

Employability

Insights from Chinese and British Universities

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CHINA AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY PRESS

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China Agricultural University Press

· Beijing ·

图书在版编目 (C I P) 数据

大学生就业力的需求与培养: 中英比较研究 / (英) 赫弗南 (Heffernan, T.), 冯伟哲主编. —北京: 中国农业大学出版社, 2012.9

ISBN 978-7-5655-0590-4

I. ①大… II. ①赫… ②冯… III. ①大学生-职业选择-对比研究-中国, 英国
IV. ①G647.38

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字 (2012) 第 208259号

书 名 Employability

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责任编辑 童 云 田树君

封面设计 James Drayson

出版发行 中国农业大学出版社

社 址 北京市海淀区圆明园西路 2 号

邮 政 编 码 100193

电 话 发行部 010-62818525,8625

读者服务部 010-62732336

编辑部 010-62732617,2618

出 版 部 010-62733440

网 址 <http://www.cau.edu.cn/caup>

E-mail cbsszs@cau.edu.cn

经 销 新华书店

印 刷 涿州市星河印刷有限公司

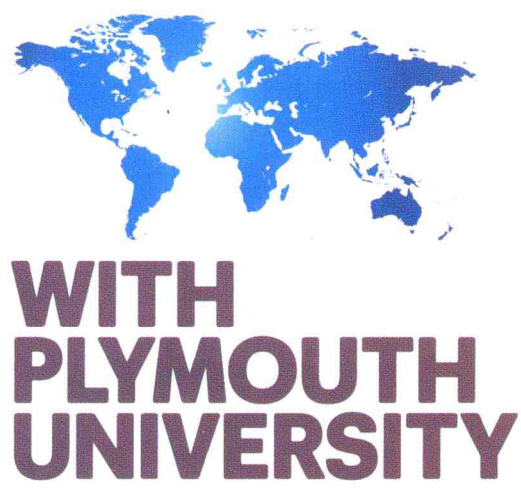
版 次 2012 年 9 月第 1 版 2012 年 9 月第 1 次印刷

规 格 787 × 1 092 16 开本 16.25 印张 370 千字

定 价 86.00 元

图书如有质量问题本社发行部负责调换

Special thanks must go to the two institutions which supported this research program. Plymouth University, UK and China Agricultural University helped resource and support this study; both institutions value the importance of developing employable graduates.



This book is an output from the PMI2 Project funded by the UK Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) for the benefit of the Chinese Higher Education Sector and the UK Higher Education Sector. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DIUS, or the British Council.

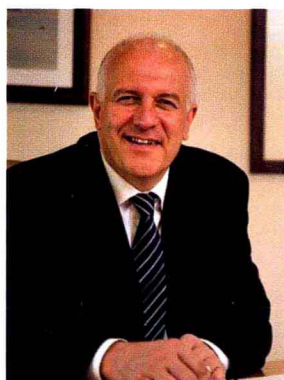
Foreword

The rapidly increasing numbers of students enrolling in the higher education system in the UK has necessarily prompted an institutional change towards a more specified and focused student experience, leading ultimately to the production of highly competitive graduates. Such competitive output is necessarily underpinned by an increased emphasis on employability at all levels of service delivery, from government policy on one hand through to HE staff development on the other hand. The shift towards employability focus coincides with a similar shift towards greater internationalisation in the sector, with both the UK and China rightly prioritising the enhancement of the overall student experience.

This book represents the culmination of a particularly successful collaboration between China Agricultural University in Beijing, and Plymouth University, UK. A strong partnership between two key institutions is fundamentally important for understanding the complex international issues present in the global education market, and for developing strategies to increase overall student competitiveness in a modern economy.

From my own perspective, this book forms an integral part of the growing literature examining the complexities involved in creating a holistic student package which continues long after graduation. The authors and contributors come from a wide range of backgrounds and bring extensive experience of the concept of employability in both China and the UK. Their experience is reflected in the friendly approach taken in the text, yet also in the detailed strategic practices that are reported.

It would be hard to understate the importance that enhancing employability has, and will continue to have, in the sector and texts such as this will be at the forefront of high impact academic and pedagogic dissemination.



Bill Rammell, 2012
Minister for Higher Education, 2005-2008
Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Internationalisation and the Student Experience,
Plymouth University, 2011-2012

About the Authors

Professor Troy Heffernan

Professor Troy Heffernan is Director of International Partnerships at Plymouth Business School, Plymouth University. His pioneering research into transnational education has led to numerous invitations around the world to run workshops and presentations to enhance best practice in the field. Other research streams Dr Heffernan explores are lecturer effectiveness and student employability enhancement. His research-led approach to education has resulted in the development of a range of new programmes at Plymouth University. These have been commended for being innovative, recognising aspects of internationalisation and for embedding employability. For his contributions to enhancing learning and teaching around the globe Dr Heffernan has received various awards including the Australia and New Zealand Marketing Educator of the Year (2004); and the University of Plymouth: Inspirational Teaching Award (2010). He has over 50 international publications, and has published in such journals as the Journal of Marketing Education and the Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management.



Professor Weizhe Feng

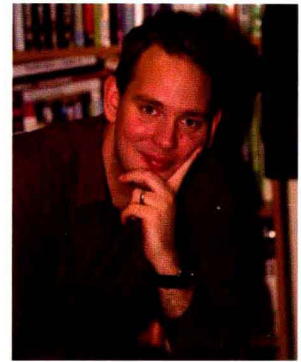
Professor Weizhe Feng received his MSc degree at the University of Reading, and PhD at China Agricultural University. He is the Deputy Dean of the International College Beijing. Professor Weizhe Feng has two main research specialisms. The first is international education, where he has published more than 20 research papers and 7 books. For his excellence in research achievements he received three government awards, including the National Second Class Award for Excellence in Education and Teaching Research (2009) given by Ministry of Education;



the Provincial First Class Award for Excellence in Education and Teaching Research (2008) given by the Beijing Municipal Government; and the Provincial Second Class Award for Excellence in Education and Teaching Research (2005) given by the Beijing Municipal Government. His second research area is ICT-based knowledge transfer and management. In this field he has published more than 20 research papers in academic journals, and has also received a Provincial Third Class Award for Social Science Research Achievement (2009), given by the Beijing Municipal Government.

Dr Robert J. Angell

Rob is a lecturer at the Cardiff Business School where he teaches research methods at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. He received his PhD in Marketing at the Plymouth University for a model applying a finite mixture structural equation model to the UK's older consumer population. Rob is a full member of the Market Research Society and has published in respected international journals such as the Journal of Business Research and Journal of Marketing Management.



Fang Yan

Fang Yan is a lecturer in Human Resource Management at International College Beijing, China Agricultural University. With a MSc in organisational and social psychology from the London School of Economics, she has consulted with internationally recognised multinational companies and taught several courses in organisational behavior and human resource related subjects. Her research interests include organisational behavior and human resource management in a dynamic global business environment.



Dan Coxon

Graduating from Plymouth Polytechnic in 1989 with a degree in Politics and Law and a passion for music, Dan was lucky enough to spend 20 years selling culture to the youth market. His move to the charitable sector shifted both his personal and professional emphasis, and here is where he started

to work with young and emerging artists to help progress their careers. It was only when he joined academia as a Lecturer in Marketing at Plymouth Business School in 2010 that this work was given a context, and that was employability. Dan was Awarded Plymouth Business School 'Employability Champion' in 2011. Today Dan has returned to the charitable sector working at Young Devon a progressive charity committed to improving the chances for young people. Dan continues to develop practical projects for young people to enhance their employability skills.



We would like to acknowledge the support and assistance of Kerry Husk, Emma Heffernan, Hugh Conway, Hui Zhang and Lingyuan Meng in the research and delivery of this book. We are also grateful to the authors of the case studies: Lynne Hammond, Dave Burnapp, Ulrike Hillemann, Elaine Walsh, Christine White, Alison Oddey, Fan Xia, Sarah McNicoll and David Croot.

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1 Introduction

Issues of employability have faced every generation of graduates, and the questions facing graduates today reflect the rapid expansion in scale experienced in recent years. In the 1980's, graduates who aspired to work in 'glamorous' industries faced the same challenges: how to stand out? Why should they get the job? In 2011, with increasing numbers of graduates entering the employment market each year, these questions have spread across all disciplines and the concept of employability has rightly become a focus at local, national and international levels.

In China, the escalation in higher education admissions for university programmes has led, unsurprisingly, to a situation where competition for jobs is fierce. At the same time evidence suggests that Chinese employers want more from graduates, particularly in terms of employability (Zhang, 2006; Venter, 2003). A key objective of reports such as the 2003-2007 Action Plan



in China (State Council, 2004) was to increase the numbers of graduates entering the workplace with adequate skills for employability. More recently, in the Outline of National Middle and Long Term Education Development and Reform Plan (China Central Government, 2010), it was realised that “many students have limited capability in employability...Employment led education and teaching reforms are to be further initiated”.

The same is true in the UK, where current research has indicated that employers have highlighted a lack of quality in graduates. There has been a rapid change in many fields meaning that discipline specific knowledge

is not sufficient to produce highly employable individuals; such knowledge quickly becomes outdated. Skills development is therefore a central concern (Rundle-Thiele, Bennett and Dann, 2005).

Across the globe, the market for higher education is growing; as new global markets emerge and economic power relationships shift, governments around the world are recognising the importance of training a larger proportion of their workforces to university level and beyond. This is especially true of countries such as the UK and China, who are actively growing a workforce to operate in an emerging knowledge economy. In the UK there were upwards of 2.4 million students at higher education institutions during the academic year 2009/10, including more than 500,000 postgraduate students (Universities UK, 2011). Similarly, enrolments at Chinese universities grew from 3.2 million in 1997 to almost 15 million in 2005 (6Xue Info, 2008). These levels of university numbers make graduate competitiveness both an important and increasingly sizeable problem in both countries.

Table 1.1 UK graduate unemployment

Academic year	Employed(%)	Unemployed(%)
2009/2010	74.4	7.4
2008/2009	72.4	7.6
2007/2008	74.9	6.5
2006/2007	77.0	4.7
2005/2006	76.7	5.1
2004/2005	76.3	5.3

(HESA, 2001)

In the UK, the Higher Education Policy Unit has seen graduate unemployment rise to 14% (December 2009); the highest recorded level. With 69 graduates now competing for each job, universities must focus on the exit velocity of their students to ensure that they are best equipped to face the competitive world into which they emerge.

1.1 Employability

These increases in student enrolment numbers, alongside fierce employment competition, mean that employability has become a central concern for both universities and policy makers alike. A country's economic performance is directly linked to the construction and maintenance of a highly qualified and flexible workforce (Knight, 2001). The responsibility of training employees to fit into this global economy falls to higher education institutions. This

importance is reflected in documents such as the Dearing Report in the UK; and the 2003-2007 Action Plans in China.

“The job market remains challenging for new graduates as it does for others. But a degree is still a good investment in the long term and graduates have a key role to play in helping Britain out of the recession.” (Rt Hon David Willetts MP, The Higher Education Minister)

The key features of these plans are to increase the numbers of skilled and employable graduates entering the job market. Agencies such as ESECT (the Enhancing Student Employability Coordination Team) in the UK, and the Ministry of Education for the People's Republic of China, are overseeing this aim. Employers in both the UK and China are increasingly dissatisfied by the quality of graduates entering work. The ESECT report *Learning and Employability* stated reasons for declines in national productivity and concluded that the failure of UK universities to develop graduates was central (Yorke, 2004). Similarly, in China it has been reported that employers are satisfied by the academic credentials of their graduates but are less pleased by the ability of recruits to demonstrate the key skills required to successfully move through the business (Zhang, 2006; Venter, 2003). Indeed, the term 'key skills' has itself proven problematic because of a mismatch between how education providers and employers define and understand the concept (Holmes, 2001).

“Graduates face an extremely competitive employment market. However, a degree remains a valuable investment. [Russell Group] Universities are constantly striving to ensure that their students develop skills-sets that make them employable, entrepreneurial and experienced.” (Dr Wendy Platt, Director General, The Russell Group)

Consequently there is a need to enhance the employability of graduates at universities around the world; and it is within this context that the current volume has been written. The overarching aim of the book is to present the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the concept of employability, the components that make up employability and different ways and means of enhancement through the university experience. To achieve this, the book

is divided into three sections; *theory and practice, empirical evidence and, lastly, case studies.*

The book is organised to logically and comprehensively explore all of these issues; firstly through a brief examination of education and the fundamental principles of employability, then a discussion of how employability should be implemented in H.E institutions. This implementation can take many forms, and student-centred as well as lecturer led fields are considered prior to an examination of how culture impacts on the learned experience. The methods, approaches and results of a primary research phase are detailed along with illustrative case studies exploring employability in differing settings.

More specifically, the first section, Section A, explores the emergence of the concept of employability; the components of employability, issues around embedding employability and student responsibilities surrounding their own employability. This section comprises four chapters:

- 2. *Education and employability;***
- 3. *Implementing employability;***
- 4. *Student centred approaches to employability;***
- 5. *Culture, learning and employability.***

The second section, Section B, identifies findings from a large empirical research project examining the employability attributes graduates require to succeed in industry; as deemed by employers in three different disciplines; marketing, accounting/finance and human resource management. Lecturers and other experts in the field of employability were consulted in order to determine strategies which enhance these attributes. The study was conducted in both the UK and China; allowing for different culturally based concepts of employability to emerge. Section B is divided into four chapters:

- 6. *Methodology;***
- 7. *Results A: The marketing discipline and employability;***
- 8. *Results B: The accounting/finance discipline and employability;***
- 9. *Results C: The human resource discipline and employability.***

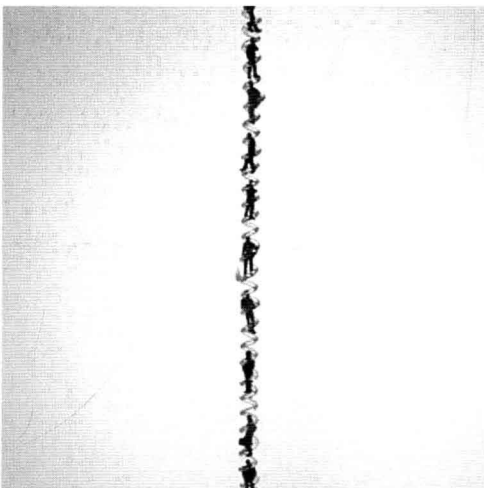
The final section of this book, Section C, presents case studies exploring the different topics and strategies surrounding employability enhancement. The section presents an accurate account of the state of employability strategies entrenched in current university policies. Further, a number of these cases illustrate programmes that have been structured alongside Chinese universities; again allowing for elements of cultural difference to emerge. There are six chapters in Section C, each based on a single case study:

- 10. Employability led course design: The development of the MSc Marketing Management & Strategy at Plymouth Business School;***
- 11. Knowledge transfer in Higher Education; London College of Fashion;***
- 12. Collaborative development of online modules concerning employability and entrepreneurship; University of Northampton;***
- 13. Using summer school to develop the employability of PhD students; Imperial College London;***
- 14. Entrepreneurship for the creative and media arts; Nottingham Trent University and Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts.***
- 15. Enhancing employability through life-wide learning; Plymouth University***

Lastly, the sections are summarised and some tentative conclusions are posited in Chapter sixteen which outlines the similarities and differences between the employability situation in the UK and China. Additionally, the applicability to the wider literature is considered alongside the implications for both policy and individuals. These final sections conclude, unsurprisingly, that employability should be more fundamentally entrenched into all levels of higher education and that the strategies used to integrate these skills should be developed in conjunction with key graduate employers.



Enhancing students' employability is a critical concept for universities around the world to grapple with, as it is how universities change and adapt to this challenge that will be one of the key drivers for the sector in the future. The universities that enhance the student experience and deliver career-ready, employable graduates with a broad range of skills and competencies will be those that succeed in the new environment.



Section A: Employability – Theory and Practice

In recent years it has been well documented that modern higher education systems play an integral role in the development of national economies. A vital cog in the sustained growth of any economy is human capital, though in conjunction with scientific advancements, engineering, manufacturing and information technology related inventions and innovations. In the UK this position has been entrenched by the Labour Government of the late 1990s and their aspiration for fifty per cent of the population to attain a higher level qualification. This demonstrated a substantial change in the way in which university level education was delivered in the post-war era of the twentieth century. The UK was, at the time, similar to most other countries (e.g. USA, China etc.) in that far fewer people studied at degree level; vocational training was the predominant way into the national workforce. The vocational training route has been superseded by a modern higher education system and, as such, it has gradually become the role of the university providers to bridge the gap between further education and successful graduate employment. However in the UK at least, there has been a shift back towards vocational training with the reintroduction of apprenticeships.

