

INTERNATIONALISATION OF BUSINESS EDUCATION: EXAMINING EMPLOYABILITY SKILL DIMENSIONS AND JOB FIT IN CHINA

Abstract: Developing an internationally competitive managerial workforce is indispensable for leading in a global business environment. This study recognises the important technical and business skills and personal attributes necessary to support the 'employability' of undergraduate business students in China. The employers (n=69) and undergraduate business students (n=281) were surveyed regarding their perceptions on the importance of certain general business and technical skills and personal attributes which contribute to employability of the students in the industries in China. The analysis of data indicates that significant differences were shown to exist between students and employers in their perceptions of each of the three 'employability' support fields. Results also suggest the overall importance of establishing a platform for the career advancement of graduates. Based on the findings, specific implications related to employers, students and educational institutions were identified. The study offers new insights into the concept of employability by reclamation of the value of skills and personal attributes required at work place. The paper addresses a foundation to support the 'job-readiness' and 'employability' of business graduates as well as the development of industry-relevant international business programs to improve the 'employability' of business graduates.

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INTRODUCTION

As a new century unfolds, many educational programmes covering business and commerce find that graduate ‘employability’ (Harvey, 2001; van der Heijden, 2002; Davis 2004; Cox and King 2006, Prestwich and Hokim, 2009, Arsenault and Stevenson, 2013) is an important marketing tool. Nevertheless, whether a fresh-faced graduate is ‘job-ready’ (Peck and Theodore, 2000) and in this sense perceived as ‘employable’, will be contingent on two critical concerns. First, the extent to which graduates have been exposed to and developed in the necessary and appropriate ‘business and technical skills’, and also whether they possess the necessary ‘personal attributes’ to be of value to prospective employers. Second, whether employers have established appropriate ‘work environments’, including a supportive ‘organisational culture’ that sustains an effective ‘employment system’ viz., the psychological contract when graduates join a business organisation (Hendry, 2003: 1430 – 1442). In other words the work environment matches the recruitment rhetoric and in so doing, provides a platform for the career advancement of graduates.

It is insufficient to expect that simply enhancing the appropriate ‘business and technical skills’ and ‘personal attributes’ have been attended to via any particular formal learning opportunity. An environment that supports effective development is also required. In many instances conflicting messages from both institutions of higher learning and industry, based on the potentially conflicting objectives of both, for example educational institutions need to turn out a well

rounded graduate versus industries needs for specific skills can create inherent difficulties for all concerned.

In some attempt to address this dilemma, changes and modifications to curricula will be made by institutions of learning, but not always to suit and satisfy the ‘skills’ and ‘personal attribute’ needs of both graduates and employers. In other instances, employers offer graduate employment and development programmes in an attempt to obtain or build the wherewithal needed because it was lacking when graduates were first recruited. In other instances, those seeking business qualifications may seek alternative sources of skill development other than university programmes (e.g. those offered by professional bodies).

Given that university learning and development programmes are designed to assist the availability and ‘employability’ of newly created graduates; there is increasing evidence that both the academic community; and industry, are aware of each other’s perspectives regarding more specific ‘business and technical skills’ and the ‘personal attributes’ increasingly demanded by organisations (McFadden, Jansen and Towell, 1999; Junghagen, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Yorke and Harvey, 2005). Nevertheless, Rynes, Trank, Lawson and Ilies (2003) note that such consultation does not always address important behavioural attributes required for effective performance in the early stages of a graduate’s business life. An element which business is increasingly calling for in university graduates (Yorke and Harvey, 2005).

Junghagen (2005: 69) supports by arguing that; *“institutions benefit from working directly with employers to adjust their curricula and qualifications frameworks to ensure student success in labour markets”*. In addition Yorke and Harvey (2005: 41) argue that, *“alignment of higher education with workforce needs should be based on careful action by institutions to embed skills and attributes within instructional programs.”*

Hence, in coming to terms with the ‘business and technical skills’ and ‘personal attribute’ needs of graduates, this research embarked on an industry-based project to identify the ‘business and technical skills’ needs and ‘personal attribute’ needs of graduates for industry in China.

China faces a critical shortage: experienced, highly skilled managers. The numbers are astounding. The country has some 25,000 state companies, 4.3 million private firms and massive industrial overcapacity. But it has too few experienced managers for even the elite firms. It is estimated that even the relatively small number of Chinese companies trying to expand abroad will need up to 75,000 internationally experienced leaders if they want to continue to grow over the next 10 to 15 years (Schafer, 2005). It is in this context, that a study on graduate ‘employability’ was considered imperative.

The researchers undertook a process of consultation with industry (and their students) with the objective that business graduates might possess the appropriate ‘business and technical skills’, and ‘personal attributes’; that would enhance their ‘employability’ at the point of graduation. Three further objectives were also seen to be important. First; to assist universities, to establish an appropriate business curriculum; regarding the needs of industry, and graduate employability. Second, to assist university graduates to make a meaningful contribution to the development upon graduation. Finally, for university graduates to commence their careers in China on a sound footing that would support ongoing learning and development. The study reported in this paper provides coverage of the results of the process pursued.

Literature Review

Historically, several works suggest that institutions teaching business and commerce type courses have failed to address such ‘skills’ and ‘personal attributes’ and thus by implication have failed to effectively attend to the ‘employability’ of their graduates.

Rynes, et al. (2003: 269) have argued that; “*business recruiters generally report seeking to hire well-rounded students who have not only technical knowledge and skills, but also behavioural ones*”. Importantly, both ‘skills’ and ‘personal attributes’ are likely to compliment each other in supporting the graduate in coping with new workplace experiences when joining an organisation for the first time, and hence being perceived as ‘employable’.

Indeed institutions of higher learning that teach business or commerce programs have correctly aimed to prepare highly-skilled and professional graduates for responsible positions following graduation and to help sustain ongoing careers. Van der Heijden (2002: 44-61) writes of this issue as the need to develop and enhance a person’s knowledge, expertise and hence ‘employability’ over the life of their career. Indeed such an objective motivated the Copenhagen Business School to undertake a significant review of the curriculum of its Masters degrees (M.Sc & M.A) and how the investigation process might lead to the improved ‘*employability*’ of their students upon graduation (Junghagen, 2005).

Nevertheless, mixed messages as to a person’s ‘employability’ are according to Harvey, (2001) all too evident. Harvey (2001) suggests that this is based on confusion associated with various definitions of ‘employability’. In other respects it can be apportioned to mixed messages as to what businesses actually seek in graduates during recruitment campaigns and what institutions of higher learning say they have actually produced.

Indeed a graduate’s ‘employability’ would also go to what Hendry (2003: 1432) suggests as the reality of organisational practice, in that “*...we should expect to find employment managed in*

different ways, and this will be justified by the fact that firms face different conditions....” As a consequence, different ‘skills’ and different ‘personal attributes’ are likely to be called for at any stage of the employment relationship, not least of all at the graduate recruitment stage.

Integral to any expectations are the outcomes of various interfaces that have taken place in reviewing business and commerce degree programs. As Junghagen (2005: 80-81) has pointed out, *“curriculum development should not be in one direction...a two way dialogue is crucial.”* Nevertheless; pursuing a two-way process, maybe insufficient. It is, therefore, important for all groups to foster relationships and to develop open lines of communication for successful education design and operation (Graf, 1997; Gabric and McFadden, 2000; Junghagen, 2005; Harvey, 2005 and Yorke and Harvey; 2005). Hence communication needs to flow at three levels. First, between the academic community and business. Second, between the academic community and students. Finally; between business, and students.

Through more open lines of communication, the ‘skill’ and ‘personal attribute’ needs of graduates, organisations and society as a whole can be determined and better understood. Information obtained can then be employed to redesign and manage educational programs; and learning experiences more generally can be attuned to required needs, which support graduate ‘job-readiness’ and ‘employability’ For example Junghagen (2005: 73) maintains,

“...it is an important role of a business school...to not only follow trends and developments in industry but also to function as an actor taking part in driving and stimulating this development. At the same time, continuous input from industry is essential to define future practice...”

In this respect, a number of studies have focused on identifying educational gaps viz., academic and business expectations regarding the necessary ‘skills’ and ‘personal attributes’ required of graduates to achieve ‘employability’ (Gelsdorf, 1986; Levenburge, 1996; McFadden, Jansen, and Towell, 1999 and Junghagen, 2005) and thus assist graduates to be ‘job-ready’. Nevertheless, it is rare that students have been included in such processes. Broadly, these studies concluded that the academic community needs to understand what the business community wants of their graduates, and attempt to design and redesign their curricula to meet identified needs.

Also; studies to identify the ‘skills’ and ‘personal attributes’, that employers’ value in graduates, have been undertaken (Hakel and Schuh, 1971; Powell and Posner, 1983; Atkins and Kent, 1988; Kanungo and Misra, 1992; Maes, Weldy and Icengogle, 1997; Yorke, 2004; and Yorke and Harvey, 2005). Whilst from simply the ‘personal attributes’ perspective; Harvey (2005: 14) notes, that employers want, *“intelligent, flexible, adaptable employees who are quick to learn”*.

Whilst these are laudable expectations, the terms in themselves may be seen as a little too vague and possibly a little too difficult to measure in terms of specific industry or organisational needs. Hence, van der Heijden’s (2002) concerns as to the vagueness of the concept mentioned earlier. In this respect, what is flexible to one organisation’s needs may not be so to another. This is particularly so when measuring such concepts amongst people from different strata of society (e.g. graduates on the one hand and employers on the other), from different cultural groups; and with different values. Nevertheless; Harvey (2005) notes, graduates (on the whole) are more likely to meet such expectations than non-graduates.

Awareness goes beyond simply a technical level. Indeed, possessing ‘skills’ associated with having what is needed to perform effectively is fine up to a point. What would seem more important however; is having the ‘skills’, and the ‘personal attributes’ to know how to find out what is needed (Hendry, 2003; Harvey, 2005; Junghagen, 2005). In this respect, if a university

qualification achieves nothing else, it should have taught graduates how to think and hopefully to think in and across different contextual circumstances.

Some research also indicates that undergraduate programs should concentrate on business-oriented content instead of quantitative skills (Behrman and Levin, 1984; Buckley, Peach and Weitzel, 1989; Levenburge, 1996). Other studies suggest that business programs lack focus on various technical skills, such as management information systems (Berry and Lancaster, 1992; Mueller and Ma (1999). McFadden, Jansen, and Towell (1999) also indicate that business programs have been placing greater emphasis on the use of computer-based tools; the implication being that business schools must build stronger management information systems (MIS) skills into their curriculum. If outcomes are to have any meaning, the ‘deliverables’ must meet different levels of expectations as noted earlier; industry, graduates, the learning institution and the broader community or society.

More specifically though, in a further study of Fortune 500 companies Martell and Carroll (1994) noted that managers stated, that although the technical skill requirements needed for a position differed across functional areas, ‘*general business skills*’ and ‘*personal attributes*’ were the same across all functional areas. In another study; Drake, Kaplan, and Stone (1972) found that motivation/ambition were the most important attributes sought by employers. Whilst Maes, Weldy and Icengogle (1997) found that oral communication skills were more important to employers than written communication skills.

Hand in glove with this is the need for institutions teaching business and commerce courses to; and certainly more convincingly than in the past, demonstrate both the effectiveness and the efficiency of what they produce. Different and more innovative curricula and learning strategies than has hitherto been the case are likely to be needed to achieve this. Whilst course content and teaching methods, may have been adequate in the past, new teaching and learning strategies will no doubt be needed to cater for the changing needs of the business world; not to mention the changing needs and expectations of students regarding their ongoing life-styles and careers.

Hence, new pedagogical repertoires must be developed if business schools are to remain useful if not distinctive courses. Nevertheless, Yorke and Harvey (2005: 42) in identifying skills, abilities and personal attributes required for graduate employability note that;

“Research over the last quarter of a century has shown a remarkable level of agreement in what employers want, despite each individual organisation having its own specific requirements.”

Whilst there is a need for institutions that teach business and commerce courses to rediscover their role and re-engineer themselves there is evidence (Junghagen, 2005; Harvey, 2005) that this is occurring. However, given the emphasis on outputs and usefulness, institutions teaching business and commerce must satisfy a greater requirement: i.e. they must aim to develop more knowledgeable and competent graduates (Peach and Weitzel, 1989; Yorke and Harvey, 2005). Thus institutions teaching business and commerce, must aim to deliver value to their graduates so their graduates are recognized as having more informed understandings and thus effective competence, and logically *‘employability’*. In this respect; institutions teaching business and commerce, must engage in interactive processes, not simply Socratic teaching and not only the delivery of information (Gelsdorf, 1986; Yorke, 2004).

The relevant factor for institutions teaching business and commerce is to produce marketable, competent and quality graduates. As noted this relates to identifying industry needs (Peach, and Weitzel, 1989). Equally, as van der Heijden (2002: 45) points out *“...as individuals continue in their career, their knowledge and skills become increasingly differentiated and specialized.”* To support such an approach there is a need to acknowledge the skills associated with the personal learning and development process itself. Such needs to be developed during one’s university life. Of equal importance is to understand how such skills are transferred into and sustained during one’s professional life. In this respect how institutions ultimately enhance expertise and support

the enhancement a person's career will be contingent on how well institutions of learning have developed in their graduates an awareness as to their own future development, and how this might take place. Failure to do so may mean that, for many businesses, and individuals their ongoing skill and knowledge needs may not be adequately addressed. This may well compromise the business development; and in addition, business graduates may face difficulties in not only finding employment upon graduation; but failing to sustain and enhance employment in the long term. To the extent then that institutions teaching business and commerce recognize and effectively address industry skill and knowledge needs; and assist in developing the personal attributes needed by graduates, will substantially determine the 'employability' of its graduates in the longer term.

Nevertheless, Hendry (2003) makes the very sobering observation as to the potential difficulty of this. That is, it is only natural that different organisations will seek different learning and skill outcomes at different times, because their strategies and processes; put simply, are different. As a consequence there are likely to be inherent differences in expectations across the three key groups. As a result institutions of higher learning can find themselves in a dilemma as to which 'employability master' they serve.

Nevertheless, no amount of government investment in the enhancement of 'skills' and 'personal attributes' will correct 'employability' problems if institutions of higher learning and business organisations fail to communicate with each other with respect to the 'skills' and 'personal attributes' required at graduation.

In addition, how the information gained can be better employed in the design and operation of various types of learning programs also needs to be considered. In this respect it is not simply graduates who might be perceived as needing the wherewithal and motivation for 'employability' resulting from poor education and/or poor access opportunities. The unemployed generally are likely in the same boat. In addition, those who are perceived to have the wherewithal; i.e., graduates simply because they have completed a structured program of learning may also need

attention. In this respect there is more to the notion of ‘employability’ than simply having participated in particular types of learning programs at particular points in time irrespective of the length and type of program, and which institution of higher learning might have conducted them.

In coming to terms with what ‘employability’ might actually mean then; Harvey (2005: 13–14) notes that the ‘*Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team*’ (*ESECT*) in the UK considered ‘employability’ in quite broad terms as,

“...a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.”

Nevertheless, Harvey (2005: 13) goes on to note that;

“...employability is not just about getting a job; it is about developing attributes, techniques, or experiences for life. It is about learning, and the emphasis is less on ‘employ’ and more on ‘ability’.”

This of course implies the need to understand the necessary, ‘skills’, and ‘personal attributes’ needed at the point of graduation in order to be in a position to come to the attention of ‘desirable’ employers at a critical stage in a person’s career. In this respect, the *ESECT* definition (Harvey, 2005) has guided this research in dividing the necessary elements associated with ‘skills’ and ‘personal attributes’ required of business graduates to obtain and sustain ‘employability’ within the China background. A major shortcoming of the majority of prior studies is that the bulk of research in employability has addressed in the developed countries

context. There is a scant or little research available on employability of students in Chinese context. The purpose of this study was to use confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modelling (SEM) to systematically identify plausible evaluation factors and further test the major relationship between variables. SEM improves reliability or the degree to which a measure is error free.

It is evident that the 'skills' and 'personal attributes' possessed by graduates and those required by the business community are likely to differ. Understanding the 'general business and technical skills' and 'personal attributes' possessed by graduating students of Chinese universities; with those required by industry in China, is one objective of the study. As noted earlier understanding this will assist universities in designing appropriate curricula and assisting the 'employability' of their graduates. Therefore, in order to fulfil these objectives, the study reported in this paper has been carried out to identify the key 'general business and technical skills' and 'personal attributes' required of Chinese graduates such that they are 'job-ready' and perceived as 'employable' within and outside the Chinese business environment. The following research questions are listed to provide specific direction for the research:

Q₁ how students and employers differ in their perceptions of needed business skills?

Q₂ how students and employers differ in their perceptions of needed technical skills?

Q₃ how students and employers differ in their perceptions of needed personal attributes?

Research Method

Research Instrument

A questionnaire was developed for this study based on the ‘skills’ and ‘personal attributes’ identified by Levenburge (1996) and Maes, Weldy and Icengogle (1997). They form the basis of the current questionnaire due to their previous successful use and wide range of items used in the context of student ‘employability’. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. Part one sought demographic information from respondents. Part two comprised three sections namely: (i) general business skills (12 skills), (ii) technical skills (24 skills), and (iii) personal attributes (22 attributes). Respondents were asked to indicate the importance of having graduates with general business and technical skills and particular personal attributes on three separate 5-point Likert scales, whereby 5 = high importance; 3 = medium importance; and 1 = low importance.

Sampling and Data Collection Procedure

To address the research objectives, two groups of respondents were identified, namely: (i) employers of business graduates in China and (ii) current business studies students in China. A total of 100 potential employers of business graduates from China were identified through the China Chamber of Commerce, Beijing. Questionnaires were delivered to the Human Resource Manager at each organisation as the researchers felt they were in a better position to comment upon the skills and attribute needs of the business that would be required in their organizations vis., graduates. A total of 71 questionnaires were returned, out of which 69 questionnaires were usable. Major industries represented in the population were transportation, consumer products, financial services, manufacturing, consultancy services, retail, food services and others. The two main demographic features identified were size of organization and the type of industry they operate in. It can be seen that the majority were from manufacturing industries and consumer products, with 36% and 22% of the responses respectively. From an assessment of organizational size, it is observed that 59% were from those with less than 200 employees, followed by 22% from those with 201–400 employees. The response rate from those with over 400 employees was

19%. A similar questionnaire was also developed for graduating business studies students in four Chinese Universities and covered the same (i) general business skills, (ii) technical skills and (iii) personal attributes as those in the employer's questionnaire.

A sample of 100 students in each of the four universities in China undergoing degree programs at the time of the study. The questionnaires were distributed to all students. Of 400 respondents, 375 questionnaires were returned, however, out of which 281 were usable. This yielded a response rate of 70%. As much as 99 % of the respondents were in the age group 20 -24 years and the remainder was over 25 years, and 62% / 38% gender split in favour of females. Also 83% had no experience in job training and 17% had experienced some form of job internship training.

Results

A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to assess the distinctiveness of the measures. LISREL 8.80 (Joreskog and Sorbom, 1996) was employed to evaluate the fit of the measurement model, and to examine the relationship between employability and business skills, technical skills and personal attributes using the sample covariance as the input.

The correlation matrix of Likert-scaled items relating to '*business and technical skills and personal attributes*' was examined, to determine if any related concepts in line with the main issue of *employability* were available. An orthogonal (uncorrelated) rotation was performed on the three factors of the study for both students and employers sample group whose Eigen values were greater than one. Tables 1 and 2 present the three orthogonal factors for students and employers respectively, their subjective interpretations, the factor loadings of variables on each of these factors and their respective reliability coefficients and the Eigen values.

As can be seen from tables 3 and 4, the three factors correlate highly with their own identical and specific questions related to each group. All six factors (employers and students) have reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) variables well above the recommended level of 0.50 and 0.60 as indicated by (Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black, 2006). Further, in comparison to what is deemed acceptable, each factor has a coefficient variable above the recommended level. The total scale coefficients also reflect a relatively high score in both sets of results.

Estimation of the Base Model

In extending from a theoretical to a statistical model, a structural equation model was developed and conducted in two sequences (Joreskog, 1993). First by estimating the multidimensional base models associated with business skills, technical skills and personal attributes for both employers and students. Secondly; the convergent validity of the indicators of both models, which consist of the significant pathways that emerged from the first step was estimated. An analysis is attempted to estimate the base models concurrently for both employers and students. The estimated models assumed that the exogenous variables linked to the employability contributed to each of the endogenous variables. The model also assumed reciprocal relations between the latent (endogenous) variables themselves (Horn 1991 and Hu and Bentler, 1998).

The confirmatory use of structural equation modeling allows for a statistical test of the goodness-of-fit for the proposed three-factor solution for both student and employer groups. Also, confirmatory factor analysis rectifies for the attenuation in the relationships between constructs due to measurement error. LISREL 8.80 provides a X^2 statistic (and associated degrees of freedom), a goodness-of-fit index (GFI), an adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI) and the Root Mean Square Residual (RMSR), and The Root Mean Square Error Approximation (RMSEA) for the estimated model.

Model Fit

Results of the model fit are shown in Tables 3 and 4. The output was examined for common anomalies such as negative error variances, extremely large parameter estimates, etc. No such anomalies were identified. Based on the overall goodness-of-fit statistics, the three-factor model for employability of students as perceived by the employers yielded satisfactory fit statistics (i.e. $X^2 = 43.5$, $df = 27$, $p = 0.000$, $RMR = 0.032$, $RMSEA = .067$, $GFI = 0.96$, $CFI = 0.97$, $NFI = 0.96$), again indicating that the reproduced correlation nearly equals the observed correlations in the model (Bagozzi and Yi; 1988). Similarly, the three-factor model for employability for students as perceived by the students also yielded a satisfactory fit (i.e. $X^2 = 249.5$, $df = 18$, $p = 0.000$, $RMR = 0.024$, $RMSEA = .072$; $GFI = 0.88$, $CFI = 0.97$, $NFI = 0.92$), indicating that the reproduced correlation nearly equals the observed correlations in the model (Bagozzi and Yi; 1988).

Discussion

The present study identified a number of factors directly and indirectly associated with employability of students in Chinese organisations. The findings from this study appear to confirm, clarify and extend the findings of previous research in this area, thus making a contribution towards future research and organizational intervention.

In general, results of the study on the employability of graduates in universities in China suggest that students and employers differ only as to the level of agreement of various skills and personal attributes required for effective 'employability' in the Chinese workplace following graduation. In many respects students from an employers' perspective are not in Peck and Theodores' (2000) terms '*job-ready*', viz., possessing the appropriate '*skills*' and '*personal attributes*', as they fall short of expectations in a number of areas. This survey shows very interesting differences as to the perceptions of the students and employers on both skill

inventories and also as to personal attributes. In addition to the general findings discussed above, some specific findings arise out of this study. Firstly, students consider that Negotiation is an important Business skill for employment in Chinese organisations. Employers think that business law, internet marketing, international HRM, statistical analysis are important Technical skills. Whereas students consider economic policy, marketing research, data base management, management accounting are the important technical skills. Employers perceive that creative, motivated and controversial are the important personal attributes. Whilst students consider risk taking, cautious, confident, flexibility are the important personal attributes.

Overall; student respondents tended to favour 'general business skills', more-so than 'technical skills' and 'personal attributes' (where they expressed very little if any difference as to how they perceived their personal marketability in gaining employment following graduation. Similarly, employers also tended to favour the need for 'general business skills', but somewhat differently to the students, employers favoured the need for 'personal attributes' over 'technical skills'.

This might suggest that whilst employers are generally satisfied with the skill levels of graduates at a technical level following graduation; employers are concerned that graduates (and/or the universities that teach and help to develop them) are not appropriately attending to the development of the 'general business skills' and 'personal attributes' necessary for effective on-job performance following graduation. In this respect, graduates are not 'job-ready' (Peck and Theodore, 2000) in the eyes of employers.

Further, and as noted above the overall findings fit well with Harvey (2005). The results also corroborate those from the study by Mason, Williams, Cranmer and Guile (2003) who examined the perceptions of 247 recently appointed graduates and 210 of their line managers regarding the match between graduates' achievements and line managers' expectations of them on entry to the work environment. Similarly the results of the study were consistent with the findings of Knight and Yorke (2004) who developed an 'employability' model by expounding four broad and

interlinking components: (i) understanding of the subject, (ii) skilful practices in context, (iii) efficacy beliefs, and (iv) metacognition.

An important contribution of this paper is the extent to which as noted above the findings from this research reflect other similar studies in quite different cultural and economic situations. Nevertheless, the results do highlight the ‘boundary tensions’ (Hendry, 2003) that can exist in employment relationships and hence suggests that different employment relationship interchanges need to be considered. For example, the need for employers to strive for greater awareness as to what graduates can realistically undertake upon graduation. That is, having performance expectations that are too high at the point of employment suggests that maybe businesses are attempting to abdicate their responsibilities associated with offering appropriate training and development opportunities for newly recruited graduates, expecting that universities have handled this for them. Equally, students might need to be more realistic as to the skills, personal attributes and experiences they can achieve prior to joining employment for the first time. It is here that possibly universities can play their most important role through flushing out agendas, bringing students and employers together and facilitating better understanding between what the students are capable of offering and what the employers might expect of them at the point of employment. In this universities possibly need to reflect a more informed understanding of the environment into their graduates will venture. When considering these findings, it is important to bear in mind some important limitations of the present study. In common with most postal surveys, the issue of sampling arises. The asymmetrical response rates from two groups of samples, impeded the convergence of a unified model of employability

Research Implications

An important objective of this study was to assess differences in students’ and employers’ perceptions of marketable skills upon graduation. As only four educational institutions were examined in the study, there was a possibility that the sample may not represent the views of all

students in China. Nevertheless, the methodology employed would likely be broadly applicable to other universities in the country.

It is obvious that efforts must be made to minimize the existing gaps between the students' perceptions of marketable skills and actual skills expected by the employers. It is evident that there is a difference between the students and the employers from the SEM analysis on importance of various skills and personal attributes. Therefore, it is crucial for the academic community to continue to discuss certain course curricula to ensure that students possess general skills, and technical as well as the necessary personal attributes. Indeed to examine realistic ways of ensuring that their graduates do fully appreciate the skills and personal attributes necessary to not only gain employment but to sustain and grow their employment over time. In other words to ensure the graduates are realistic as to expectations. Furthermore, it is imperative that students develop interactions and relationships with business communities to understand how they can qualify for the workplace settings.

Equally there is need to examine not so much whether graduates are employable per se upon graduation, but also whether the appropriate environments have been established and supported by businesses in order to un-tap the 'skills' and 'personal attributes' that graduates possess. There can be some instances where organisations do not thrive in traditional ways and are not always comfortable with what the 'bright eyed – bushy tailed' graduate maybe trying to say or indeed do upon arrival in the organisation. That is the extent to which the culture of the organisation supports and rewards different behaviours can have a telling effect on an organisation's ability to retain new people as they become part of an organisation. Much of this goes to the perception of the psychological contract upon arrival in an organisation. Indeed the extent to which a graduate's perception of the expected new environment matches the reality. In addition, further work is needed in different cultural contexts to determine the cross-cultural application of the general business and technical skills as well as the personal attributes seen important within the Chinese context.

Other strategies for closing the identified gaps could be linked to developing better communications between the academic community, students and employers. Also; to identify appropriate means to provide students with information on the skills and personal attribute expectations of employers. This could be achieved through internships, allowing students to gain field experience, and open forums. Strategies and practices surrounding the most appropriate and effective means to develop the necessary skills as well as required personal attributes need to be explored.

Conclusion

Given the congruencies of these findings of this study with important studies in other cultural contexts (Mason, *et al.* 2003; Junghagen, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Yorke and Harvey, 2005) it is important that the universities in China attend to these findings in a positive and constructive manner in designing and conducting their undergraduate business programmes in manner conducive to the expectations of both students and employers. It is noted that the findings and implications associated with this research project confirm the summary of Yorke and Harvey (2005: 42) mentioned earlier;

“Research over the last quarter of a century has shown a remarkable level of agreement in what employers want, despite each individual organisation having its own specific requirements.”

Importantly, the skills and personal attributes required for graduate ‘employability’ identified here are further acknowledged within a different cultural and economic context. In addition, a study seems necessary before firm conclusions can be reached regarding this study to acknowledge education/human resource development/learning styles and backgrounds in order to identify and best understand the most appropriate cultural/economic development means from

industry perspectives in putting in place the most appropriate educational programmes. Nevertheless, whilst it is critical to know the specific skills and personal attributes necessary for ultimate employability, it is equally critical to know the most appropriate means to best deliver programmes that develop the types of skills and personal attributes required of graduates upon graduation.

In this context, employers could again be researched as indeed should those with an awareness of best practice in learning. This is an area that deserves to be explored in future research. An evaluation of the investments required in both monetary and non-monetary terms should also be included in such a process.

In many respects van der Heijden (2005: 3) summarises the circumstances surrounding and driving 'employability' very well when she argues *"the potential of a given organisation to perform optimally in global markets depends on employees' capability to develop, cultivate, and maintain fundamental qualifications."*

The most fundamental issue then must go to the skills and personal attributes developed through exposure to various 'learning experiences' (formal and informal) as students progress to graduation. How organisations, business schools and their students have communicated in reviewing, and changing where appropriate the learning content, focus and process will in large part go to how successful organisations are in recruiting graduates with the necessary skills and personal attributes for early organisational success, and how successful graduates will be in establishing something that is meaningful to them at the point of graduation and into the future.

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Table 1 Factor analysis of perceptions of Employers on Employability

Factor	Variables	Factor loading	Mean	SD	Cronbach Alpha
Business Skills	Listening	0.637	4.10	0.925	.98
	Problem Solving	0.887	4.84	0.368	
	Verbal Communications	0.625	4.24	0.881	
Technical Skills	Statistical Analysis	0.676	3.82	0.856	.99
	Internet Marketing	0.795	3.44	1.022	
	Web Design	0.723	2.72	1.069	
	International HRM	0.758	2.86	1.110	
	Business Law	0.684	3.49	1.158	
	Word Processing	0.723	3.23	1.152	
Personal Attributes	Rational	0.653	4.18	0.752	.97
	Enthusiastic	0.738	4.65	0.589	
	Creative	0.656	4.14	0.772	
	Adventurous	0.815	3.08	0.799	
	Motivated	0.648	4.04	0.864	
	Controversial	0.734	3.34	1.148	

Table 2 Factor analysis of perceptions of Students on Employability

Factor	Variables	Factor loading	Mean	SD	Cronbach Alpha
Business Skills	Listening	0.781	4.10	0.804	.99
	Problem solving	0.786	4.65	0.579	
	Negotiation	0.774	4.33	0.737	
Technical Skills	Economic policy analysis	0.672	3.91	0.886	.98
	Marketing Research	0.645	4.11	0.898	
	Web Design	0.747	2.98	1.081	
Personal Attributes	Confident	0.731	4.58	0.634	.99
	Flexible	0.775	4.33	0.723	
	Cautious	0.737	4.22	0.758	
	Responsible	0.789	4.63	0.59	
	Adventurous	0.752	3.63	0.885	
	Risk-Taker	0.701	3.51	1.004	

Table 3 LISREL Goodness-of-Fit Measures for Convergent Validity for Employers

Goodness-of-Fit Measures	Three Factor Model
Absolute/ Predictive fit	
Chi-square	43.5 (p=0.000)
Degrees of Freedom (df)	27
Comparative Fit	
Normed fit Index (NFI)	0.96
Non-Normed fit index (NNFI)	0.92
Incremental fit Index (IFI)	0.93
Comparative fit Index (CFI)	0.97
Relative fit Index (RFI)	0.90
Other	
Root Mean Square Residual (RMR)	0.032
Root Mean Square Residual Approximation (RMSEA)	0.067

Table 4 LISREL Goodness-of-fit Measures for Convergent Validity for Students

Goodness-of-Fit Measures	Three Factor Model
Absolute/ Predictive fit	
Chi-square	249.5 (p=0.000)
Degrees of Freedom (df)	18
Comparative Fit	
Normed fit Index (NFI)	0.92
Non-Normed fit index (NNFI)	0.88
Incremental fit Index (IFI)	0.90
Comparative fit Index (CFI)	0.90
Relative fit Index (RFI)	0.88
Other	
Root Mean Square Residual (RMR)	0.024
Root Mean Square Residual Approximation (RMSEA)	0.072