretation of the labour market and appropriate ways of applying for opportunities. Human capital is defined by Tomlinson [15] as the knowledge and abilities graduates gain that support their outcomes in the job market.. This capital is closely linked to students' skills and approaches, representing the application of subject knowledge and concepts, as well as the demonstration of transferable skills relevant to the labour market.

Donald et al. [17] use Becker's Human Capital Theory as the theoretical basis. They investigated the effect of human capital on the self-perception of employability of UK undergraduate students

through a questionnaire. It was found that the development of human capital was positively correlated with college students' self-perceptions of employability. And they believe that different dimensions of human capital can improve college students' self-perception, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence, thus enhancing their employability. In addition, Benati and Fischer's [18] study used the Graduate Capital Model for interviewing graduates about their reflections on their personal internship experiences. In terms of human capital, some students described how personal academic experiences and corporate training contributed to the development of their leadership skills and ultimate career goals of how they could make positive contributions to their communities as professionals. This means that human capital functions as a basis for career readiness for graduates entering the labour market as well as for demonstrating personal values.

### **3.2. Social Capital**

Social capital reflects graduates' interpersonal skills as well as their ability to shape their self-perception. These abilities can help graduates identify opportunities to present themselves, learn about career-related information and resources, and create an effective personal online presence. Social relationships and networks are considered by Tomlinson [15] as the total of social capital. They help graduates to understand and access employment opportunities to mobilise human capital and make them more compatible with the social structure. Furthermore, a study on the effect of social capital on employability was carried out by Benson et al. [19] among business school students at a UK HE institution. They have found that social networks can help individuals gain access to more information and opportunities. The information and opportunities available to students can be categorised into practical resources and emotional support, the accumulation of which is an ongoing process. Thus students are helped to enhance and utilise their employability while gaining access to more resources about the labour market.

### **3.3. Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital requires graduates to understand and demonstrate an understanding of the workplace culture, insights and knowledge that organisations value in order to demonstrate attractiveness to employers [20]. Tomlinson [15] suggested that cultural capital includes knowledge, dispositions and behaviours that are culturally valued in line with the target workplace. This means that the cultural capital of graduates not only adds value to their personal image, but also demonstrates the perception of different cultures and the international labour market.

The review by Kalfa and Taksa [21] emphasises the importance of cultural capital. Firstly, cultural capital helps students to orientate themselves towards their subject area; secondly, transferable skills as cultural capital promote social inclusion; and finally, the perception of cultural capital broadens the perspective of research on the employability of individuals. They also suggest that individual knowledge, dispositions and behaviours can be transferred between domains, but they can have different values. Thus, cultural capital emphasises the importance of the potential capabilities and performance of individuals in cultural capital.

### **3.4. Psychological Capital**

Psychological capital is a psychologically based social resource that provides graduates with a potentially positive mindset to help them transition and adapt to the challenges of moving from university into society [18]. Career adaptability is an assessment of an individual's ability to adapt and respond to changes in the workplace and is essential for graduates [22], which is able to be assessed by psychological capital. Even though they have a strong competitive advantage and professional skills, without resilience graduates struggle to fulfil their work assignments [15].

Therefore, the psychological capital that graduates need to have is the ability to cope with challenges, changes and excesses, manage workplace stress effectively and develop risk plans.

Chen and Lim [23] examined the relationship between psychological capital and employability. The results indicate that psychological capital is a leading variable in enhancing employability skills. It can support individuals to remain optimistic, increase self-confidence and overcome obstacles when looking for a job. Moreover, Baluku et al. [24] identified psychological capital as a key resource for students to engage in their careers, enhancing their perceptions of employability. The cognitive resources constructed by psychological capital are crucial in this process, and students can engage in some vocational learning during HE. This can develop their psychological perceptions and, adaptability as well as resilience in specific vocational environments.

### 3.5. Identity Capital

According to Tomlinson [15], identity capital as the level of personal investment graduates make to advance their future employability and careers. In simple terms, graduates first need to identify their skills, characteristics and experience and then assess areas for improvement. Self-assessment can be based on self-values and career motivation as a basis for determining whether there are suitable careers and opportunities for oneself, or for choosing a more defined position [25]. Furthermore, The concepts and self-perceptions students develop based on their future careers can lead them to a complete career readiness experience [15]. This means that identity capital is a process of self-reflection that graduates undertake from the outset of their higher education studies, assessing their own progress and learning and building more experience for them. In addition, Mao and Shen [25] suggest that identity capital originates from an individual's family background and social context, whereas other capitals are usually accessible as resources or abilities that individuals possess. Individuals have little control over the quality of their identity capital. Therefore, students still need more external help to make improvements to their identity capital.

## 4. Constructivism

Constructivism is a synthesis of several theories and its position that learning is a process of constructing meaning, which is how people autonomously construct their understanding of knowledge through their experiences and social interactions [26]. Therefore, constructivism describes how students comprehend and use learning resources and concentrates on methods of thinking and learning. Teachers should take constructivism into account while assessing students' knowledge and give them opportunities to use it. O'Connor [6] suggests that constructivism theory is becoming more prominent in the discussion of HE is teaching and learning. Many educators believe that teaching cannot be too focused on the content itself that students need to be allowed to centre their knowledge construction, and that learning is active rather than passive.

Dewey's Constructivism criticises traditional education as passive and negative learning and emphasises students' autonomous learning for practical, experiential learning and problem-solving [26]. Students receive knowledge from teachers, which is information and skills shaped by past standards and rules of behaviour. According to these principles, Pardjono [27] concluded that the nature of active learning consists of three aspects: the nature of knowledge, learning, and teaching. Amineh and Asl [26] support the idea of autonomous learning and they realise that Dewey sees autonomous learning as being carried out by students through personal experience rather than knowledge and skills gained from academic texts. This way of learning allows students to transform what they currently learn into experiences in mental activities that promote understanding and action on future knowledge. And, thinking is reconstructed as a result of an individual's contact with their surroundings.



In addition, Vygotsky's Constructivism emphasises learning as a social process in which individuals actively construct knowledge through interactions with others and their cultural environment [27]. According to Vygotsky, cognitive development can happen within an individual but only after it has taken place at the social level. In order to enhance their comprehension and knowledge construction skills on a social level, students would benefit from establishing a connection with their surroundings [28]. This means that the source of a learner's knowledge is found in social interactions with those around them.

A widely used model in Vygotsky's Constructivism theory is Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD is defined by Vygotsky [28] as the difference between an individual's actual level of development as assessed by autonomous problem-solving and their potential level of development as assessed by working with peers who are more knowledgeable or solving problems under an adult's guidance. In the field of HE, Wass et al.'s [29] empirical study proved that ZPD encourages students to collaborate actively and stimulates more potential. Although the limitation of this study is that teamwork did not significantly enhance students' critical thinking, students can use the critical thinking they obtained to integrate ideas and use perspectives in new learning situations. Therefore, ZPD emphasises the importance and significance of individual interaction in society; for the individual, ZPD provides learners with a moderate learning challenge and a zone of learning balance that encourages motivation and engagement in the process of student autonomy.

## 5. Discussion

The above-mentioned Literature Review section provides a conceptual and theoretical description of employability, the Graduate Capital Model, and constructivism. In the discussion section, this study will focus on the Graduate Capital Model, breaking down each of these capitals and analysing how it can help Chinese students to effectively improve their employability in the context of HE in the UK from a constructivist perspective.

### 5.1. Human Capital

In terms of human capital, Chinese students often lack classroom engagement and motivation [3]. This can lead to lost opportunities for them to improve their English communication and understand the context of UK education. Therefore, Chinese students should have a sense of active participation in the classroom, such as in class discussions, case studies, problem-solving and other related activities. Such activities are usually done in the form of group work, which not only develops Chinese students' English application skills, but also teamwork, communication skills, and a sense of corporate honour [28,29]. During active participation in the classroom, students are advised to relate their theoretical knowledge to the current learning environment. In actively participating in the classroom, students are advised to relate theoretical knowledge to their experiences in the Chinese education system. Akanwa [30] found that many British professors are very willing to listen to the ideas of Chinese students in their lectures, which they see as having a positive effect on improving personal insights and achieving an inclusive classroom. Therefore, Chinese students need to release their anxieties and worries about participating in the classroom and complete their studies with a positive and active mindset.

### 5.2. Social Capital

Chinese students can make use of the career guidance platform provided by their schools and attend some professional development seminars. This can prompt the importance of career readiness for Chinese students. Reviewing learning experiences, taking advice from professionals, practical exercises and interactions help to improve social skills [19]. Similarly, students can also seek the help

of personal tutors, which are assigned to each student at most UK universities. Chinese students can also actively engage in groups and extracurricular activities that attract their interest, which provides an opportunity for students to share their experiences, build friendships, and present personal image. This approach also establishes cultural exchange opportunities for Chinese students. Students from different backgrounds are supported and encouraged to interact with each other in those activities, which promotes cross-cultural exchange while expanding students' online socialisation. Chinese students are able to draw on the perspectives of different cultures to gain new inspiration and motivation for their development.

### **5.3. Cultural Capital**

In a similar way to the human capital mentioned above, Chinese students receive different cultures and perspectives when they participate in UK educational programmes. Chinese students should take advantage of the opportunities for interaction and collaborative learning with tutors and other students in the classroom to develop an understanding and appreciation of different cultural backgrounds. In addition, Chinese students should be encouraged to explore and analyse different aspects of culture, including art, history and social standards [31]. Chinese students can begin by conducting independent research, such as looking up information online and visiting local museums and cultural institutions. Then discussing their observations with local students and professors can help develop their cultural experience while enhancing critical thinking.

### **5.4. Psychological Capital**

At the school level, teachers should create a positive and inclusive classroom climate where Chinese students feel supported and encouraged in their new learning environment, and incorporate problem-solving and receiving feedback into the classroom. At the personal level, Chinese students should take personal mental health issues seriously. Studying in the UK is a new challenge, including listening, communicating in a non-native language, completing assignments, and working in groups, and adapting to a new living and learning environment. Therefore, Chinese students should try to integrate life and academic skills, which include time management, resilience, self-efficacy, and coping strategies to ensure that they are equipped to deal with these challenges [24]. Alternatively, Chinese students can access psychological counselling services from schools and local communities to address potential psychological problems. Based on Constructivism, Chinese students should set achievable academic goals and regular reflection on behaviour and academic achievement [26]. This can help them strengthen their motivation, timely monitoring and improving personal weaknesses. Collaborative learning promotes connections with peers and a shared sense of achievement while enhancing Chinese students' sense of support.

### **5.5. Identity Capital**

Firstly, Chinese students should begin to reflect on their positioning, competitive advantages and experiences. They can use these opportunities to develop and enhance identity capital in their daily learning and classroom engagement. For example, sharing how personal experiences and cultural backgrounds have influenced oneself, reflecting on one's strengths and weaknesses in activities, and summarising existing personal resources and how they match one's career goals [25]. In addition, Chinese students need to assess personal learning, and analyse and reflect on their personal match with labour market needs. From a constructivist perspective, Chinese students can seek professional help, such as looking for career planning organisations to help them clarify their goals and room for progress, and building a CV with a clear personal identity under professional guidance. Therefore, these approaches can help Chinese students build their best career strategy based on identity capital.

## 6. Conclusion

After understanding the situation related to the employment situation of Chinese students studying in HE in the UK, this study found that there it is necessary to enhance their employability. The analysis of graduate employability reveals that the Graduate Capital Model is applicable to the transition of graduates from the HE period to the labour market. Students should self-reflect and assess whether their personal employability is able to meet the demands of the career target market. This study also highlights the positive impact of autonomous learning and co-operative learning in Constructivism and ZPD on the way students learn and think. The discussion section analyses the combination of Constructivism and the Graduate Capital Model to provide a pattern to enhance different types of Graduate Capital for Chinese students. There are interactions between each capital, but each has its own characteristics. Constructivism can therefore be used to motivate Chinese students' awareness of their employability readiness as well as to advise them on its practical application. At the same time, this combination analysis (Constructivism and Graduate Capital Model) can also provide reference value to UK HE organisations and educators to help them better create inclusive classrooms in the context of interacting with large numbers of Chinese students.

However, this study has some limitations. Firstly, this combination analysis has not been applied in practice, so its validity has not been confirmed. Secondly, it is difficult to assess students on a standardised basis when they are applying the Graduate Capital Model as many of the skills are subjective and implicit. Furthermore, the main source of motivation for the application of combination analysis is the individual student's willingness to engage in autonomous learning. This does not guarantee that each student will have a continuous, long-lasting motivation to learn. Therefore, the outputs of this study need to be subjected to more empirical research and critical analysis to provide a detailed assessment of their validity and value implications.

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