



Is There a Soft-Skill Mismatch Between Chinese Overseas Students and the Requirements of Chinese Employers?

A Case Study of Chinese Master's Students at Leeds University

Xuelel Mao^(✉)

University of Leeds, Leeds, UK
1280538273@qq.com

Abstract. Chinese overseas students improve their soft-skill employability to increase their competitive edges. This research is especially focusing on exploring whether the soft skills of Chinese students who graduated from UK universities at the master's level on the supply side meet the soft-skill requirements of Chinese employers in the corresponding industry on the demand side in the China labour market or not. Therefore, this study firstly found out the requirements and comments of Chinese employers and then discovered the soft-skill supply of Chinese overseas students at the master's level in the UK university. Therefore, the demand and supply in the Chinese labour market can be compared.

Keywords: soft skill · employability · Chinese overseas students' employment · workplace requirements

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Chinese overseas students experienced an expansion of chasing overseas education experiences in recent years, and it has then become a nationally well-accepted phenomenon, especially after the reforming and opening-up in China. According to Dimmock and Leong (2010), America, the United Kingdom, and Australia are the most popular countries chosen by Chinese students [1]. However, an increasing number of Chinese overseas students now go back to work in China after graduation. As a special group of employees, Chinese overseas graduating students are now concerning their employability in the workplace due to increased competencies in China's labour market. According to the Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad (Wang and Miao, 2016), more than 400,000 overseas Chinese students went back to China to work in 2015. The number of overseas Chinese students returning to work in China increased by 12.14% compared with last year. Competing with other graduating students in China, overseas Chinese students of employment are concerned [2].

This research will consider both supply and demand sides of the labour market. On the supply side of the labour market, what kinds of soft skills do overseas-graduated Chinese students gain after studying in a foreign country? As for the demand side, what soft

skills are employers required that they expect these students to have? In addition, Chinese overseas students experience different educational systems compared to domestic graduating students. What kinds of potential soft-skill benefits will the different educational systems bring to the employability of Chinese master's students? This research focuses on the UK graduating Chinese master's students (Chinese overseas students) as employees. Specifically, students in the University of Leeds are chosen as a case study to represent the UK-studying Chinese students in this paper.

1.2 Research Question and Objectives

Based on the research background, this paper will illustrate the relationship between the demand and supply side regarding soft skills in the Chinese labour market.

There are several aims for answering this question. The first objective aims at discovering the soft-skill requirements of employers in the industries and the reality that the past Chinese overseas students performed. The second aim of this research is to investigate Chinese overseas students' soft skills in their expected occupations and industries. The third objective focuses on comparing and interpreting information, then giving results of soft-skill supply and demand in the labour market. Moreover, this research will try to reveal the current underdeveloped soft skills and soft-skill advantages of students in the UK. The last objective is to discover the soft-skill benefits and effects that the UK educational system brings to Chinese master's students, which will become their future competitive edges in the labour market competitions.

1.3 Significance of Study

The significance of this study can be found in the following three aspects:

By discovering the requirements of employers in the Chinese labour market, the graduating students improve corresponding soft skills to meet the requirements in the Chinese labour market.

Acknowledging the strengths and shortcomings of soft skills, Chinese overseas students in UK universities with master's degrees can pay more attention to increasing soft-skill competitive edges.

By finding out the soft-skill shortcomings, the UK universities can design more teaching settings to improve the soft skills of students to improve their employability of students.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Debates on Soft Skills

Over the past decades, technology and professional skills have dominated the job requirements of employers for a long period. However, in recent years, as the nature of skills is changing, people are starting to pay attention to soft skills. Paynes (1999) believes that soft skills partly replace technical skills, such as manual dexterity and know-how. According to the research of Guo et al. (2016), more than 90% of employers believe that

soft skill is a required skill for the long-term development of enterprises. Therefore, soft skills are now an essential part of employees' employability. Chinese overseas students as employees need to have corresponding soft skills in the workplace [3].

Several researchers argue the definition of soft skill. Soft skill is acknowledged as interpersonal skill, life skill and emotional intelligence (Rao, 2014). Noon et al. (2013) point out that soft skill is a broader definition of individual skills, including personal characteristics. Grugulis (2007) defines soft skills as attitudes, character traits which employers demand [4].

Attitude is another important soft skill emphasized by several researchers. Negative attitudes may lead to less employee engagement, performance reduction, and bad effects in the workplace. Cappelli (1995) points out that the attitudes gap exists as research proves that people new to the labour market are hard to adapt to the working environment. In the research of Redman and Mathews (1998), they find that HR managers pay more attention to staff who have required attitudinal traits and behaviors rather than technical skills or qualification levels. Keep (2001) indicates more details of positive Attitude in the workplace, such as self-confidence, self-motivation and the creation of new opportunities [5].

3 Research Approach and Methods

3.1 Qualitative Methods and Approaches

The research question of this dissertation aims at illustrating the questionable relations between the soft-skill demand of Chinese employers and the supply of Chinese overseas graduating students in the UK masters' degree (Chinese overseas students) in the Chinese labour market. To answer this question and achieve research objectives, research designs focus on discovering both the soft-skill demand of Chinese employers and the soft-skill supply of students. Qualitative reasoning approaches will be applied in this paper.

3.2 Case Study, Inductive Reasoning and Interviews

As for research methods, this research applied qualitative methods to an inductive case study at the University of Leeds. The main reason for developing a case study at the University of Leeds is that students in the Leeds campus are easier to contact by networking as Chinese overseas students at Leeds University, covering several aspects that they are enough representative in the industries as the UK graduating Chinese overseas students.

4 Research Findings

4.1 Research Background

This chapter aims to discover whether the soft skills supplied by Chinese overseas students educated with master's degrees in UK universities (Chinese overseas students) match the requirements of Chinese employers in the Chinese labour market. There are four objectives outlined at the beginning of this research. Moreover, the following questions are closely linked to achieving research objectives:

Table 1. The details of interviewed employers

Employer Name (Anonymity)	Industry	Position	Years of Working
Lei	Education	Human Resource Manager	4 years
Zhang	IT	Human Resource Manager	2 years
Yun	Finance	CFO	18 years
Luo	Manufacturing	Vice General Manager	20 years
Qian	Manufacturing	GroupLeader	4 years

What are the requirements and expectations of Chinese employers toward Chinese overseas students?

To what extent do Chinese overseas students offer soft skills to employers in China?

Is the soft-skill supply and demand in the Chinese labour market match?

What soft-skills benefits can UK universities bring to Chinese overseas students?

Based on the four questions, this research interviewed employers in industries and students at the University of Leeds. According to the Annual Report on the development of Chinese Students Study Abroad (Wang and Miao, 2016), Chinese overseas students mainly major in Finance, Manufacturing, Education and IT. Therefore, the interviewed employers and students come from these industries. Moreover, a case study was conducted at the University of Leeds to discover the supply of Chinese overseas students in soft skills. In this research, five employers in the Chinese labour market and four students (Table 1).

4.2 Soft-Skill Requirements of Chinese Employers

4.2.1 Communication Skills

Who majored at the University of Leeds were chosen to be interviewed. The details of interviewed Chinese employers can be found in the following form. As for four interviewed Chinese overseas students, two of them majored in engineering subjects, one of them majored in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language), and the last student majored in accounting and finance.

When asked about the corresponding soft-skill requirements of employers, almost every interviewed employer highlighted that communication skills were required in the field to different degrees.

In an educational organisation, human resource manager Lei believes that soft skill is a key resource of employability in an educational company. According to Lei, the Chinese overseas students take a large account in their company. She considers that communication skills are necessary.

'Their jobs are very trivial.' Said Lei, *'Jobs of student supervisors are not difficult, but they have to communicate with different people flexibly.'*

In this company, various Chinese overseas students account for a large proportion as teachers teach courses of IELTS (International English Language Test System). When

talking about the requirements of communication skills of teachers in the IELTS department, Lei said that the prepared courses need to be delivered effectively. To make students with less English foundation learn better, teachers not only need to transfer their words effectively, but they also have to try to catch the attention of every student, especially the students with less attention by their body and oral language.

Another interviewee Qian from the world's top 500 companies in the manufacturing industry, also mentioned the requirements for English communication skills.

'As my organisation is a foreign-founded company, the official language in my company is English. Our expectation towards Chinese overseas students is that they should have good communication skills in English which is necessary to handle daily work.'

Moreover, Zhang, a human resource manager in a world's top 500 IT (information technology) company, indicated a detailed requirement for communication skills,

'We want to find out clear and logical thinking through the communications. Communication skills are most important in management occupations as works of management people need to coordinate with leaders and colleagues.'

There is a question about English communication skills. Rare explanations regarding English can be defined as a soft skill. Even it is unclear whether English is a soft skill or not. However, based on the answers of employers, English is a required skill as it is the foundation of communication skills in the workplace. Revealed by employers, they emphasise that employees with excellent English-speaking ability can use communication skills better in an English environment. That is, English is essential for communicating with people in the workplace. Under this condition, English speaking ability and communication skills are both required by employers.

4.2.2 Attitude

Attitude is another soft skill emphasised by interviewed employers. Lei (Education industry) mentioned that attitude is the priority when hiring people. When asked about what kinds of attitudes are wanted, she said,

'As for teachers in the IELTS department, I would say attitude is the most important soft skill for them. For example, to be a teacher, employees need to have determination and patience. These positive attitudes drive employees to devote themselves to their careers.'

Based on the interviews of employers, their requirements toward attitudes are various in companies. Nevertheless, each employer expects that employees have positive attitudes. On the one hand, on the employee scale, employers prefer hiring employees with a clear target, one who knows what they want and what efforts they should make to achieve it. Moreover, employers prefer people who can be self-motivated and driven to learn new things by themselves rather than pursuing short-term benefits. On the other hand, on the management scale, a positive attitude also stands for an extroverted personality which can activate the atmosphere of the company.

4.3 Soft-Skill Supply of Graduating Chinese Overseas Students at the Leeds University

To better compare the soft-skill requirement of employers in the Chinese labour market and the supply of Graduating Chinese overseas students (Chinese overseas students), the choices of interviewees largely depended on the industries of interviewed employers.

4.3.1 Communication and Team Working Skills

Benefiting from educational arrangements of modules, the soft-skill improvement mentioned mostly by interviewees are communication and team working skills. Specifically, students who major in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language) arrange mock teaching classrooms with classmates, and some students who major in engineering have team projects with the same teammates throughout the year. One overseas Chinese student majoring in engineering said that,

'We have team-working projects. We shared the work and coordinated with each other. For instance, teammates chose their own advantaged part at the beginning. Also, when confronted with difficulties, we would solve them together. I am the only Chinese overseas student in my group. Thus, I had to use English precisely to negotiate with my teammates, especially.'

When we were experimenting and had to coherent different individual parts or solve coding problems. This improved my English communication skills largely. After these team workings, I found myself can quickly adjust myself to a multicultural group.'

When working in a team, it is unavoidable that various problems and working contents need to be settled together. Therefore, students need to communicate, negotiate and coordinate with each other. Thus, if students conquer these difficulties during team working or presentation and learn how to solve them, the following soft-skill development will benefit students to enhance their employability. Moreover, some interviewees said they understand English accents more when communicating with students from various countries. Especially for Chinese overseas students, not very many of these students have team works in past educational experiences (Guo et al., 2017). Therefore, after one year of experience at the University of Leeds, Chinese overseas students gained soft skills which were helpful for them in meeting the requirements of employers. For instance, according to the interviewed Chinese overseas students, the commonest soft-skill development is not only communication and team working skills, but also problem-solving and inter-person skills learned from the education of the University of Leeds.

4.3.2 Ability to Adapting Multicultural Environment

Studying at the University of Leeds not only means learning academic skills for Chinese overseas students. It also means adapting to new foreign cultures. Chinese overseas students need to get used to the ways of local life and understand the thinking of people in their countries. For instance, during their educational experiences, Chinese overseas students must work with students from various countries. Students from different countries may have diverse perspectives. Students exchange their ideas and habits based on their

cultural backgrounds when communicating with these people. Thus, abundant opportunities were offered to Chinese overseas students, which could enhance their inclusivity of cultures and develop their understanding of the world.

Culture is a large-scale topic. However, it is indeed that students learned to be more inclusive in terms of cultures. To begin with, many Chinese overseas students may be too shy to talk with foreigners. Also, there may encounter some cultural shocks. However, after their master's years, they become more open-minded. Encouraged by the environment and teachers at the University of Leeds, they become more active in talking with people. To conclude, Students adapt to a multicultural environment faster after this year.

In conclusion, the education at the University of Leeds enhanced the soft-skill employability of Chinese overseas students. Seminars, projects, international environment, and teaching methods improved various soft skills. Especially team working tasks taught students to be more inclusive and understandable in terms of getting along. Chinese overseas students also obtained communication and inter-person skills from the teaching methods. Due to their working experience with people from different cultures, they can quickly adapt to a multicultural environment. Moreover, they have a stronger awareness and ability to learn actively and independently. All these developments were attributed to their education, which helped them to meet the requirements of employers.

4.4 Discussions of Matched and Mismatched Aspects

According to the answers of those interviewees, the supply of Chinese overseas students generally matched the demands of employers in the Chinese labour market.

There are several positive comments from Chinese employers on Chinese overseas students. First, employers are mostly satisfied with the communication skills of Chinese overseas students, especially English communication skills, which benefited from educational experiences in UK universities. Second, most of the interviewed employers agreed that Chinese overseas students showed excellent independent thinking ability and initiative in learning. Thirdly, employers agreed that Chinese overseas students are fast learning and are well equipped to adjust quickly to the multicultural environment. One employer emphasised that Chinese overseas students could accommodate the environment in a foreign country by using their English communication skills and were fast learners in a foreign environment. These soft skills are useful to guarantee cross-countries projects.

There are some underdeveloped soft-skill aspects of Chinese overseas students. Personal characteristics bring some, and some are caused by insufficient technical and professional skills. As for their characteristics, two interviewees felt that they were introverted and impetuous, so they lacked interpersonal skills and negotiation skills. Also, every interviewee of Chinese overseas students revealed that they need to improve their self-confidence.

5 Conclusion

Soft skills supplied by Chinese overseas students generally match the requirements of employers in the Chinese labour market. This is contributed by the special experiences of

studying in a UK university which brought Chinese overseas students competitive edges. For instance, soft-skill improvements gained in the UK university help Chinese overseas students meet the requirements of employers in the Chinese labour market. Since Chinese overseas students have to compete with domestic students when they enter the Chinese labour market, they need to improve their soft skills to match the requirements of Chinese employers and to be competitive. At the University of Leeds, modules have different teaching methods settings. However, the teamwork settings can be found in each module. These team works bring abundant soft-skill benefits to meet the requirements. These soft skills were what Chinese employers expected employees to have. Moreover, even though Chinese employers mainly satisfy the soft-skill supply of Chinese overseas students, in terms of positive attitude requirements, especially those introverted students who are interested in those positions require extroverted personalities, such as teachers. Self-confidence is considered an underdeveloped soft skill for Chinese overseas students.

References

1. Dimmock, C. and Leong, J. O. S 2010. Studying overseas: mainland Chinese students in Singapore. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. 40(1), pp. 25–42.
2. Cappelli, P. 1995. Is the “Skills Gap” Really about Attitudes? *California Management Review*. 37(4), pp. 108–124.
3. Guo, D., Guo, D. and Wang, W. 2017. Ways of Cultivating “Emotional Intelligency Quotient” as “Hard Equipment” of Employment for Engineering College Students——From the Perspective of Taking Reform on Curriculum of College General Education. *China University Students Career Guide*. 04, pp. 52–57.
4. Grugulis, I. 2007. *Skills, training and human resource development*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
5. Grugulis, I. and Vincent, S. 2009. *Who skill is it anyway? Work, employment and society*. 23(4), pp. 597–615.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

