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developing employability: Case study of a post-1992
university in the United Kingdom**

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Understanding international students' agency in developing employability: Case study of a post-1992 university in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Employability remains a critical issue for international students in the United Kingdom. This study adopts the Employability Agency Framework proposed by Pham et al. to explore how a group of international students actively exercised their agency to enhance their employability during their Master's studies in the United Kingdom. A post-1992 university, which prioritises vocational training and graduate employability, was selected for the study. Using qualitative interview data from four academics and 14 international students from a programme in educational studies, this research explores the ways international students conceptualise employability, the strategies they employ to enhance their job prospects and the systemic barriers they encounter. Findings reveal that although the participants actively developed their transferable skills, adaptability and resilience, there are systemic barriers that reduce their opportunities for employment. The identified barriers include restrictive visa policies, information asymmetry, occupational downgrading, employer discrimination and low-quality careers support provided by the host university. There was a view among participants that ethnic resources and social networks could facilitate their access to jobs in the United Kingdom. This study suggests that improving international student employability requires a multi-faceted approach. Universities need to provide international students with tailored careers support and clear guidance on UK work requirements, and to foster stronger partnerships with employers.

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Policymakers need to make visa policy less hostile to international students in order to create an inclusive labour market.

KEYWORDS

agency, employability, international student, United Kingdom

Key insights**What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**

This study explores international students' conceptions of employability, the challenges they experience in job seeking, and the ways they exercise their agency to develop strategies for seeking employment during their masters' studies in the UK.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

This study suggests that improving international student employability requires a multi-faceted approach. Universities need to provide international students with tailored careers support and clear guidance on UK work requirements, and to foster stronger partnerships with employers. Policymakers need to make visa policy less hostile to international students in order to create an inclusive labour market.

INTRODUCTION

Employability has become a central focus in higher education research, particularly in relation to the experiences of international students in host countries such as the United Kingdom (Cheng et al., 2022; Daubney, 2021; Fakunle, 2021; Matsouka & Mihail, 2016). As a concept, employability is widely understood as the ability to secure and sustain employment in one's chosen field, requiring a combination of skills, experiences and professional networks (Harvey et al., 1997; Tomlinson, 2017). Traditional perspectives on employability often position students as passive recipients of career preparation (Tomlinson, 2012, 2017). However, it is clear that students can actively negotiate labour market complexities through reflexivity, strategic decision-making and resource mobilisation (Vu & Ananthram, 2022). Employability can therefore be conceptualised as an active process in which individuals draw upon personal resources, social connections and contextual opportunities to achieve their career aspirations (Pham et al., 2023; Tran & Vu, 2018).

Despite the importance of student agency in this process, there is limited research examining how international students exercise agency to develop their employability in the United Kingdom. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective mechanisms of support for international students to transition successfully into the UK job market. This study adopts the Employability Agency Framework proposed by Pham et al. (2023) to explore international students' conceptions of employability, the challenges they experience in job seeking and the ways they exercise their agency to develop strategies for seeking employment during their Master's studies in the United Kingdom, including how they respond to the barriers.

A post-1992 university in the United Kingdom was chosen for the study, because it integrates transferable skills into its curricula and emphasises work-integrated learning. However, there are structural and systemic barriers existing in the wider context, such as restrictive visa policies and employer preferences for candidates with UK work experience (Darni, 2023; Fakunle, 2021; Marginson, 2011). This study will illuminate how the participating international students deal with the challenges and how the university could better support them to improve their employability outcomes. The research contributes to the broader discourse on international student employability by highlighting the agency of students in seeking employment in the United Kingdom. It provides important insights into the structural factors that facilitate or constrain their employment prospects and sets out recommendations for universities, employers and policymakers to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students in the United Kingdom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students' employability

Employability is a multidimensional concept subject to varying interpretations and measurements across different contexts such as economic, educational and organisational settings (Boudreaux et al., 2022; Eimer & Bohndick, 2023; Matsouka & Mihail, 2016; McQuaid, 2006). In the context of higher education, employability is often embedded within the curriculum, reflecting the institution's role in preparing graduates for the labour market (Yorke, 2006). The notion of employability is thus typically framed in terms of achievements and the alignment with market needs. Studies in the literature tend to define employability in line with the research topic, such as programme design or curriculum development (Chowdhury & Miah, 2019; Koseda et al., 2025; Scandurra et al., 2024). However, existing studies have not clearly defined employability from the perspectives of international students.

Fakunle (2021) describes how students demonstrate their understanding of employability through self-reflection and their efforts to meet employer expectations in the competitive UK job market. Rothwell et al. (2008) emphasise that perceptions of employability are shaped by the interplay of self-assessment and employer evaluation, and influenced by factors like self-efficacy and perceived opportunities. Pham et al. (2023) suggest that understanding what employability means for international students requires a more specific lens, one that centres on individual agency.

There is also a view that international students' ethnic values may promote innovation and a sense of integration (Brooks et al., 2012; Pham et al., 2023). Ethnic capital, including resources within ethnic communities, social networks and home-country habitus, can affect international graduates' employability outcomes (Marginson, 2022). Hearing others talk about their own life and work experiences in the host country can help international graduates understand local industry expectations and adjust their subjectivities accordingly (Jones, 2021; Pham et al., 2023).

An individual's self-beliefs, confidence and active engagement in their employment goals and planning are categorised as individual attributes in Clarke's (2018) dimensions of employability. Pham (2021) refers to these attributes as agentic features, which are closely linked to 'reflexive agency', for example when international students familiarise themselves with the new habitat and labour force. There is thus a need to explore how international students understand the notion of employability and how they exercise agency to navigate the job market.

It is worth noting that international students' employability remains precarious, shaped by a mix of racialised labour market dynamics, visa restrictions and institutional neglect. Studies

have documented the difficulties these students face in navigating unclear recruitment practices, occupational downgrading and limited access to meaningful work placements in the United Kingdom and on a global scale (Fakunle, 2021; Harvey et al., 2002; Hillman, 2021; Jones, 2021; Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020; Matsouka & Mihail, 2016). Within this context, the concept of agency is essential for understanding how international students attempt to navigate such terrain. An agency-focused approach allows us to explore how international students draw on personal, cultural and social capital to negotiate structural inequalities.

Agency and employability

Agency is often defined as an individual's capacity to act independently and make free choices within given sociocultural structures (Bandura, 1989). Framed within constructivist and sociocultural perspectives, agency emphasises the individual student's active role in managing their learning (Baker, 2019; Inouye et al., 2023). In many students, exercise of agency extends further to include their response to social and systemic barriers they may encounter, and this aspect of agency is particularly relevant in international students (Kahn & Lundgren-Resentera, 2023; Pham et al., 2023). Research shows that international students demonstrate resilience and adaptability in navigating new academic and cultural environments (Pham, 2019; Pham & Jackson, 2020); in so doing, they transform their identities and develop hybrid selves (Boudreaux et al., 2022; Torrance & Froese, 2011). They also employ strategies to confront injustices and seek mutual support (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017; Tran & Vu, 2018).

A focus on students' agency in terms of employability highlights the interplay between individual actions and structural factors (Tomlinson, 2010; Tran & Vu, 2018; Vu & Ananthram, 2022). In the UK context, structural factors include hostile visa policies (Cheng et al., 2022), cultural obstacles (Stening, 2021) and discrimination at recruitment (Hillman, 2021). Visa restrictions limit employment during and after studies, to the detriment of students' opportunities to get valuable work experience to boost their employability (Cheng et al., 2022). Lack of the 'right' social traits or networks can contribute to exclusion of international students at the recruitment stage (Brown et al., 2010). For example, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) survey reveals that UK employers prefer candidates with local experience, to the disadvantage of international students (McGirr, 2020; Vivian et al., 2016).

Matherly and Tillman (2015) emphasise that personal agency is the driver of employability, whilst Guilbert et al. (2016) argue that such emphasis overlooks contextual and relational influences on employability. For example, students' perceptions of their 'ability selves' could influence their employability outlooks (Donald et al., 2018; Rätty et al., 2018). Work-integrated learning and self-directed skills development also potentially enhances student employability (Fakunle, 2021; Vu & Ananthram, 2022). Individual agency does not operate in isolation; it is affected by social circumstances and interacts with external factors like engagement strategies and school climate to affect outcomes (Lee & Shute, 2010; Torrance & Froese, 2011). These perspectives suggest that the interplay between social-contextual factors and individual agency is complex and dynamic. There is a need to explore how international students demonstrate this interplay in developing their employability.

The Employability Agency Framework

Pham et al. (2023) proposes five key components that shape employability: subjectivity, contextual structures, host-country resources, ethnic resources and agentic features.

Subjectivities refer to the individual's sense of identity, self-perception and career aspirations. Contextual structures are institutional, legal and social frameworks shaping career opportunities for international students. Host-country resources are the educational qualifications, professional skills and work experiences gained by international students in the United Kingdom (Fakunle, 2021). Ethnic resources include transnational personal and social networks, and the diverse perspectives within them, that can enhance an individual's employability. Agentic features encompass individual characteristics such as self-efficacy, resilience and proactivity that support international students to deal with employment challenges. These features help students integrate their subjectivities with available resources to create employment opportunities (Baker, 2019).

Pham et al.'s (2023) Employability Agency Framework was chosen as a theoretical framework for this study due to its comprehensive approach to interpreting international students' experience of employability. Different from other theoretical lenses, such as that of Clarke (2018), which isolate individual capabilities from structural constraints, Pham et al.'s (2023) framework explains the complex interplay between agency and context. The proposed five key components of employability—subjectivities, agentic features, ethnic resources, host-country resources and contextual structures—allow for a more holistic analysis of how employability is enacted and constrained. By applying Pham et al.'s framework, this study reveals international students' conceptions of employability, their unique employment experiences, including the challenges they face, and how they actively develop their employability during their Master's degree programmes in the United Kingdom.

METHODOLOGY

This study draws on 16 interviews with 14 international students enrolled in the MA Educational Studies programme at a post-1992 university in England and four lecturers who are the module/programme leaders. This programme aims to prepare students for teaching careers. Two key research questions are addressed by the study:

- RQ1** How do international students at a post-1992 university in the United Kingdom understand the concept of employability?
- RQ2** How do the international students develop their employability during their Master's studies in the United Kingdom?

This qualitative case study seeks to explore the 'what' and the 'how' aspects of international students' employability and the dynamics of their agency in developing employability. Purposive sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was used to recruit research participants. The 14 selected student participants are from Nigeria, India, Vietnam and China. Half of them had teaching experience before coming to the United Kingdom for the postgraduate taught programme. Research participants' prior teaching experience shapes their expectations of employability. Apart from getting a UK qualification, they hope to improve their career prospects and gain international exposure via relevant institutional support. Table 1 summarises key background information about the research participants.

Interviews were semi-structured and based on a set of questions designed to elicit the participants' conceptions of employability and descriptions of the ways they developed their employability during their MA studies in the United Kingdom. Each interview lasted about 40 min. All interviews were professionally transcribed.

TABLE 1 Research participants.

	Pseudonym	Gender	Previous teaching experience	Nationality	Age
Student	Participant 1	F	Experienced	Nigerian	30–40
	Participant 2	F	Novice	Indian	20–30
	Participant 3	M	Experienced	Chinese	20–30
	Participant 4	F	Novice	Vietnamese	20–30
	Participant 5	F	Novice	Burman	20–30
	Participant 6	M	Novice	Vietnamese	20–30
	Participant 7	F	Experienced	Indian	20–30
	Participant 8	M	Experienced	Nigerian	40–50
	Participant 9	F	Experienced	Vietnamese	20–30
	Participant 10	F	Novice	Vietnamese	20–30
	Participant 11	F	Novice	Vietnamese	20–30
	Participant 12	F	Experienced	Vietnamese	20–30
	Participant 13	F	Experienced	Vietnamese	20–30
	Participant 14	F	Novice	Vietnamese	20–30
Academic	Participant 15	F	SL Course leader	British	40–50
	Participant 16	F	SL	British	30–40
	Participant 17	M	SL	British	30–40
	Participant 18	M	SL	British	40–50

Thematic analysis via NVivo (Clarke & Braun, 2016) was used to explore the data in the interview transcripts, as this approach affords a rich understanding of the themes emerging in qualitative interview data. University ethical approval was obtained for the study. Participation was completely voluntary. The names of the research participants and the university are anonymised.

FINDINGS

The five dimensions of employability agency proposed by Pham et al. (2023) are used to interpret the research findings: subjectivities, contextual structures, host-country resources, ethnic resources and agentic features. Research participants were keen to get employment in the United Kingdom and they framed their employability primarily in terms of individualistic factors such as transferable skills, adaptability, networking and institutional reputation. However, their aspirations for employment were undermined by contextual structures acting as systemic barriers. Despite these challenges, the students' ethnic resources, particularly their informal networks within co-ethnic communities, emerged as a valuable (albeit informal) support mechanism for job seeking. Furthermore, participants exhibited the agentic features of self-belief and proactive engagement in skills development. Nevertheless, their exercise of individual agency was not sufficient to overcome the substantial systemic barriers they met. There is a large gap between international students' expectations of employability and their actual outcomes in the UK labour market, raising concerns about the return on their investment in international education.

Understandings of employability

Research participants identified university rankings, transferable skills, adaptability and social networks as crucial elements for securing jobs in the competitive UK job market. The university's high ranking was seen as very important, especially by participants who did not have previous teaching experience. They felt that the university's rank and reputation would influence how potential employers perceive them. Transferable skills were emphasised by all research participants; self-presentation, evidence of strong performance and flexibility were regarded as the most important skills. For example, Participant 1, an international student from Nigeria with prior university teaching experience, shared her view:

It's your attitude and your personality that matters. For instance, when you have been invited for an interview, your attitude towards the questions, your personality and the way you present yourself are important. We need to convince the interviewer that we are ready for the job.

(Participant 1)

The emphasis on these characteristics and transferable skills aligns with Clarke's (2018) findings that individual attributes such as confidence and active engagement can enhance employability. The students' 'agentic features' (Pham et al., 2023), such as self-efficacy and adaptability, support them to engage with the job market in their host country.

The importance of social networks was widely recognised, with 6 out of 14 student participants indicating that networking could give them a competitive advantage in their job search. Participant 4, for instance, described building networks with lecturers, classmates and people in senior positions as part of her strategic approach to her career development.

You really need networks. You have to reach out to people that can help you with your career path. I always try to stay in a professional relationship with most of my lecturers and most of my seniors, classmates so that if they have any chance to refer me, I will take it.

(Participant 4)

Here, the value of social networks for employability echoes the findings of Marginson (2022) that ethnic capital, including social networks and community connections, can influence international graduates' employment outcomes.

Subjectivities

All student participants recognised the importance of improving their pedagogical skills, teaching methodologies and subject matter expertise, in order to build their employability in UK teaching roles. They expressed a commitment to developing strong English language skills for effective communication and engagement with diverse student groups.

Eight participants indicated self-awareness of their particular or special skills that they hoped would boost their employment prospects in a challenging climate. For instance, Participant 6 was passionate about AI and had skilfully integrated AI into his teaching:

Essential skills to me are creative thinking and flexibility in applying new technical advancements (AI) in teaching, because we are living in a globalising and changing world.

(Participant 6)

This quote suggests that Participant 6's subjectivities, which encompass his self-perception and career aspirations, shaped his understanding of the essential skills that could help him succeed in the complex job market. By exercising agency to align teaching approaches with his passion for AI, he demonstrates both a reflexive and forward-thinking mindset on his employability.

Contextual structures as systemic barriers

Despite strong motivation to become employable in the United Kingdom, most student participants reported that systemic barriers had reduced their job opportunities, with the effect of diminishing their aspirations to work in the United Kingdom. The identified barriers include information asymmetry concerning qualifications required for employment, bureaucratic procedure for professional recognition of overseas qualifications, occupational downgrading to junior roles and employers' attitudes (including bias). Certain host-country resources, specifically the university careers services, were perceived as inadequate and misaligned with international students' needs. These experiences suggest that contextual structures and issues can constrain individual agency and operate as systemic barriers to international students' employability (Pham et al., 2023).

Information asymmetry

Most student participants had hoped that completing a Master's degree in educational studies would automatically qualify them for teaching roles in the United Kingdom. However, the reality is very different. Despite widely reported teacher shortages, the Master's qualification alone does not make the graduates eligible for jobs as teachers in the United Kingdom because that degree does not confer qualified teacher status (QTS). Participants were unaware of this before embarking on their Master's programmes. Participant 1 shared her experience:

My expectation was that I would just get my Master's degree and apply for a teaching job. I trusted that the Master's degree would qualify me to teach in the United Kingdom. But that expectation actually was not met.

(Participant 1)

Similarly, student participants were not made aware beforehand of employers' requirements of specific certificates and documents for recruitment purposes. The gap between expectation and reality reflects a problem of 'information asymmetry' (Zhao & Cox, 2022) experienced by international students.

Bureaucratic processes for professional recognition

Student participants encountered lengthy bureaucratic processes to obtain the documents required by prospective employers. For example, Participant 7, a qualified mathematics teacher from India, shared his frustration at the hurdles of getting his Indian qualifications recognised for QTS registration:

It's a challenge to get a PCC or DBS check. I have 4 years of teaching experience [in India], but they need QTS registration for teachers [in the United Kingdom],

like mathematics teachers. I applied for that, and it takes 4 to 8 weeks, just to get registered.

(Participant 7)

Experiences such as those of Participant 7 suggest that the onerous professional recognition process can increase the complexity that international students face in seeking jobs in the United Kingdom, which puts them at further disadvantage.

Occupational downgrading

Student participants found it vexing that despite being qualified and experienced teachers in their home countries, it was not possible for them to secure commensurate teaching positions in the United Kingdom. Only 4 out of the 14 participants were able to obtain short-term teaching-related jobs, but these were junior roles—teaching assistants and cover supervisors. For example, in the case of Participant 10, who was a qualified university lecturer in Vietnam, a teaching assistant job was the only type of teaching role she could get:

My first job is an international student ambassador at our university [in the United Kingdom], which is quite seasonal, so I found another job as a teaching assistant.

(Participant 10)

Student participants did not regard these junior roles in schools as valuable for their career development, because they were limited to supervisory and behaviour management activities in the classroom and not permitted to teach. They felt that they were being 'deskilled' (Gargano, 2009; Kim, 2010) and were disappointed that neither their prior teaching experience nor their expensive Master's degrees were valued in the United Kingdom.

These difficulties in securing appropriate employment in education led 9 of the 14 student participants to resort to low-skill jobs to cover their living expenses. These jobs were seasonal, non-contracted and perceived as detrimental to their aspirations for a teaching career in the United Kingdom. Half of the student participants expressed concerns about their employment prospects after their Master's programme and had doubts whether studying in the United Kingdom was a worthwhile investment. For example, Participant 5, who previously worked as a high school teacher in Burma, indicated that studying in the United Kingdom was not good value for money:

I paid a lot of money to be here [in the United Kingdom], and to be honest, I have expectations on the outcome... When it comes to getting jobs, qualifications do not seem to interest employers very much.

(Participant 5)

This comment reflects the growing scepticism among the student participants about the likely return on their investment in UK study. In contrast, the views of the academic participants were that employability is embedded in the Master's Educational Studies programme. For example, Participant 15, a senior lecturer and course leader, asserted that the programme enables students to develop important transferable skills:

There's a theoretical or practical underpinning [in the programme]. They're not just giving opinions and they've got some sort of resource or evidence behind

what they're saying. So, students' ability to make reasoned arguments [is an] important skill for employability, and I think that's important in life.

(Participant 15)

Participant 16, another senior lecturer, agreed with Participant 15 that the Master's programme can help students get ready for work:

From what I know, some tasks prepare them [students] for future skills that they might start their career...

(Participant 16)

The disparity in these views suggests that there is a large gap between the academic participants' notions of what provisions are effective in developing international students' employability and what the actual employment outcomes are for international students in the United Kingdom. This gap highlights a need for targeted interventions to enhance international students' employability. As Brown et al. (2010) rightly point out, international students need specialised employability support that addresses the distinctive challenges of transitioning into a foreign labour market, as well as the generic skills needed by all graduates.

Employer attitudes (including bias)

Another major concern shared by the student participants was that employers did not provide any feedback when they rejected job applications, which meant that students did not know where they fell short. Comments by Participant 11, who is from Vietnam, were typical:

I expect reasons why my application is refused, so I can improve, but normally the [employer] emails [to] just say sorry and wish me luck.

(Participant 11)

The lack of feedback served to discourage student participants from applying for UK jobs and to decrease their confidence. The findings chime with a study by Darni (2023) showing that employment processes are not transparent for international graduates. Additional obstacles were found in employers' preferences for designated skill sets which the participants were not aware of at job application and for applicants who could work full-time. Participant 4, who had a Master's in business from Australia, observed that:

They only want full-time. We are only allowed a total of 20h a week, not to mention that the number goes down to 15h if we work on campus.

(Participant 4)

This cap on international students' permitted working hours is imposed by student visa regulations in the United Kingdom. Aside from the effect of the cap, the participants perceived that their immigration status alone was an obstacle to jobs, simply because it put employers off. Participant 12, a novice language teacher from Vietnam, suspected she was being discriminated against for this reason:

I found it very hard to find a long-term job because of the visa, because we are on student visa. Employers might feel reluctant when they want to hire me.

(Participant 12)

These findings support Pham et al.'s (2023) argument that the legal framework can negatively affect the career opportunities of international students. In this study, the UK visa system is a contextual structure that constrains international students' agency and employability. In other words, visa restrictions not only make it difficult for these students to secure employment but also limit their opportunities to gain valuable work experience with which to build their CVs and professional networks. In turn, the students' subjectivities change: they may feel discouraged and less confident to navigate the job market in the United Kingdom.

Ethnic resources

Networking is classified as an 'ethnic resource' in Pham et al.'s (2023) Employability Agency Framework. The student participants saw networking as important for improving their employability outcomes. They described the common tactic of referring friends to job opportunities, which helped to build informal support systems within co-ethnic communities:

Currently, I am working part-time for a local supermarket, I was referred by a friend who has worked there for a while, and because we are from the same hometown.

(Participant 2)

Six participants had successful experiences of using personal networks to look for jobs in the United Kingdom. For example, Participant 3 had previously made many applications and none was successful. Eventually, he secured a teaching position through the recommendation of a British classmate who was a senior teacher at a local school:

At the moment, my only teaching role came from a classmate. Her reference was really strong and it got me a teaching job in her school. I was lucky to have met her in the course.

(Participant 3)

In this way, Participant 3's personal network helped him mitigate the negative effects of employer attitudes and the systemic barriers in the UK job market. By cultivating and using that network, Participant 3 was actively exercising his agency to develop his employability. The perceived value of personal networks in this study also aligns with Morley's (2001) critique that employability discourses should not overlook factors such as ethnicity, identity and social class, despite their significance for international students.

Agentic features

Despite the systemic barriers, the research participants demonstrated reflexive agency in the self-belief and confidence afforded by their gains in professional knowledge, linguistic skills and cultural competencies during their UK studies:

I have a growing love for teaching. I have enhanced language proficiency and learned more professional knowledge and inclusivity. Also, I am more aware of ethical procedures in all sorts of activities.

(Participant 14)

However, self-belief and confidence alone are insufficient for the student participants to overcome systemic barriers. This reinforces Pham's (2019, 2021; Pham & Jackson, 2020) observation that while self-efficacy and proactive engagement are important, they must be supported by institutional change and policy reform in order to improve international students' employment outcomes.

Careers support from the host university

It is noteworthy that academic and student participants diverged in their views on the effectiveness of careers support provided by the host university. The students were disappointed with the careers services and judged the quality of their work placements as low. For example, Participant 3, a teacher of business and accounting from Hong Kong, described his unsatisfactory placement experiences:

Placements are randomly arranged by the school. When I was doing a placement, it felt like no one really cared about you as a student.

(Participant 3)

In contrast, academic participants felt that all the necessary provisions for career and placement support were already in place and that it was up to the international students to engage with the services. For example, Participant 17, a senior lecturer, asserted that:

There are employability advisors and the university prides itself on being able to support people for the workforce and employment. Hopefully, students can make use of that.

(Participant 17)

Some academic participants appeared unconcerned with international students' employment prospects in the United Kingdom because it was their understanding that students would return to their home countries. Participant 15, a course leader, implied that international students do not need to work in the United Kingdom:

Within the goals of the course, we don't have an expectation that students will then work in the United Kingdom. They may go back to their own countries or different countries to work.

(Participant 15)

Such mistaken expectations by programme staff are at odds with the host university's strategy for international student recruitment, which promises employability—a strong incentive for prospective students to study in the United Kingdom and to choose the host university.

DISCUSSION

The five key components of Pham et al.'s (2023) Employability Agency Framework—subjectivities, contextual structures, host-country resources, ethnic resources and agentic features—are all evident in the lived experiences of the research participants in this study. For instance, in their pursuit of employment, the student participants exhibited agentic features that include a strong sense of self-belief, proactive engagement in skills development and

demonstrable adaptability. This finding is consistent with Pham et al.'s (2023) emphasis on individual agency as a driving force in employability. Ethnic resources appear to play a significant role in supporting the students' job search, echoing Pham et al.'s (2023) assertion that ethnic capital and social networks can be valuable assets, particularly in unfamiliar labour markets.

Whilst Pham et al. (2023) posit that individual agency can empower international students to navigate employment, findings from this study suggest that a high level of agency by itself is not enough to overcome the entrenched systemic barriers to employment, such as restrictive visa regulations, occupational downgrading and employer attitudes and bias. The student participants had exercised their agency actively and strategically by leveraging the available host-country resources (e.g., university careers services) and their ethnic resources (including pre-existing and new networks), but their goals were thwarted by the systemic barriers. For example, although the participants were diligently seeking to develop their skills and build professional networks, they could only get junior or low-skill roles due to the effect of visa restrictions, employer bias and the non-recognition of international qualifications and experience (McGirr, 2020). These challenges have discouraged the international students from further seeking UK jobs and contributed to a wide gap between the expectation and the reality of employability. The students chose to invest in their Master's programme and come to the United Kingdom with the expectation of enhanced employment prospects, but then, in situ, they found the job market to be structurally hostile, notwithstanding a well-publicised teacher recruitment crisis. In sum, these findings suggest that although international students exercise agency in job seeking in the United Kingdom, the impact of their agency is constrained by contextual structures (systemic barriers). This critical interplay between agency and contextual structure has not been clearly articulated by Pham et al.'s (2023) Employability Agency Framework.

This study also reveals that international students predominantly consider employability through an individualistic lens, focusing on attributes to be personally developed—such as transferable skills, adaptability to new environments and the building of professional networks. This perspective aligns with the 'subjectivities' and 'agentic features' elements of Pham et al.'s (2023) framework. Such individualistic conceptions of employability echo broader neoliberal discourses within higher education that emphasise personal responsibility for career success in increasingly competitive global labour markets (Young, 2009). There is a need to move towards a more relational and ecological understanding of employability (Guilbert et al., 2016; Vu & Ananthram, 2022) because employability is not just something an individual international student has or does not have. It emerges from the dynamic interaction between the individual, the social context and the labour market.

This study argues that we need to avoid too great an emphasis on individual agency when studying international students' employability. We need to acknowledge systemic factors as primary and powerful determinants of the students' employability outcomes. The host university and the UK government will need to tackle and minimise the systemic barriers facing international students in order to support them effectively to navigate and succeed in the UK job market. Based on the key findings of this study, four recommendations are proposed to enhance international students' employability in the UK context.

Firstly, universities need to improve their provision of careers support and tailor it to the needs of international students. While students were attracted to the postgraduate taught programme for better career prospects, many academics positioned the course purely as an academic qualification. This disconnect suggests a kind of 'mis-selling', particularly when institutional strategies promote UK-based career prospects as a key recruitment incentive. In the context of the marketisation of higher education, where international students constitute a major revenue stream, such misalignment is problematic and risks reputational damage. Academic staff need to be better supported by their university to increase their knowledge

of international student employability, institutional employability strategy and international student perceived value of studying abroad. At an early stage, institutions must provide clear guidance on UK certification requirements in the relevant professions and sectors, and offer networking events with employers to clarify expectations about international qualifications and experience. Universities need to support international students to develop job search strategies to navigate the complex UK job market. As placements and internships are recognised as key employability enhancers, these should align with individual students' career goals and provide professional development opportunities that genuinely bridge the gap between academic learning and workplace realities (Cheng et al., 2022; Fakunle, 2021; Rätty et al., 2018; Tran & Soejatminah, 2017).

Secondly, at the national level, the need to address systemic barriers is urgent. Student visa reform is a priority. It is recommended that policymakers review and change the visa regulations, for example eliminating or amending the 20-h cap, to promote greater equity for international students, as they contribute to the United Kingdom's economic prosperity and rich cultural diversity. Also, official processes for recognition of non-UK professional credentials must be streamlined so that international students' access to the UK labour market is not fettered by unnecessary bureaucracy and delays. Employers need to adopt more transparent, equitable and inclusive recruitment practices and commit to the provision of constructive feedback to all job applicants, including international students. Universities could offer a wide range of tailored employability support in order to meet students' employment needs. For example, international students aiming for UK-based employment would benefit from advice on QTS, visa sponsorship pathways and mentorship from UK-based professionals. Conversely, those planning to return home will need support on developing transferrable skills and getting to know their local job markets.

Thirdly, ethnic resources can be leveraged in strategic and systematic ways to support international students. Universities and policymakers should recognise the value of organic networks of resources and mutual aid, and could explore more formal mechanisms to help students capitalise on these networks. For example, mentorship programmes and/or dedicated online platforms could connect international students with established co-ethnic professionals. In these spaces, students could obtain culturally relevant job-seeking support (Pham et al., 2023) and opportunities to build social capital.

Finally, and fundamentally, the dominant employability discourses need to change, informed by the evidence of the lived experience of international students. We need to shift the focus of the conversation from individual agency and individual skills development towards a more ecological understanding of employability, which takes proper account of systemic barriers and how best to break them down.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that international Master's students at a UK university perceive employability as being personally equipped with the skills and attitudes to navigate and negotiate the intricate landscape of the UK labour market. Their employability is shaped by the complex interplay of their own subjectivities, agentic features, ethnic resources and wider contextual structures. While the students' employability agency is considerably influenced by their personal motivation and professional identity formation, it also comes up against substantial systemic barriers in the United Kingdom. Despite the students' determined efforts to improve their job prospects, these barriers impede access to the employment they desire.

The study highlights that the participating students view the Master's programme and the host university's careers services as lacking in tailored employability support. However,

the students' confidence in themselves was bolstered by the academic competencies and knowledge gained through the degree. There is a clear and pressing need for host universities to improve their careers support for international students. At the national level, there is a need for policymakers to revisit the current visa restrictions, which are a major barrier to job access, and to develop inclusive policies that will improve international students' employment prospects in the United Kingdom.

Ultimately, addressing the challenges faced by international students in the UK job market requires a collaborative approach. Universities, employers and policymakers need to work in concert to dismantle or minimise these systemic barriers and to establish more inclusive and effective support mechanisms. Collectively, we can support international students to develop robust employability agency and enhance their opportunities for successful integration into the job market.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This project has received institutional research ethics approval.

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