Graduate Attributes and Influential Factors in Higher Education: Perceptions of International Undergraduates in China

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Abstract. Internationalization in higher education has positioned Chinese universities as attractive destinations for international students seeking globally recognized credentials. While the importance of graduate attributes for employability is widely acknowledged, existing research has primarily focused on Western contexts, which leaves gaps in understanding how these attributes are developed among international undergraduates in Chinese universities. This study adopted a qualitative exploratory approach to address these gaps. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 international undergraduate students, who were recruited from a mixed sampling method that combined voluntary sampling and purposive sampling and were from diverse academic disciplines and cultural backgrounds. Thematic analysis was employed to explore students' perceptions of key graduate attributes and the factors influencing their development of graduate attributes in Chinese universities. Findings highlighted human capital, including academic qualifications, technical expertise, and transferable hard skills as the cornerstone of employability. Social capital, such as peer networks and faculty mentorship, and cultural capital, including familiarity with Chinese workplace norms, were also deemed critical. Agentic capital, characterized by self-initiative and strategic planning, further underscored the importance of proactive career management. Factors influencing these attributes included well-structured curricula, interactive teaching methods, university career services, and extracurricular activities. The study underscored the need for higher education institutions to adopt holistic approaches to curriculum design, enhance industry collaboration, and provide tailored support services for international students. These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and higher education providers aiming to better prepare international graduates for the global job market.

Keywords: higher education; graduate attributes; employability; international students; China

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1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has emerged as a defining trend in the 21st century, driven by globalization and the growing demand for cross-border knowledge exchange. Universities worldwide have embraced this trend, developing programmes to attract international students and foster intercultural learning environments (Zadravec, 2023). This global phenomenon reflects the increasing recognition of the role of international education in enhancing graduates' global competencies, employability, and adaptability in an interconnected world (Mushfiq, 2024; Yaremchuk, 2023). In alignment with this global trend, China has positioned itself as a major player in the international higher education arena. Through supportive policies such as the "Study in China" initiative and the provision of scholarships under the Belt and Road framework (Jiang, 2020; Jiang, 2023), the country has witnessed a steady increase in the number of international students pursuing undergraduate education. These efforts have attracted a growing number of international students—over 500,000—to Chinese universities, particularly at the undergraduate level (Wang et al., 2022). This influx reflects China's growing influence as an educational destination, which offers not only academic opportunities but also exposure to its unique cultural and economic environment.

Despite these developments, the novelty of international education in China presents significant challenges. Unlike well-established systems in Western countries, China's higher education system for international students often lacks systematic programme designs and clearly defined graduate attributes—benchmarks of what international graduates are expected to achieve upon completing their studies (Wang & Yi, 2023; Wu & Wang, 2021). This lack of specification has led to issues such as unemployment or underemployment among international graduates, both in China, the host country, and in their home countries (Hu, 2024; Wang et al., 2023; Zhu, 2023). While international education is intended to enhance global employability, the absence of tailored curricula, industry engagement, and comprehensive support systems can hinder the realization of this objective (Xue & Wang, 2019). These deficiencies underscore the need to explore and address the factors that influence graduate attributes in the Chinese higher education context.

However, despite significant research attention to the internationalization of higher education in China, a noticeable gap remains in studies focusing on the development of graduate attributes among international undergraduates. Existing literature predominantly highlights enrolment statistics, policy initiatives, and the economic implications of internationalization (Lei, 2023; Zhang, 2021; Zhu, 2024), while the critical aspect of graduate preparedness remains underexplored. This oversight is particularly concerning, as the fundamental objective of international education is to equip students for professional success and meaningful contributions in a globalized world (Wang & Yi, 2023). Therefore, the purpose of this study, underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, is to examine the perspectives of international undergraduates in China regarding graduate attributes and the influential factors shaping their development. The study sought to answer the following research questions: (1)

What graduate attributes are perceived as important by international undergraduates in China? and (2) What factors influence the development of these attributes in Chinese higher education? By addressing these questions, this study aimed to contribute to the understanding of graduate attributes in the context of China's internationalized higher education. The findings are expected to inform policymakers and educators about the challenges and opportunities in aligning programme designs with global and local employability needs, ultimately enhancing the outcomes of international education in China.

2. Literature Review

Graduate attributes, defined as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions developed during higher education, play a crucial role in employability, which refers to the ability to secure and maintain meaningful employment (Bunyamin et al., 2022; Khan & Mandal, 2022). Beyond academic qualifications, employability encompasses a range of competencies that align with the dynamic demands of the global labour market. A multi-dimensional framework, including human capital (the academic knowledge, technical skills, and qualifications acquired through formal education), social capital (the networks and relationships that facilitate access to opportunities and career progression), cultural capital (the knowledge, norms, and confidence needed to navigate diverse workplace environments), identity capital (self-confidence and self-awareness that enable graduates to articulate their value and career aspirations), psychological capital (essential traits for managing career challenges such as resilience, motivation, and adaptability), and agentic capital (the ability to take initiative, set goals, and strategically manage one's career path by leveraging other forms of capital) (Donald, 2024; Hu, 2023; Tomlinson, 2017), offers a comprehensive lens for understanding graduate readiness. Together, these forms of capital provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating graduate attributes and their role in employability.

However, much of the existing research on international students in China emphasizes human capital, overlooking the interplay of other capitals in shaping graduates' readiness for the labour market. For example, studies often focus on academic achievements, such as grades, degrees, and technical knowledge, as indicators of employability (Hu, 2024; Wang & Gao, 2022; Wang & Li, 2020; Zhang & Zhu, 2020). While these are undoubtedly important, the broader, more nuanced aspects of employability remain under-explored. Exceptional studies were conducted by Liu and He (2020) and Ma (2020), which highlighted the role of social capital in enhancing international graduates' employability in China by fostering professional networks and connections during their academic programmes. Similarly, Xue and Wang (2019) and Zhang (2024) explored the importance of cultural capital, noting how gaining cultural knowledge and confidence allows international students to adapt more effectively to cross-cultural workplaces. Despite these contributions, few studies have examined the other forms of capital or presented a comprehensive understanding of international students' graduate attributes in China. This gap in the literature underscores the need for a more holistic approach to understanding graduate employability in international education contexts.

However, the capital-based classification of graduate attributes is not sufficient to approach employability, which lies not only at a personal level but also at a broader social level (Even & Christiansen, 2024). Therefore, a more comprehensive framework is necessary to account for the role of higher education providers and the broader ecosystem in shaping graduate attributes and employability outcomes. Hardin-Ramanan et al. (2020) foreground the concept of career readiness within an interconnected ecosystem where universities and employers contribute to enhancing students' employability. This framework emphasizes that higher education institutions must navigate the demands of multiple stakeholders while exploring innovative pedagogical strategies to prepare students for the workforce (Hu & Wang, 2024; Moumen & Mejjad, 2021).

In this ecosystem-based model, universities are pivotal players (Hardin-Ramanan et al., 2020), tasked with developing curricular innovations that integrate skill enhancement, foster industry collaborations, and providing robust career guidance services (Boffo, 2018; Othman et al., 2023). For example, embedding opportunities for experiential learning, such as internships and work-based projects, allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts while simultaneously building social, cultural, and agentic capital (Purnawati & Sari, 2023); industry collaborations further bridge the gap between academic preparation and market expectations, ensuring that students develop skills aligned with labour market demands (Chen, 2020); career guidance services can help students identify their strengths, set realistic career goals, and strategically utilize their various forms of capital for long-term professional success (Rahmi et al., 2022). Situating employability within this broader ecosystem underscores the need for higher education providers to act as mediators between individual student development and societal needs.

As such, a number of studies have emphasized the role of Chinese universities in enhancing international students' employability. For example, Zhang and Zhu (2020) explored how technical and domain-specific training in engineering programmes equips international students with hard skills directly applicable to industry demands. Similarly, Cheng (2023) examined the curriculum design in business administration courses, highlighting how practical modules such as financial modeling and data analytics workshops contribute to skill development. In the field of medical education, Wang et al. (2019) analysed the effectiveness of hands-on clinical training for international medical students studying in China, emphasizing how exposure to real-world applications of theoretical knowledge builds critical hard skills. Furthermore, a study by Qiao et al. (2020) focused on the IT sector, showcasing how specialized courses on coding, software development, and system architecture offered by Chinese universities have enhanced students' technical competencies and improved their job prospects in both host and home countries. These studies collectively underscore the importance of human capital development in aligning educational outcomes with market needs, particularly through curriculum innovations and practical training modules that provide international students with tangible, industry-relevant expertise.

However, despite the aforementioned gap on over-emphasis on human capital, previous research in China also tends to overlook the broader role that universities can play in enhancing international students' employability. While much attention has been paid to technical skill development and academic knowledge, there is limited exploration of how universities can create ecosystems that foster comprehensive career readiness (Cheng, 2023; Liu & He, 2020). This includes initiatives such as establishing stronger university-industry partnerships, integrating soft-skill training into curricula, and providing robust career services tailored to the unique needs of international students (Wang & Yi, 2023; Wu & Wang, 2021). Addressing these gaps requires a paradigm shift where universities move beyond academic and technical training to adopt a more holistic approach. This involves recognizing the multifaceted nature of employability and designing programmes that not only equip students with human capital, but also other forms of capital to ensure their readiness to succeed in an increasingly globalized workforce (Hu & Wang, 2024), thereby justifying the present study.

3. Methodology
3.1. Research Design
The present study was conducted at a university in a major Chinese city, selected for its alignment with local and national educational policies that have successfully attracted a diverse cohort of international students from various socio-cultural backgrounds (Shu, 2022). The research adopted an exploratory qualitative approach, underpinned by a multiple-case study design, to provide a thorough and contextualized understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The exploratory nature of the study was particularly suited for examining the lived experiences and perceptions of international undergraduates in a complex and dynamic educational setting. The multiple-case study design allowed for an in-depth exploration of diverse perspectives across various socio-cultural and disciplinary contexts (Sensing, 2022), enabling the identification of patterns and differences within and across cases. This design facilitated a holistic understanding of the significant graduate attributes and the factors influencing employability in the context of Chinese higher education, while also offering flexibility to account for the unique characteristics of the participants and their academic journeys.

3.2. Sampling
A mixed sampling method was adopted to recruit participants of the study as it allowed for more flexibility in the sampling process (Singh, 2023). Initially, voluntary sampling was employed: the researchers, with assistance from academic advisors, shared research information with international students at the university. Interested students were invited to provide their contact details for follow-up, which created a pool of potential participants. Subsequently, purposive sampling was applied based on the following criteria: (1) they were enrolled in full-time undergraduate programmes, as this ensured consistent engagement with the university's academic and extracurricular offerings; (2) they were in the final year of their studies, as this cohort had accumulated sufficient academic and practical experiences to reflect on their graduate attributes and

employability; (3) they demonstrated diversity in terms of academic disciplines and cultural backgrounds, to provide a broad representation of experiences and perceptions regarding graduate attributes and employability; (4) they had experience participating in educational research, as this familiarity facilitated effective communication and deeper reflection during the study.

Consequently, 18 international undergraduates were recruited, a sample size deemed sufficient to achieve qualitative saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2020). The demographic information in Table 1 indicates that the participants, aged between 22 and 25, originated from Asian and African countries, which are the primary sources of international students for Chinese universities (Wang et al., 2022). They were enrolled in diverse fields of study, ranging from medicine to engineering, representing some of the most sought-after majors among international students in China (Hu & Wang, 2024). This diversity ensured the study captured a wide range of perspectives and experiences related to graduate attributes and employability.

Table 1: Participants' demographic information

Participant	Gender	Gender	Native Country	Major
1	Female	23	Kenya	Medicine
2	Female	24	Kenya	Medicine
3	Female	22	Japan	Chinese Language and Literature
4	Female	25	Ghana	Business and Finance
5	Female	24	Kazakhstan	Information Technology
6	Female	22	Bangladesh	Business and Finance
7	Female	23	Ghana	Medicine
8	Female	22	Kazakhstan	Chinese Language and Literature
9	Female	22	Ghana	Chinese Language and Literature
10	Female	22	Nigeria	Information Technology
11	Male	22	Mongolia	Engineering
12	Male	23	Nigeria	Information Technology
13	Male	23	Pakistan	Engineering
14	Male	24	Nigeria	Information Technology
15	Male	24	Nigeria	Information Technology
16	Male	25	Pakistan	Business and Finance
17	Male	23	Ghana	Engineering
18	Male	22	Pakistan	Engineering

3.3. Data Collection Method
In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants in either Chinese or English, depending on their preference, and each interview lasted for 30 to 45 minutes. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in probing specific topics while ensuring that key themes were consistently addressed across all interviews (Sensing, 2022). Topics included participants' perceptions of important graduate attributes, their views on the relevance of their academic programmes, the support provided by their universities, their preparation for the labour market, and the challenges they faced as international students. The interview protocol (refer to Appendix 1) used in the study was adapted from Hu and Wang (2024), whose research had similar objectives of

exploring the perceived important graduate attributes and influential factors. Since their research was contextualized in Malaysia, modifications were made to align with the present research context and were further confirmed by these researchers for validity. Example questions included: "What skills or attributes do you think are most important for your future career?" "How do you feel your current academic programme prepares you for employment?" and "What challenges have you encountered as an international student in China?" All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the data.

3.4. Data Analysis
Thematic analysis was conducted systematically, adhering to the steps outlined by Rosairo (2023): becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Data analysis began with an in-depth review of the interview transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' responses. This process involved multiple readings of the transcripts to identify recurring patterns and nuances. Initial codes were generated by segmenting the data into meaningful units that reflected the participants' views on graduate attributes and the factors influencing their development.

Once the initial codes were identified, they were grouped into categories based on shared meanings and relevance to the research objectives. For example, codes such as "degree as a credential," "language proficiency certificates," and "practical skills" were generated using a concept-driven approach, based on the underlying theories, and were categorized under human capital, while codes like "networking events," "peer collaboration," and "faculty mentorship" were grouped under social capital. This categorization process ensured that all relevant aspects of the data were captured comprehensively. Themes were then developed by integrating the categories into broader concepts that encapsulated the key findings of the study. For instance, Perceived Key Graduate Attributes emerged as a theme encompassing human, social, cultural, and agentic capitals as critical components of employability. The iterative process of reviewing and refining themes ensured that they accurately represented the data and aligned with the study's objectives.

3.5. Qualitative Trustworthiness
Throughout the data collection and analysis process, qualitative trustworthiness was prioritized by adhering to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Jaison, 2018). Member checking was a key strategy employed to enhance credibility. Participants were invited to review the translations and interpretations of their interview responses to confirm that their perspectives were accurately captured. This step not only validated the findings but also strengthened the trustworthiness of the analysis. Triangulation was also employed to enhance the validity of the findings. This involved cross-verifying data from multiple sources of interviews to ensure a comprehensive understanding and to mitigate potential biases. Additionally, the analysis process was meticulously documented to ensure transparency. Reflexive notes were

maintained at each stage to record analytical decisions, researcher reflections, and potential biases. This documentation facilitated dependability by providing a clear audit trail of the analysis process. Transferability was addressed by providing rich, thick descriptions of the themes, supported by illustrative quotes from participants.

4. Findings

4.1. Perceived Key Graduate Attributes

The qualitative analysis highlighted *human capital* as a primary component of graduate attributes for employability among international undergraduates in China. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of possessing a degree from a full-time higher education provider in China, which was perceived as a significant credential valued both in their home countries and globally. Additionally, earning certificates, particularly those related to language proficiency (e.g., College English Test for English proficiency), industry-specific qualifications, and internship recognitions, further strengthened their employability profiles. The knowledge acquired during their studies, especially technical and subject-specific expertise, was another key element. Participants noted that the rigorous academic training provided them with a strong foundation in their respective fields, enhancing their professional readiness. For instance, students majoring in engineering and medicine highlighted the relevance of practical skills acquired through lab work and clinical placements, while those in business-related disciplines emphasized their understanding of global market dynamics. Furthermore, human capital was not confined to formal education; participants also discussed the importance of developing transferable hard skills, such as data analysis, technical writing, and IT proficiency, which they deemed critical in a competitive labour market. These findings underscore the significant role of human capital as a cornerstone of employability, reflecting the alignment between academic credentials, skill development, and labour market expectations (Hu & Wang, 2024; Tao, 2023).

> "Having a degree from a Chinese university is a huge advantage back in my home country. It shows that I've received rigorous training in a globally recognized education system." (Participant 3)
>
> "Getting my College English Test certificate was a game-changer. It's not just proof of my Chinese proficiency, but [also] shows I can adapt to a new [linguistic] environment." (Participant 7)
>
> "The hands-on experience in the lab helped me understand engineering concepts better. It's not just theoretical knowledge but real skills I can apply in my career." (Participant 11)
>
> "Learning IT skills during my time here has made me more confident in applying [for] jobs in industries that rely on digital tools." (Participant 4)

Moreover, the participants highlighted the importance of developing *social capital* for future employment. Building networks, forming relationships with peers, and engaging with faculty were seen as critical components of their university experience that could significantly influence their career trajectories. Specifically, some participants emphasized the value of networking events and industry seminars organized by their universities. They mentioned how these platforms

allowed them to interact with professionals in their fields and gain insights into industry expectations. Additionally, peer networks were frequently cited as a source of mutual support, collaboration, and information sharing, particularly among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The role of faculty in shaping social capital was also acknowledged. Participants noted that their professors often acted as mentors, offering career advice and facilitating introductions to industry contacts. As such, social capital was underscored as it not only enhanced students' employability but also contributed to their personal growth and ability to navigate professional environments confidently (Ma, 2020; Wang & Gao, 2022).

> *"The career fairs and seminars [organized by the university] were great for meeting professionals and understanding what employers are looking for."* (Participant 1)
>
> *"Having classmates from different backgrounds helped me learn how to collaborate better. We share job opportunities and even prepare for interviews together."* (Participant 14)
>
> *"My teacher introduced me to an industry contact who eventually offered me an internship. Without that connection, it would [have] been much harder to find opportunities."* (Participant 10)
>
> *"In my home country, who you know can be as important as what you know. Building relationships here will definitely help when I return home."* (Participant 5)

Cultural capital was also emphasized by the participants, particularly those seeking employment opportunities in China. They highlighted the importance of understanding and adapting to Chinese workplace norms, etiquette, and cultural values, which were seen as critical for professional integration. Participants stressed the need to navigate employer expectations, such as respect for hierarchy, valuing collective achievements, and demonstrating a strong work ethic. Additionally, acquiring cultural knowledge and confidence in engaging with local colleagues and clients was viewed as a key factor in gaining a competitive edge in the Chinese job market (Cao, 2018). This underscores the role of cultural competence as an essential component of employability for international students in China.

> *"Employers in China appreciate when you understand their culture and can fit [into] their way of doing things… It shows that you respect their values."* (Participant 16)
>
> *"I've learned that build[ing] guanxi [connections] is not just about networking; it's about having meaningful relationships based on trust, which is so important here."* (Participant 12)

Furthermore, *agentic capital* was emphasized as a critical attribute for employability, with participants highlighting the importance of self-initiative and strategic planning in shaping their career trajectories. They expressed the need to actively seek out opportunities, such as internships, networking events, and skill-development workshops, to enhance their employability. Participants discussed setting clear career goals and leveraging available resources, including university career services and alumni networks, to achieve these objectives. The ability to take ownership of their career paths, adapt to changing circumstances, and make proactive decisions was seen as a vital skill for navigating the competitive job

market both in China and their home countries. This reflects the growing recognition among international students of the importance of agency in securing meaningful and sustainable employment outcomes (Yunesman, 2023; Zang, 2024).

> *"It's important to take the first step. I've joined career fairs and applied for internships myself because waiting for opportunities isn't enough."* (Participant 4)
>
> *"I've mapped out a five-year plan. I know where I want to work, and I'm making sure to build the skills and connections needed to get there."* (Participant 17)
>
> *"Sometimes, plans don't work out, but I've learned to adjust. For example, when I couldn't secure an internship, I took an online certification course instead."* (Participant 15)
>
> *"You can't just study and expect to get a job. I actively search for opportunities and keep updat[ing] my CV with relevant experiences."* (Participant 8)

Despite the emphasis on these capitals, the participants had relatively little to say about other forms of capital, such as *identity capital* and *psychological capital*. To address this gap, the researchers posed specific questions to elicit participants' perceptions of these capitals. Participants generally regarded identity and psychological capitals as less critical in their journey toward employability. When asked about identity capital, some participants noted that self-confidence and self-awareness played a role in shaping their career choices and approaches to job applications. However, they viewed these attributes as secondary to tangible qualifications and skills. Similarly, psychological capital, including resilience and adaptability, was acknowledged but not emphasized as a primary factor in employability. While participants appreciated the value of staying motivated and adaptable in unfamiliar environments, they also considered these qualities as implicit expectations rather than critical assets to highlight. These findings suggest that while identity and psychological capitals are inherently valuable, they are not perceived by international students as key components for employability compared to other capitals.

> *"Employers care about what I can do and [the] qualifications I have, not so much about how self-aware I am. It's important, but it's not what gets you the job."* (Participant 18)
>
> *"Resilience and adaptability are things you just need to survive in a new country, but they're not something I'd put on my CV as a skill employers are looking for."* (Participant 12)

4.2. Perceived Factors Influencing Graduate Attributes in Chinese Universities
Participants firstly emphasized the significance of academic resources, particularly well-structured curricula and access to modern facilities, as fundamental to their development of graduate attributes. They highlighted that their universities offered bilingual or industry-relevant coursework, which effectively bridged theoretical knowledge with practical applications. Such programmes were seen as instrumental in equipping students with the technical expertise and critical thinking skills required for future employment (Moumen & Mejjad, 2021; Othman et al., 2023). Laboratory sessions, case studies, and project-

based learning emerged as standout features that provided hands-on experience and fostered analytical and problem-solving abilities. These resources were particularly valued by participants aiming for careers in highly technical or specialized fields such as engineering, medicine, and business.

> *"The bilingual courses offered by my university are very useful. They connect theory with practice, making it easier to understand how things work in the real world."* (Participant 9)
>
> *"Case studies are one of the best parts of the curriculum. They challenge you to think analytically and propose solutions, which is important for future work."* (Participant 6)

However, while participants acknowledged these strengths, they also voiced concerns about areas needing improvement. A recurring issue was the limited flexibility in curriculum design (Zhang, 2024), which, in their view, did not adequately account for their employment needs or future career aspirations. Some participants articulated that some courses were too theory-heavy, with insufficient focus on practical applications or skill development directly relevant to the job market. This was particularly concerning for students seeking employment in competitive industries where practical experience and industry-specific skills are crucial. Several participants also noted a lack of integration between academic programmes and industry partnerships. While some universities provided internships or industry collaborations, these opportunities were not always accessible or tailored to the needs of international students. These shortcomings, participants suggested, highlighted the need for universities to adopt a more holistic and adaptive approach to curriculum and resource design. They emphasized the importance of integrating more career-oriented modules, offering personalized guidance for international students, and fostering stronger university-industry collaborations.

> *"Some courses are too focused on theory. We need more opportunities to gain practical skills that will help us get jobs in competitive fields."* (Participant 11)
>
> *"The curriculum doesn't always consider the unique challenges we face as international students, like adapting to the job market in a new country."* (Participant 15)

Combined with curriculum design, course delivery and teachers' instructional styles were other factors that might impact international students' graduate attributes. Participants frequently emphasized the importance of interactive and engaging teaching methods in facilitating their understanding of complex concepts and fostering critical thinking skills. Practical approaches, such as case-based learning, group discussions, and hands-on projects, were highlighted as particularly effective in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application (Jiao, 2023). However, some participants expressed concerns about traditional, lecture-dominated teaching styles, which they felt limited opportunities for active engagement and collaborative learning. They noted that such methods often failed to address their diverse linguistic backgrounds and learning preferences, making it more challenging to grasp the course material fully. Additionally, participants pointed out the varying levels of preparedness among instructors to teach international students, with some excelling in adapting

their teaching styles while others struggled to accommodate different cultural and linguistic needs. These findings underscore the importance of integrating innovative and inclusive teaching strategies to better support international students (Jiang, 2023). Participants suggested that teacher training programmes focusing on culturally responsive pedagogy and multilingual instructional practices could enhance the overall effectiveness of course delivery, ultimately contributing to the development of graduate attributes necessary for employability in diverse professional settings.

> *"The interactive teaching methods, like case studies and group discussions, really helped me understand the material and connect it to real-world situations. But in some classes, the traditional lectures made it harder for me to stay engaged, especially when the language or examples didn't align with my background."* (Participant 10)
>
> *"Some teachers were amazing at adapting their styles to our needs, using simpler language or practical examples, but others just stuck to a one-size-fits-all approach, which made it difficult for us international students to keep up and fully participate."* (Participant 4)

University-provided career services emerged as another critical resource valued by participants. They highlighted the importance of job fairs, which introduced them to potential employers and provided insights into the dynamics of the Chinese job market. Internship opportunities were also seen as instrumental in helping students gain practical experience and establish professional connections. Career counselling sessions, particularly those that focused on individual career paths, were appreciated for offering guidance on navigating post-graduation employment. Workshops on resume writing and interview preparation stood out as particularly beneficial, equipping students with the skills needed to present themselves confidently in competitive job markets. Despite these strengths, participants expressed concern about the lack of tailored services specifically designed for international students. For example, participants noted the absence of language-specific career guidance, which would better address the challenges faced by non-native Chinese speakers in accessing local job opportunities. Additionally, participants pointed to the need for mentorship programmes that connect international students with industry professionals who understand the unique challenges of working in a cross-cultural context. This gap in tailored services left some students feeling underprepared for the realities of the job market, underscoring the need for universities to adopt a more inclusive approach to career support that aligns with the diverse needs of their international student body (Shu, 2022).

> *"The university's job fairs and workshops were really helpful for understanding the Chinese job market and improving my professional skills, but I often felt that the career services weren't tailored to international students like me. There was little guidance on overcoming language barriers or mentorship opportunities with industry professionals who could help us navigate cultural differences and job expectations in China."* (Participant 7)

Participants also regarded extracurricular activities, including language exchange programmes, cultural immersion workshops, and student-led organizations as

integral to their overall development and preparation for future careers. These initiatives were praised for offering opportunities to network, build essential soft skills, such as teamwork and communication, and deepen their understanding of Chinese culture. For international students aiming to secure employment in China, these experiences were particularly valuable, as they helped bridge the cultural and professional gaps often faced in transitioning to the local workforce. Language exchange programmes, in particular, were highlighted for improving conversational proficiency in Chinese, while cultural workshops provided insights into local customs and workplace etiquette. Additionally, student-led organizations allowed participants to take on leadership roles, fostering confidence and organizational skills that were seen as transferable to professional contexts. However, participants expressed concerns about the accessibility and inclusivity of these opportunities. Several felt that extracurricular activities were often better tailored and more prominently advertised to domestic students, leaving international students unaware of or underrepresented in these initiatives. This limited access, they suggested, reduced the potential benefits of such activities and underscored the need for universities to adopt more inclusive approaches to promoting and designing extracurricular programmes that cater specifically to the needs of international students.

> *"Extracurricular activities like cultural workshops and student organizations have been great for networking and building soft skills, but I feel that international students often miss out because these opportunities aren't as accessible or well-promoted for us compared to Chinese students."* (Participant 15)

5. Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex interplay of various forms of capital—human, social, cultural, and agentic (Donald, 2024; Tomlinson, 2017)—in shaping the graduate attributes of international students in Chinese universities. The emphasis on human capital underscores the importance of academic credentials, industry-recognized certifications, and technical expertise in enhancing employability. Participants highlighted that degrees from Chinese universities are perceived as valuable in both their home countries and the global labour market. This aligns with prior research (Hu & Wang, 2024; Ma, 2020; Tao, 2023), emphasizing the role of formal education in preparing graduates for professional success. Transferable skills, such as IT proficiency and data analysis, were particularly valued in competitive job markets, underscoring the need for universities to provide a balanced mix of theoretical and practical training.

Social capital emerged as another critical factor, with participants underscoring the role of networking and mentorship in shaping their career trajectories. Interaction with faculty, peers, and industry professionals was seen as instrumental in gaining insights into job market expectations and accessing career opportunities. This finding reflects existing literature on the importance of fostering social connections for career advancement (Duan, 2019; Ma, 2020; Xu et al., 2023). However, the limited accessibility of tailored career services for international students indicates a gap in support systems that universities must address (Shu, 2022). Developing targeted career guidance and mentorship

programmes would better prepare international students for the nuanced demands of cross-cultural professional environments.

Cultural capital, particularly knowledge of Chinese workplace norms and etiquette, was recognized as essential for professional integration in China. This aligns with previous studies highlighting the importance of cultural competence for employability in cross-cultural contexts (Qiao et al., 2020; Shu, 2022). Participants stressed the need to navigate employer expectations, such as valuing collective achievements and demonstrating respect for hierarchy. However, cultural capital was also seen as a barrier for some students (Cheng, 2023), suggesting that universities could offer more structured programmes to foster cultural understanding and workplace adaptability.

Agentic capital further underscored the importance of self-initiative and strategic planning in navigating the job market. Participants who actively sought internships, participated in career fairs, and pursued additional certifications demonstrated a proactive approach to employability. This finding supports the growing recognition of agency in career development (Hu & Wang, 2024; Nabilah et al., 2022), where students who take ownership of their career paths are better equipped to achieve meaningful outcomes (Moo & Wan, 2023). Nonetheless, this reliance on individual initiative highlights the need for institutions to provide a supportive ecosystem that encourages and facilitates such agency.

Despite the strong emphasis on these capitals, identity and psychological capitals were perceived as secondary by participants. While attributes such as self-confidence and resilience are undoubtedly valuable, they were not prioritized as critical employability factors, as also indicated in other studies (Li, 2022; Tao, 2023). This finding may reflect cultural or contextual differences in how students perceive the importance of intrinsic attributes versus tangible qualifications (Yong & Ling, 2023). Future studies could explore how these forms of capital interact with other attributes in diverse cultural settings to provide a more holistic understanding of employability.

The study also identified key institutional factors influencing graduate attributes, including curriculum design, teaching methods, and career services. Well-structured curricula, bilingual coursework, and practical learning opportunities, such as lab sessions and case studies, were highly valued by participants. However, limited flexibility in curriculum design and a lack of integration between academic programmes and industry partnerships were seen as significant shortcomings. These findings echo earlier research (Liu & He, 2020; Wang & Gao, 2022; Zhang, 2024), underscoring the need for universities to adopt adaptive and inclusive approaches that align academic offerings with labour market demands. Career services and extracurricular activities also play a vital role in shaping employability. Participants appreciated initiatives such as job fairs, resume workshops, and cultural exchange programmes, which provided platforms for skill development and networking. However, the perceived inaccessibility of these opportunities for international students highlights a critical area for improvement (Cheng, 2023). Universities must ensure that these

initiatives are inclusive and adequately address the unique challenges faced by international students.

The findings and discussion of this study provide valuable suggestions for various stakeholders involved in international higher education, particularly in Chinese universities. For universities and higher education institutions, there is a pressing need to prioritize flexible and adaptive curriculum design that balances theoretical knowledge with practical skills. Programmes should incorporate hands-on learning opportunities to better align academic training with industry demands.

Additionally, teaching methods should focus on interactivity and inclusivity (Liu & He, 2020; Zhang & Hu, 2024), with an emphasis on culturally responsive pedagogy to accommodate the diverse needs of international students. Tailored career support for international students is also critical. Universities should offer language-specific guidance, mentorship programmes with industry professionals, and workshops designed to address the unique challenges faced by non-native students in the local job market. Strengthening university-industry collaborations to provide meaningful internship opportunities and professional networking platforms would further enhance students' employability.

Universities need to develop programmes that foster cultural understanding and adaptability among international students, necessitating professional development for faculty and educators to enhance their ability to support international students effectively (Wang & Li, 2020). Training in culturally responsive teaching and multilingual instructional strategies can improve educators' capacity to meet the diverse needs of their students. Faculty members also play a critical role as mentors by offering career advice, facilitating introductions to industry professionals, and guiding students in their academic and career pursuits. These efforts not only enhance students' social capital but also build their confidence in navigating professional environments. Policymakers and government bodies also have a role to play in supporting the internationalization of higher education by funding programmes that attract and support international students. Policies that encourage partnerships between universities and industries can create seamless pathways from academic training to employment.

6. Conclusion
This study explored the key graduate attributes and the factors influencing their development among international undergraduates in Chinese universities. The findings revealed that human capital, encompassing degrees, certifications, technical skills, and subject-specific knowledge, emerged as the primary attribute associated with employability. Social capital, such as peer networks and faculty mentorship, and cultural capital, including an understanding of Chinese workplace norms, also played pivotal roles in shaping students' readiness for the labour market. Additionally, agentic capital, characterized by self-initiative and strategic planning, was highlighted as a critical attribute for navigating competitive job markets. Despite the emphasis on these capitals, identity and

psychological capitals were perceived as less critical. Factors such as curriculum design, course delivery, teaching styles, career services, and extracurricular activities could influence the development of graduate attributes, underscoring the importance of a holistic and inclusive approach in higher education institutions.

This study is not without limitations. The focus on a single national context—Chinese universities—limits the generalizability of the findings to international higher education systems in other countries. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced biases, as participants might have over- or under-represented their experiences. Future research could adopt a comparative approach by examining graduate attributes across multiple countries to provide broader insights into international education. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the career trajectories of international graduates would be valuable to better understand how graduate attributes evolve over time and their long-term impact on employability. Expanding the focus to include the perspectives of employers and faculty members could also enrich the understanding of how various stakeholders perceive and contribute to the development of graduate attributes.

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Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

1. Perceptions of Graduate Attributes

Main Question:

- "What skills or attributes do you think are most important for your future career?"

Probes:

- "Why do you think these skills are important?"

- "Do you feel these attributes are globally recognized or specific to the Chinese context?"

- "How would you rank the importance of technical skills, soft skills, and cultural awareness in employability?"

2. Relevance of Academic Programmes

Main Question:

- "How do you feel your current academic programme prepares you for employment?"

Probes:

- "What aspects of your programme do you think are most effective in preparing you for the labour market?"

- "Are there specific courses, projects, or internships that you find particularly useful?"

- "Do you think your programme provides a good balance between theoretical knowledge and practical skills?"

- "What improvements would you suggest for your academic programme to better meet your career goals?"

3. University Support

Main Question:

- "What kinds of support does your university provide to help you prepare for the labour market?"

Probes:

- "Have you participated in any career fairs, workshops, or counselling services? If so, how were they helpful?"

- "Do you feel that the university caters to the unique needs of international students in terms of employability support?"

- "Are there any mentorship or networking opportunities provided by your university?"

- "What additional support do you think would be helpful?"

4. Challenges Faced

Main Question:

- "What challenges have you encountered as an international student in China?"

Probes:

- "Have you faced any language or cultural barriers? How have you managed these challenges?"

- "Are there challenges related to adjusting to the academic environment or teaching styles?"

- "Do you feel adequately supported by the university in overcoming these challenges?"

- "How do you think these challenges affect your preparation for the labour market?"

5. Final Reflection:

   - "Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences as an international student in China?"

   - "Are there other factors you feel influence your employability that we haven't discussed?"

Appendix 2: Codes, Categories, and Themes for the Findings

Code	Category	Theme
Degree as a credential, Language proficiency certificates, Technical expertise, Transferable skills (e.g., data analysis, IT proficiency)	Human Capital	Perceived Key Graduate Attributes
Networking events, Peer collaboration, Faculty mentorship	Social Capital	
Understanding Chinese workplace norms, Building guanxi (trust-based relationships), Respect for hierarchy	Cultural Capital	
Self-initiative, Strategic planning, Proactive decision-making	Agentic Capital	
Self-confidence, Self-awareness, Resilience, Adaptability	Identity/Psychological Capital	

Well-structured curricula, Practical learning (e.g., labs, case studies), Bilingual/industry-relevant coursework	Academic Resources	Perceived Factors Influencing Graduate Attributes
Interactive teaching methods, Limited engagement in traditional lectures, Culturally responsive pedagogy	Course Delivery and Instruction	
Job fairs, Resume workshops, Internship opportunities, Limited tailored services for international students	Career Services	
Language exchange programmes, Cultural immersion workshops, Leadership roles in student organizations	Extracurricular Activities	