**Forms of capital and agency as mediations in negotiating employability of international graduates migrants**

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Abstract

This study deployed a qualitative approach to explore an alternative perspective regarding graduate migrants’ employability. Twenty graduate migrants in Australia participated in in-depth interviews. Findings revealed graduate migrants faced various challenges in the target labour market, and to successfully secure employment it was important for them to exercise agency and develop key forms of capital – i.e., excellent technical knowledge, relationships with ‘significant others’, strong career identity and psychological resilience, and interlink these capitals so that they could make of their strengths and coat weaknesses. Results from the study imply that managing, teaching, and professional staff members should collaborate closely to develop well-rounded programmes designed to equip international students sufficiently with multidimensional resources.

**Keywords:** Higher education; Australia; international students; employability; skills; capital

# Introduction

International education is important to both Australian society and economy, and in 2009 international students account for 22% of tertiary education students at Australian universities - the highest proportion of international students in all OECD countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). Employing international students upon graduation has been viewed as a strategy to meet the demands for highly skilled labour and enhance competition in Australian education (AUIDF 2013; Marginson et al. 2010). The country has, therefore, extended various efforts to employ international graduates to fill the skilled worker gap. This process started with the liberalisation of the study-migration pathway in the late 1990s, followed by employer-sponsored migrant policy, and recently the National Strategy for International Education 2025 in 2016. These policies aimed to support international students to apply for permanent residency (PR) and enhance local working experiences in work-readiness programs.

Unfortunately, there is still clear evidence of alarmingly poor employment outcomes for international graduates (AUIDF 2013; Cappelletto 2010). To tackle this problem, Australian universities have prioritised implementing initiatives that embed employability skills in university curricula (Bridgstock 2009). This approach has been, however, critiqued for its ineffectiveness in equipping international students with adequate generic skills (Pellegrino and Hilton 2013; Jackson 2009) and practical and applicable working experiences (Howells et al. 2017; Gribble et al. 2015). In this paper, we argue that improvement to international student employment outcomes might be catalysed by acting on insights we have identified through an investigation of the connection between graduates’ capitals and their employability trajectories. This line of research has been supported by a small but increasing number of researchers including Tomlinson (2017), Brown and Hesketh (2004), Clarke (2017), Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth, (2004), King, Findlay, and Ahrens (2010) and Holmes (2004). These researchers argued that employment outcomes are not simply determined by generic skills, but also by factors such social class, gender, ethnicity, social networks and university status: essentially, the development of human capital, social capital, cultural capital, mobility capital, personal adaptability and career identity.

This contribution enriches the graduate employability literature by unpacking the connection between aduates’ agency and employability trajectories through an analysis of how graduate migrants developed strategies to manage their transitions into the labour market. The paper is structured as follows. It will commence with a discussion of employment issues facing graduate migrants in Australia, followed by a presentation of Tomlinson’s Graduate Capital Model which is used as the core conceptual framework to this study. It will end with a discussion of how the present study was conducted and what findings were revealed as well as suggestions and implications for graduates, policy makers, and educators.

# Employability of international graduates in Australia

In the current literature, international graduates’ employability in Australia has been shown to be determined by various factors. Holding PR could, according to Blackmore, Gribble and Rahimi, 2017), ease graduates’ employment adventures as it can minimise complicated administrative sponsorship procedures for employers. High expectations and stereotyped attitudes of Australian employers were also found to negatively impacts job opportunities for international duates (Almeida et al., 2015; Robertson, Hoare, and Harwood, 2011; Gribble and McRae 2015). This happens because employers often hold ‘perception of fit’, meaning having preferences towards candidates with a similar background (Blackmore et al., 2017). Last but not least, international graduates also limit their employment opportunities when often targeting large-tier and high-profile organisations (Blackmore et al., 2017; Jackson 2016). These factors have contributed to the fact that in 2013, only 18.5% of employers indicated that they recruited international graduates (Graduates Careers Australia, 2015).

Due to the continuous shortage of skilled migrants, both the Australian government and universities have strongly promoted the employability skills agenda as the predominant approach to enhance the employment status of international graduates (Barrie, Highes & Smith, 2009). Employability skills which are often used in association with ‘soft skills’, ‘graduate competencies’, ‘work-ready skills’, ‘generic skills’ and ‘transferable skills’ have been widely embedded in current teaching and learning programs (Williams, Dodd, Steele & Randall, 2016). Unfortunately, flaws of this approach have been reported in various studies with main critiques about the vague meaning of the attributes between stakeholder groups (academics, industry and students) (Pellegrino and Hilton, 2013; Jackson, 2009), academics’ lack of skills in embedding these attributes in their teaching (Barrie, 2009; Jones, Yates and Kelder, 2012), and insufficient support provided to students on extra-curricular activities (Tran, 2017).

Recently, more and more researchers have found that employability is often demonstrated through different capitals: human capital, social capital, cultural capital, mobility capital, personal adaptability, and career identity Clarke (2017), Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth, (2004), King, Findlay, and Ahrens (2010), and Tomlinson (2017). The employment battle has become significantly competitive due to a larger number of students accessing higher education and employability skills training (Gale & Parker, 2013). How graduates develop and exercise agency in interlinking their personal capitals has, therefore, become crucial for employment success (Saito & Pham, 2018). To date, very little attention has been paid to this area, except several studies including McGrath, Madziva, and Thondhlana (2014), McGrath and Powell (2015), Hinchcliffe (2013), Erel (2010) and Ryan (2011) which examined migrants’ agency in negotiating employability. To redress this gap, this article examines the role of forms of capital in graduate migrants’ employability trajectories and how they exercised agency in interlinking various personal qualities articulated in both home and host countries, and even translating non-recognised capitals to recognised qualities to obtain employment success. The following section will summarise Tomlinson’s Graduate Capital Model which we deployed as the framework guiding our investigation.

# Tomlinson’s Graduate Capital Model

Tomlinson (2017) has identified five forms of capital—human capital, social capital, cultural capital, identity capital, and psychological capital—and their relationship with graduate employability as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Insert Figure 1 here

In brief,*human capital* refers to the knowledge and skills that graduates obtain to prepare for employment. Graduates in vocation-related disciplines tend to be able to apply technical knowledge upon employment in a straightforward manner, whereas those in general education disciplines do not have a clear transferable knowledge pathway to the workplace (Tomlinson 2017). *Social capital* refers to social relationships and networks with significant other, including family, peers, higher education institutions, and social organisations that graduates use to access the labour market. It is noted that graduates from lower and marginalised socioeconomic backgrounds are disadvantaged in this area and often have to use existing economic capital or make more efforts to enrich their social network (Robertson and Dale 2013; Tomlinson 2017).

*Cultural capital* refers to cultural-valued knowledge, dispositions and insights typically valued within organisations and which graduates need to embody in order to signal their attractiveness to employers. This capital is illustrated as a ‘personality package’ that includes accent, body language, and humour. Similar to social capital, poor socioeconomic background or an overseas background were noted by Tomlinson as factors that may cause international students to struggle in developing cultural capital. *Identity capital* is how individuals are able to make active self-investments towards their future employment. Their efforts could be used to form their personal identity and are also presented as form of narrative. Tomlinson highlighted the curriculum vitae (CV) as a tool allowing graduates to present compelling employability narratives that convey their identities to impress employers. Finally, *psychological capital* includes capacities that enable graduates to overcome barriers, adapt to new situations, and respond proactively to inevitable career challenges. This capital is becoming increasingly important because of the intense competition and uncertainty regarding employment in today’s labour market (Brown et al. 2012; Tomlinson 2017).

Tomlinson’s model was developed mainly to inform an understanding of domestic graduates’ employability and has not been applied to international students. International graduates have distinct backgrounds, identities, and social, cultural, and intellectual capital (Blackmore et al., 2017; Saito & Pham, 2018), possibly leading to different pathways for managing their employability. This study, therefore, utilised but further empirically explored the model to better understand international graduates’ employability and their approaches to managing their future outcomes. Underpinned by this conceptual approach, the study was guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent did these different forms of capital influence graduate migrants’ employment outcomes and opportunities?
2. How were graduate migrants able to exercise their agency in utilising different forms of capital to enhance their labour market prospects?

# Methodology

## Participants

Twenty international graduates from a range of demographic backgrounds, academic disciplines, and career development pathways, were invited to participate in this research. The research employed purposeful sampling. Specifically, an ethics-approved snowball sampling technique was used to approach participants (Creswell 2012). Participants met the following selection criteria: (i) completed school education overseas; (ii) held a degree obtained in Australia (undergraduate, master’s, or PhD); and (iii) lived in Australia when the research was conducted. All participants came from Asian countries and their demographic details are presented in table 1 below. This research did not attempt to offer a representative sample of all international students in Australia but provided insights into how graduate migrants developed their employment outcomes and exercised agency towards managing their employability.

Table 1. Demographic information about the participants: (*n)* = number of participants

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Nationalities | Degree | Disciplines | Staying in Australia | Gender |
| China  (*n*=6) | PhD  (*n*=5) | Education  (*n*=6) | 3 years  (*n*=4) | Female (*n*=12) |
| Vietnam  (*n*=4) | Masters  (*n*=4) | Business  (*n*=6) | 4 years  (*n*=6) | Male (*n*=8) |
| Malaysia  (*n*=2) | Bachelors  (*n*=9) | Technology  (*n*=3) | 5 years  (*n*=6) |  |
| Indonesia  (*n*=2) | Vocational and college degrees (*n*=2) | Arts  (*n*=2) | 6-8 years (*n*=4) |  |
| Singapore  (*n*=2) |  | TESOL  (*n*=2) |  |  |
| Philipinnes  (*n*=2) |  | Construction  (*n*=1) |  |  |
| Thailand  (*n*=1) |  |  |  |  |
| Japan  (*n*=1) |  |  |  |  |

## Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect narrative descriptions of the participants’ employability trajectories and key episodes on their journey from HE to employment. Specifically, twelve participants were invited in individual in-depth, open-ended interviews, the remainder joined group interviews of 3-4 members. Open-ended interview questions were developed so that participants could ‘best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings’ (Creswell 2012, 218). Interviewees were asked to share experiences related to various dimensions of their career development that were relevant to the research questions. Questions focused on how participants managed challenges and navigated complexities. Additionally, they were asked to identify their strengths and support in the labour market. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and was recorded audibly or by written notes, or both, for later transcription. Both the first researcher and the research assistant participated in coding data and continuously cross-checking codes until the inter-rater agreement was 100%. A deductive approach was applied to analyse the data. The analytical process commenced at a general level, for instance starting with broader areas such as career aspirations, educational profile and experience, then focused on more specific issues such as their use of career resources and related assets that facilitates (or otherwise) their early career outcomes.

The questions specifically focused on the main capitals which were used to frame the subsequent data analysis, with specific attention given to specific sub-dimensions of each capital (for example, knowledge, social relations, resilience, cultural fit) which emerged through the respondent’s personal accounts of their early career experiences and outcomes. Accordingly, the data were disentangled into segments (i.e. a word, single sentence, or paragraph) so that annotations and codes could be attached to them. Any code that referred to these five categories was grouped into one or more of the categories. Then, for each category, the researchers grouped any code that referred to the same phenomenon as a theme. Codes that did not fall into these five categories were grouped in new categories, to allow for further inductive analysis to unfold.

# Findings

## Human capital knowledge: Technical knowledge versus soft skills

One of the first significant themes was the perceived value of their enhanced human capital, acquired through studying an international degree. Although they were from various disciplines and worked in different industries, they expressed a common experience that disciplinary knowledge helped them significantly in obtaining immediate employment especially in the academy, remaining employed, and earning promotions. Some could apply their content knowledge directly, whereas others were advantaged in a more generic sense having gained a stronger overall foundation of educational and work-related knowledge:

I came to Australia without knowing how to write a good essay but now I can write publications. My publications were the main reason I was employed (Quyen – a lecturer in education).

I could use quite a lot of things I learned from my degree, but my working experiences in multinational companies in my home country helped a lot (Ngan – banking sector employee).

How much content knowledge these respondents could apply to their jobs varied depending on the nature of their jobs and the more specific connections between their degree-level learning and the demands of a given workplace. However, their accounts revealed the operation of their agency in different ways to manage their career. Quyen was strategic in building an impressive publication record to make her stand out, whereas Ngan knew how to make use of her non-recognised knowledge (working experience in her home country) to support the hard currencies obtained in the host country as an additional credit. These capacities made them look more advantaged compared to other candidates - a strategy enabling graduates to win the employment battle in many cases (Brown & Hesketh, 2004).

By contrast, generic skills could be interpreted differently based on individuals’ backgrounds and values (Pham, Saito, Bao & Chudry, 2018). Therefore, the graduates found it hard and frustrating to find the fit in the organisation. Our analysis revealed language proficiency and intercultural competences affected their entrance to the field and slowing their career progression significantly as employers often have preference towards verbal communication (Blackmore et al., 2017). By contrast, the graduates perceived verbal communication was their weakness compared to other capacities, as illustrated in the message below.

I was shortlisted for several interviews but failed all of them … When they looked at my CV, they might have been very impressed, but when we met for face-to-face interviews, they became aware of my English [deficiencies] (Wang – a graduate in business).

Several graduates echoed confusion and frustration when facing the gap between what they had been taught and what industry expected.

I found this very interesting but frustrating. In universities, we were taught to be ‘critical’, and we often think [that] asking questions … means ‘critical’… but then I found he [supervisor] was not very happy [because I asked a lot].

This quote clearly consolidates what Pellegrino and Hilton (2013) claim about different interpretations of attributes amongst stakeholders and this made it double hard for graduate migrants to figure out what was actually expected from them.

The data therefore show that higher education-derived human capital in the form of ‘hard currencies’ was not sufficient on its own. Respondents appeared to come unstuck when applying soft skills from the academic and home-country worlds to the workplace. This reflects the difference in transferring possibilities of hard knowledge and the acquisition of wider soft skills which are of equal value (Thondhlana, Madziva & McGrath, 2016).

## Social capital: social networks and human relationships

Our data analysis revealed the respondents had limited social networks. Similar to findings of previous studies (i.e., Sakurai, McCall-Wolf & Kashima, 2010), the main reasons contributing to this limitation were their close attachment to co-ethnic community and mentality of emphasising academic performance over social relations. Some graduates indicated that they found creating social networks challenging. What they shared revealed the ‘fit’ search that industries often hold (Almeida, Fernando, Hannif & Dharmage, 2015). The reflection below, for instance, suggested their Asian name and accent inhibited their chance of success:

They were looking for volunteers and I called but they never got back to me … It is hard to develop physical relationships … even on social media it is not easy to join their conversations—maybe because they see my Chinese name (Adrian – a graduate in marketing).

Our data analysis, however, disclosed an important finding that most of the successful graduates had developed good relationships with some key stakeholder whom could be called ‘significant others’. These people helped connect them to potential employers as a referee and an introductory person. For instance, Lan, a finance graduate, transitioned from cleaning work she did for a local family to part-time accounting work at their family company, and finally landed a full-time job as the result of the knowledge and experience she had through this pathway. Another full-time lecturer admitted that a good relationship with her supervisor was crucial to her job success because she was known and recognised in the field mainly due to her supervisor’s reputation. She stated:

Many fantastic students were around, and I understood that many were better than me, but I was chosen partially because of the reputation of my supervisor. When I became an academic, I realised that the reputation of a referee can guarantee the quality of students (Ha – a graduate with a PhD degree).

The connection between such relationships and employment outcomes has been discussed in various studies about migrants and international students and returnees (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014; Blackmore et al., 2017; Li, 2013). However, the significance of each network varies amongst the groups depending on their contextual backgrounds. For migrants, the connection with people in co- or similar-ethnic groups appeared significant because it helped them learn about the host country’s labour market and job opportunities (Ryan & Mulholland, 2013; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). Also, relationships with relatives and authorities were found to help returnees in many Asian countries (i.e., China, Vietnam) navigate barriers in the home labour market (Li, 2013; Pham & Saito, 2019). Our study and the study conducted by Popadiuk and Arthur (2014) reported the importance of developing relationships with supervisors and mentors in career opportunities of international students because such connections helped broker significant knowledge about job openings and what may be required to negotiate them. This certainly helped socialise the hard currencies gained from formal study and improve their job market opportunities.

## Cultural capital: cultural synergy and alignment

Almost all respondents expressed concerns about having a shallow understanding of the working environment in their field. They did not have good insights about the cultural script or constitution of a workplace, the hidden recruitment rules and expectation of employers, including desired behavioural dispositions and competences. Some graduates perceived industries were not looking for what was advertised on the website “I heard [that] some companies prefer candidates with experience in various fields rather than only one field. If I had known this, I could have developed my CV to highlight this (Henny – a graduate in finance)”. Industries do not advertise all expectations explicitly maybe because they have what Bauder (2003) and Hage (1998) call ‘nationally-based protectionism’ and ‘national capital’ – hidden policies that give priorities to local people with local qualifications. Hidden expectations of employers could be, for example, seen in recruitment policies which often have a clause saying that employers are not responsible for clarifying their reasons of recruiting. This led to frustration shared amongst some graduates in our study because they were unsuccessful but did not know what to improve.

The participants’ trajectories also disclosed their struggles of entering different organisational fields and the challenges of decoding the cultural rules and scripts of an organisation, including its desired forms of embodied capital. One of the main challenges concerned ‘socio-pragmatic competencies’ (Celce-Murcia et al, 1995); that is, competencies in relation to everyday interactions such as figuring out appropriate language, standard behaviours and acceptable topics in daily talks. As a result, they experienced accidents as described by Millet (2003) as ‘hitting an iceberg’ when venturing different cultures without adequate preparation – i.e., asking ‘odd’ questions or looking ‘weird’. One participant said he often found it hard when working with other people because he could only see the visible and surface layer of human relationships but failed to understand why people chose one approach over another or collaborated with one person over another.

Amongst 20 participants, we identified five graduates obtaining employment in their co- and similar ethnic communities mainly based on their social networks and the advantage of being able to use another language and possessing knowledge about the home-country market. For instance, a graduate in commerce (Debing) shared that he was selected for the position mainly because the company expected him to expand networks in China. Although two out of these five graduates were not satisfied with their downgrading positions, these graduates proved their capacity in using social network to find a space where they could use their non-recognised human capitals and avoid the competition with local counterparts.

## Psychological capital: resilience as an important dimension of managing post-HE transitions

Our analysis revealed two groups possessing distinct psychological characteristics. The first expressed their strong desire to stay in Australia, whereas the second was indecisive about where they really wanted to settle. The differences in attitudes led to distinct features in their efforts in negotiating employability. The first group, in general, showed great resilience since coming to Australia. They mostly adapted admirably to their studies and work environments. Some PhD graduates in the study were exceptional because they came to Australia for their first Australian degrees but achieved exceptionally academic performances. It was noteworthy that the PhD program did not give them much chance to develop soft skills due to their main contacts being limited with the supervisors. However, they showed impressive flexibility and adaptability as their career progressed. An important quality helping them develop resilience and persistence was a positive attitude, for example:

Of course, there are always issues at any workplace, so I keep thinking positively and learn a lesson from each problem. I like the way people here use productivity to judge our quality but not personal relationships. (Hannah – a graduate in chemistry).

Amongst the participants, we found Xia, a graduate in education, stood out with her amazing resilience. She used to be a maths university lecturer with rich specialisation knowledge. After migrating to Australia, her qualification was not transnationalised, so she decided to pursue a second undergraduate degree in education. She was shortlisted for all job positions she applied for but failed all interviews mainly because, as she perceived, her English proficiency was not standard. She finally accepted a mandarin teaching position and used it as a tool to enrich local working experience and improve English – two areas that she hoped could make her more competitive for a job in her specialisation once they got improved.

The second group appeared to possess less psychological capital because they showed less efforts in socialising with mainstream people and easily gave up when confronting difficulties. Amongst some common reasons (e.g., difficult to develop social networks with local people, easy to hang around with people in the same community), many did not have intentions to settle in Australia for long-term work. They had actually planned to return to their home country or move to another country after they obtained PR. Li (2014) and Pham and Saito (2019, in press) found a similar finding; many international students intended to do study to apply for PR or citizenship but not for employment purposes because they had been arranged for jobs in the home country. This explains why half of new permanent residents leave Australia within five years of receiving their permanent visa (Gomes, 2017).

## Identity capital: passion as a ‘must’ for employment success

When we analysed the connection between identity capital and their career progression, we found a noteworthy theme that most of the participants who successfully secured satisfactory employment opportunities demonstrated real passion in their careers. As discussed elsewhere in the paper, holding PR is an important factor lifting employment status of international graduates (Blackmore et al., 2017). However, surprisingly, our analysis revealed many graduates who had not targeted obtaining PR as their main goal of coming to Australia succeeded in employment. By contrast, the graduates who had aimed to obtain PR as the only goal of their overseas study struggled to find employment. For instance, a PhD graduate shared that she had a great interest in exploring her field of expertise, so just kept reading and writing as a way to explore and disseminate their work. Her research capacity and publication record impressed her supervisor immensely who then recommended and supported her to win a research fellowship. We also found some graduates expressed their passion in portraying themselves as what Tomlinson (2007) calls ‘careerists’. They sold their image as a career-oriented person on social media (i.e., facebook, LinkedIn) by disseminating their work, joining conversations related to their field, and showing their positive attitudes. James, a graduate working as a director of a start-up finance company, shared his tip below.

At the end of the day, employers only care about outcomes, so show them your capacity to obtain the outcomes by an image full of energy on any media channel.

By contrast, our analysis revealed several graduates who had targeted obtaining PR as the only goal of coming to Australia faced struggles in their employability trajectories. For instance, one graduate shared that she interrupted the PhD program to do another course so that she could be eligible to apply for PR. After obtaining PR and sponsoring her whole family to Australia, as the main breadwinner she then gave up the PhD program to work full-time at a fruit shop – a career pathway that, as an academic, she had never thought about.

A final important theme emerging in our data was that how the graduates positioned themselves within their social networks could determine their employment opportunities. Some graduates did not intend to do professional unsatisfactory work (i.e., shop sellers, service workers) because they were afraid that their friends and relatives would look down them. An accounting graduate, for instance, explained she had been looking for jobs for two years because ‘I need to find a type of work that makes my mum feel proud’. Friedmann (2002) described this thinking as habitus that can inflict a feeling of one living ‘simultaneously in two countries’ (p.311). The reluctance to accept downgrading positions appeared more obvious amongst the graduates who had strong attachments with their co-ethnic community and home country because in Asian culture professions are associated with social class and respect (Tran, 2018).

# Discussion and conclusion

The findings from this study revealed several significant empirical themes which further contribute to current knowledge and understanding of graduates’ transitions into employment and the factors influencing their employability. While applicable to home graduates, this study specifically makes a novel contribution to understanding the situation for international graduates. First, contrasting with numerous studies about the importance of generic skills in negotiating employability (Barrie et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2012), our study found that the weight of academic performance and soft skills varied depending on the profession and strategies utilised by the graduates. It was clear that the graduates who pursued career in the academy needed to articulate excellent hard currencies – i.e., academic performances and publications. Being academically outstanding students could enable them to easily build a relationship with ‘significant others’ (i.e., academics, supervisors). Such a relationship then opened up various opportunities enabling dialogues with potential employers for jobs. The emphasis on academic performance reflects recent trends in Australian education with much interest in quantitative measurement (i.e., comparisons of quantitative educational outcomes across national boundaries) (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Therefore, students with outstanding academic records tend to be prioritised for job opportunities.

For the graduates who pursued career in industry, generic skills (especially communication) were crucially important, and where lacking presented challenges for graduates. It was clear that our respondents were largely disadvantaged in this area although some showed great efforts in learning and improving. As a result, to succeed in employment, the graduates needed to exercise agency in interlinking various capitals so that they could make use of their strengths and hide weaknesses. For example, Lan and Ha used their hard-working and dedicated personalities as a tool to win support of their ‘significant others’ who then refereed them to employers – a clear interlink between identity, cultural and social capitals. Previous studies had reported the important role of *quanxi* (relationship) in Asian countries (Bodewig et al. 2014; Guo, Porschitz, and Alves, 2013; Robertson, Hoare, and Harwood 2011; Le and LaCost 2017) and in Australia (Blackmore et al., 2017; Pham et al., 2019, under review). However, the nature of such relationships differs in these two contexts. *Quanxi* tends to mean relationships with monetary exchange, whereas the relationship with ‘significant others’ in Australia tends to be built on mutual benefits over a long period of time and often on trust that is called “iron clad”’ (Blackmore et al., 2017, p. 81).

Differently, Xia’s case showed her exercise of agency in interplaying various forms of capital and also creating new capital. She used psychological capital to enrich her human capital (i.e., do a new degree, accept a downgrading position to improve English) and cultural capital (i.e., enrich local working experiences) so that she could find a job in her specialisation. This process indicated an ability in combining her non-recognised capital (her overseas maths qualification) and recognised capital (her Australian education degree) to form a new capital – a combination of maths knowledge in China and pedagogical skills in Australia. In their study about returnees’ career development, Pham and Saito (2019) found that the returnees who knew how to interplay hard knowledge and soft skills obtained in Vietnam and Australia achieved significant successes in their career, and we saw such agency in Xia’s case. Similarly, five graduates who obtained jobs in their co-ethnic community showed a capacity to connect their cultural and social capitals to navigate their inadequate communication competencies. Aware of their limitations in linguistic and cultural competencies and strengths in language and knowledge of the home country, they strategically developed social networks with people in co-ethnic communities for job opportunities and progression. Out of all the dominant forms of capital discussed, international graduates experienced most challenges in terms of cultivating the appropriate forms of cultural capital, mainly in the embodied and linguistic form, and this presented barriers to entering different fields.

Finally, our study revealed a couple of significant messages for international students and institutions. First, PR was found to have both negative and positive influences on participants’ employment. Having PR helped some graduates obtain employment more easily because it was a recruitment condition but the process perusing PR could also interrupt career progression. This finding was a significant message to migrants because many tend to have an assumption that having PR guarantees employment (Blackmore et al., 2017). Second, our study found that the development of forms of capital was significantly influenced by their plan for job and stay settlement. Little attention has been paid to the connection between employability and career development intentions (i.e., Li, 2010; Pham et al., 2019, under review). This line of research should be further investigated because there is currently an increasing number of Asian students returning to their home country (Tong, 2017; Xinhua, 2013) mainly due to the economic development of emerging markets, especially those in Asia like China, Vietnam, Korea, India and Malaysia (Harvey, 2009). If we want to enhance international students’ employability, it is time for Australian education to work on not only preparing them for employment in the host country but also for their home or a third country.

Finally, it was very clear from the study that the current dominant skills agenda was insufficient to facilitate the multifaceted employability journeys of international graduates. Therefore, universities’ instructors and services need to better inform international students about the need to develop various sources of capital at the early stage of their study. This also meant there is a need to deploy diverse theoretical perspectives to guide research regarding the multifaceted dimensions of international graduates’ employability. The literature is still in an early stage of examining the post-study life of international students. Therefore, data in this field is still limited and further research should be conducted. Such data would be invaluable to any government attempting to develop a rational policy to link international student recruitment with national high-skilled labour recruitment needs.

In summary, the findings of the study led to a revision of Tomlinson’s Graduate Capital Model in the case of graduate migrants’ employability as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

(Insert Figure 2 here) My sense is that this would be better place further up the discussion and with some more explicit outline as to how it has added to the concept (as per reviews) – there’s quite a few ways in which this could framed ie. developed an empirical account based on international graduates; has shown the interactions of different forms and which ones are most applicable; added to the context-specificity of different capitals and how they are contingent on different field etc; show areas which need to be further enriched and why the deficit of some can act as a barrier etc etc?

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