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Conceptualising the employability agency of international graduates

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Abstract

The notion of agency has been widely used in varied disciplines, but is relatively new in the field of international graduates' employability. This working paper critically discusses two "extreme" paradigms about agency in the context of international graduates' employability. The first paradigm (object-centered theories, strong post-structural theories, and Bourdieu's Theory of Practice) perceives individuals as agents with weak agency because their activities largely depend on medians and are subjugated by contextual structures like discourses, fields, and inequalities in capitals. By contrast, the second paradigm (social cognitivism and social science) strongly praises individuals' agency like their agentic dispositions, agentic actions, capacities, and power. The paper then grounds these theoretical accounts by empirical findings to see how much they can inform international graduates' employability. Finally, the paper suggests a conceptualisation of the employability agency of international graduates which is informed by the critical discussions of the selected theoretical accounts, grounded in empirical findings and the incorporation of other relevant theoretical perspectives. In essence, the conceptualisation positions

international graduates' employability agency as being both constrained and resourced by five components including contextual structures, subjectivities, host-country resources, ethnic capitals, and agentic dispositions and actions. These components are highly interdependent and constitute each other in complex ways. Consequently, initiatives aiming to enhance international graduates' employability should consider all these components.

Introduction

International students have continuously increased in Australia during the last decade; from 2011 to 2020, their numbers increased by 72 per cent (Australian Trade and Investment Commission, 2021). International education contributed to various aspects of the society, especially to the economy with $40.3 billion in 2019 (Department of Education, 2019). International students have a range of reasons to choose the destination country. However, post-study employment prospects have become one of the most significant reasons as a large number of students are self-funding their overseas studies (Pham, 2020). Unfortunately, low employment outcomes of international graduates are a long-standing concern in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

Australia has made various efforts to enhance international students' employability outcomes including universities' initiatives and different types of visa schemes. The country offers the most generous visa schemes compared to many other countries (Trevena, 2019). However, recent research argued that to enhance international graduates' employability, there is a need to know more about their post-study work experiences (Pham, 2021b). This is because although Australia has a well-established international education industry, knowledge about their post-study careers is surprisingly lacking (Pham, 2021b; Tan & Hugo, 2017). For example, Pham et al. (2019), Pham (2021a), and Singh and Fan (2021) found international graduates' employability was significantly determined by a range of resources including human, social, cultural, psychological, and identity. However, little is known about how they build and use these capitals during and after their study programs. One aspect currently attracting increasing attention is international graduates' agency in employability. In the international education literature, agency is relatively new because the literature has been dominated by studies deploying the deficit perspective that sees international students as "inferior others" who have difficulties and struggles in the host environment, and thus, they need support (Coate, 2009; Samuelowicz, 1987). To survive in the host country, they need to go through a process, as described by Marginson (2014), of "adjustment" or "acculturation" to the requirements and habits of the host country. Capacities that international students

possess and may develop to overcome challenges in the host country are not appreciated and discussed.

Notably, an increasing number of researchers have critiqued stereotypical assumptions about international students. Although acknowledging difficulties of international students, many researchers deploying this perspective do not treat international students as "inferior others" who need to adjust to fit into their host countries. Researchers have started exploring how international students have exercised agency in managing their studies and career (Tran & Vu, 2018; Marginson, 2014; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Pham et al., 2019; Pham, 2021b). These studies found evidence about how international students can make choices to decide their identities, and use strategies to negotiate studies and career in the host country. In the field of employability, Pham and Jackson (2020b) and Pham (2020) found evidence about the significance of students' agency and argued that to obtain optimal outcomes in the employability negotiation process, they needed to develop "agentic capital", that is, the capacity to develop strategies to use various forms of capital effectively and strategically depending on one's ethnic background, areas of expertise, career plans, contexts, and personal qualities. However, similar to other fields, the concept of agency in this field remains relatively vague. We have not known much about the agency-structure relationship, and how international graduates build and use agency to negotiate their employability.

The purpose of this paper

This paper derives from reflections on several studies into international graduates' employability that were conducted for several years. These studies aimed to examine international graduates' career trajectories in Australia. One of the main foci of these studies was to examine how these graduates exercised agency to navigate the host labor market. A total of 375 international graduates participated in these projects; however, the data reported here came from qualitative data collected from 55 participants. The majority of these 55 graduates were from East, Southeast, and South Asia, while 8 came from countries like Egypt, Russia, and Italy. Individuals selected as participants obtained a degree (undergraduate, masters, or PhD) and

lived in Australia when the research was conducted. 60% had gained permanent residency (PR), whereas the rest were on a post-study work visa. The sample was diverse in terms of gender, nationality, and disciplines. No timeframe after their graduation was set because the projects aimed to explore experiences of international graduates during their long-term employability trajectories. This aligns with what Clarke (2018), Jackson and Tomlinson (2020), and Pham (2021a) argue for a broad definition of employability: *Employability includes employment outcomes, sustainability, job satisfaction, professional skills growth, and wellbeing*. However, 60% had stayed in Australia for six months to five years after graduation, whereas the rest had stayed for more than five years.

This paper chose to report qualitative data because qualitative methods are useful for capturing the complexity of international students' experience and agency, and avoid framing international students as "in deficit", foregrounding "… what they lack, what they need[,] and how they differ" that quantitative surveys often do (Lipura & Collins, 2020; Marginson, 2014; Page & Chahboun, 2019). These projects deployed the biographical interpretive approach which invited the graduates to share their work experiences in Australia via in-depth interviews and the scroll back method (Lincoln & Robards, 2017). Using the scroll back method, the graduates were invited to connect with the researcher on social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter) so that the researcher could obtain information about their broad social and political context like their resources, interests, and circumstances. Then, the graduates were directed to unpack the connection between these contexts and their career trajectories as co-analysts in in-depth interviews to provide the context and the deeper meanings (Lincoln & Robarts, 2017). While co-analysing, the researcher used probing questions and directed the graduates to certain parts of their timelines like their study and career milestones. Since the graduates used social media as a main tool to connect with their home country, their narratives were surprisingly informative. As advocated by Lincoln and Robarts (2017), the scroll back method allows researchers to obtain longitudinal data without spending a long period in real longitudinal research. This dimension enabled the researcher to collect data about the international graduates' long-term employability within the short timeline.

This paper is framed as a conceptual paper. This choice was made because increasing attention has been paid to individual agency of international students. While this line of research is necessary, there should be caution about the tendency for overemphasis of individual agency and underestimate the impacts of structural factors. In employability, although international graduates' agency has been evident, we have not known much about the extent to which they could exercise agency, the impacts that structural conditions have on their agency, and the conditions for their agency to be activated. To answer these questions, a critical review of various theoretical perspectives and research strands should be conducted because a single perspective will not be sufficient to unpack and explain this complexity. Besides, agency has been widely discussed theoretically but not empirically, leading to vagueness of concepts about agency. To fill these gaps, this paper aimed to provide a critical discussion of several theoretical frameworks and ground them by empirical findings.

Studies use a range of theoretical approaches in various disciplines exploring agency (see Eteläpelto et al. (2013) for a comprehensive review). This paper does not attempt to discuss all, but only selects the theoretical frameworks that represent the two "extreme" paradigms: one perceiving individuals as agents with weak agency and one viewing them as agents with strong agency. These theoretical approaches were chosen because, as discussed above, there are concerns about the tendency of researchers to overcompliment international students' agency and carry them too far over to the other side of the continuum. By unpacking "extreme" theories, this paper aims to draw out reasonable principles of various theories that could inform the development of a reasonable conceptual framework for the investigation of international graduates' employability agency. Since agency has been discussed widely and there have been different notions of agency (e.g., human agency of Goller (2017), or professional agency of Eteläpelto (2017)), this paper uses the term "employability agency" to refer to agency that international graduates use in their employability negotiation. The terms "agency" and "individual agency" are also used through the paper, but they refer to human agency in general.

The paper consists of three parts. The first part discusses the paradigm perceiving individuals as agents with weak agency. The second part discusses the second paradigm which strongly celebrates individual agency. In each paradigm, the paper discusses how the chosen theoretical accounts reflect employability agency of international graduates, considering empirical data. The paper finally discusses a conceptual framework informing the investigation of international graduates' employability agency. This framework is developed based on theoretical and empirical insights obtained from the discussions of the chosen theories, empirical findings, and other relevant theoretical approaches.

Individuals as agents with weak agency

Theoretically, the rejection and underestimation of individual agency is manifested in several theories. The first was Leontiev's (1978) object-centered theory, which was particularly common at the start of the industrial epoch when basic technological tools played a central role in manufacturing (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). This theory emphasises object-oriented and goal directed actions; consequently, individuals (workers) have little space for individual choices and initiatives. Human-centered or creative knowledge work, which requires human intellectual agency, is seen as unnecessary. Sharing a similar perspective, some Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) researchers like Engeström (1987) also place great emphasis on the roles of objects and tools, and argue that they are the main facilitators and motives of human actions. Deploying this model, most empirical studies have explored how material and cultural tools mediate and constitute human action (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 55). The suppression of structures is praised and the existence of human agency is significantly underestimated (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Loyal & Barnes, 2001).

There are other theoretical frameworks sharing a similar view, although their advocacy for structural suppression is "softer". These are "strong" post-structural accounts (e.g., Butler (1992)) and Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. These frameworks argue for the existence of discourse and field which function as divisions of different social groups. Within each discourse and field, subjects are given their own positions and constituted to act based on their positions. People need to follow specific logic,

taken for granted practices, and "rules of the game" that favor the dominant groups (Bourdieu, 1990). This happens because cultural capital carries both standardised values, which are legalised and institutionalised, and embodied values, which refer to one's preferences or perceived "correct" ways of doing things (Bourdieu, 1986). People may possess the same standardised values; however, very often, only dominant groups' embodied values are acknowledged and validated.

According to Bourdieu (1990), individual agency manifests in how people use "habitus" to act strategically to enhance their forms of capital in the field. The author claims habitus is "a system of durable and transposable dispositions that mediates the actions of an individual and the external conditions of production" (p. 53). In other words, it consists of familial and personal experiences and functions as an "internalised schemes" that direct individuals to engage with certain ways of thinking and behaving (Tholen, 2015, p. 777; Pham, 2021b). Habitus enables people to accumulate valued forms of social and educational capital that they have experienced and built. However, the accumulation of different cultural capitals does not benefit individuals naturally; this is because how people can use their accumulated capitals depends on their agency, which is seen in the capacity to play the game and perform in particular ways. This requires people to have a "feel for the game" and to align oneself with the "tastes" of the field (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 166). As such, here, agency does not mean absolute freedom, but is blocked "within existing social conventions, values, and sanctions" (Tholen, 2015, p. 777). The possibilities for individual agency are seen as restricted and are determined through discourses and within the field.

How was employability agency depicted in these theoretical accounts?
The data analysis revealed that the employability agenda aligns with the principles of the abovementioned theoretical approaches in various aspects. Although graduate employability has been interpreted differently from different perspectives, human capital is the mainstream interpretation which has been supported by the majority of policymaker, media, and research contributions, and has profoundly influenced how international graduates and their parents interpreted and prepared for employability. Human capital theorists (e.g., Becker (1964)) argue that knowledge and skills are the

main elements leading to one's employability because education is a major factor in improving productivity and enhancing economic growth. International graduates and their parents are filled with this ideology from governmental policies and institutional promotions; therefore, they are willing to make the investment in education and training in relation to the perceived payoff. Under the frameworks of the object-centered and CHAT theories, education (knowledge and skills) is the tool whereas employability outcomes are the object. Our findings revealed that these theoretical approaches were right, to some extent, because qualifications (tools) were found as the necessity that all graduates agreed that they needed to obtain before entering the labor market. Besides, many graduates were driven by employability outcomes (object) by sharing how much they had considered post-study career prospects while choosing their course of study. However, to obtain all aspects of employability (as defined above), the graduates needed to articulate a range of other resources and qualities due to the existence of discourses, rules of the game, and habitus, as proposed by post-structural and Bourdieusian accounts.

Plentiful evidence showed that the host labor market was divided into various discourses; of these, the main discourses were discourses of local employers and international graduates. The former was featured by expectations of Western culture and habitus. This is observable in desirable recruitment criteria commonly applied by local employers. These included English proficiency, a PR visa, high-level communication skills, Australian work experience, and a range of Western personal values like being proactive, critical, innovative, and independent (Blackmore et al., 2017; Pham et al., 2019). International graduates were categorised in another discourse where their position was defined as "inferior others" because they had to accumulate resources to meet expectations of local employers. They could, unfortunately, rarely meet these expectations even if they had concrete evidence. For example, to prove communication competencies, international graduates can use a high score of an International English language Testing System (IELTS), a standardised and institutionalised measurement of one's English proficiency; however, this concrete score was not enough. The local workforce placed lots of emphasis on "legitimate language" that refers to "subtle normative codes" (Cederberg, 2015, p. 34). International graduates needed to show the right

knowledge, appropriate communication skills, and sensitivity to cultural differences, and a "standard" accent so that they could develop natural and smooth conversations (Pham, 2021b). A large number were unable to prove this "legitimate language", and failed interviews and were excluded from small talks at the workplace. Recently, international graduates' inferior position has been even reinforced because Australia is inflated with graduates with credentials. Therefore, local employers have increasingly become interested in assessing "legitimate" capitals so that they can evaluate how international graduates "fit in" the Western labor market (Blackmore et al., 2017).

The discourse of international graduates was also "labelled" with Asian habitus which inadequately met Western expectations and values. For instance, Asians' shyness and passiveness indicate their incapability in taking the lead in groupwork (Blackmore et al., 2017); therefore, very few graduates could climb to the management level. They even had to change disciplines because some professions were perceived to be "unsuitable" to international graduates – a phenomenon called "nationally-based protectionism" (Bauder, 2003). Lawyers and early schooling teachers are on this list because society, the authorities, and parents have preferences towards people with local knowledge and standard accents, who are often Westerners in English-speaking countries (Pham, 2021b). The existence of these two discourses led to the fact that international graduates are only able to decode real expectations of employers if they have real-life insights about the workforce by doing some work or engaging in the community in some way. If they view the labor market based on their "naïve" understanding, as promoted by policies and institutions, they continue to struggle.

Under these structural constraints, only a small number of the graduates can exercise employability agency by acquiring or acting on particular forms of strategic knowledge or rules of the game. Graduates strategically used Asian habitus in a way that aligned with Western customs and preferences. For instance, being aware that small and private companies often used personal connections as an unofficial recruitment strategy, several succeeded in using their Asian hardworking and dedication habitus to develop personal connections with "significant others", who

then introduced them to potential employers. Some others were aware of difficulties that international graduates often face when looking for and working in professions that require a high level of professional skills – an area that has largely disadvantaged international graduates (Pham, 2021c). Therefore, these graduates strategically chose technical knowledge and focused disciplines like engineering, computing, and research. These strategic graduates were more likely to succeed in obtaining immediate employment because technical skills and science are often seen as ethnic capitals of Asians.

What were limitations of these theoretical accounts in informing employability agency?

These theoretical accounts were useful for the explanation of how power existed visibly and invisibly within discourses and fields, and how international graduates were constrained within hierarchical systems and stereotypes. However, these superior-inferior positions were not found in several cases. Several graduates actually resisted to adapt to the rules of the game. They were even able to transform established traditions in their organisations. The journey that an academic took to transform curricula and pedagogies at their college was an example. The academic initiated the development of hybrid practices (e.g., intercultural pedagogies or bilingual services) that used Asian ethnic cultural and intellectual properties as key elements in teaching and student services; however, their initiative was rejected straightaway. Instead of giving up, they persistently collected evidence to show how this initiative worked. Eventually, authority was given to renovate the whole program and became the course director. Several others did not take these gradual steps but showed strong resistance by refusing to improve what local workforce expected (e.g., refusing to learn more about Australia) because they did not see the need. They actually planned to leave Australia at some point (e.g., migrating to another country to learn new cultures, or returning to their home country to be close to their relatives). A couple of female graduates also did not agree with their workplace policy by quitting their jobs. They made this decision because their organisations did not allow them to step down to part time so that they could have more time for their families.

As such, the graduates' employability trajectories were not necessarily determined by their defined positions in discourses and rules of the game. They did not struggle to enhance capitals for a better position in the field, as Bourdieu (1990) argues, either. Instead, their career paths were significantly shaped by a range of other factors associated with one's reflexive agency, which is the evolving sense of self and objectives, the "who I am," "who I am becoming," and "what I want to be" (Marginson, 2021). Reflexive agency is missing in arguments of scholars supporting objects-centered theories because, as argued by Marginson (2021), education itself does not lead to employability outcomes; instead, the contribution of education is "the production and augmentation of the reflexive autonomous agency of graduates which makes these outcomes possible" (p. 5). International graduates managed their employability trajectories through activities occurring from a social basis like availability of resources, goals, and visions of social practices, albeit through their subjectivities. Therefore, the abovementioned theoretical accounts provided insufficient conceptual guidance for an examination of these issues. Consequently, although these theoretical approaches can significantly contribute to our understanding of how employability agency is constrained and resourced by contextual structures, they are not in themselves sufficient.

International students as agents with strong agency

Scholars who believe that individuals have strong agency also acknowledge the connections between individuals and their environment. Environmental characteristics can impact individuals' plans and actions. However, individuals are not fully subjugated by the environmental characteristics of their current situation but can control its nature and their circumstances. Two traditions that place strong emphasis on individual agency are social cognitivism (e.g., Bandura (2001)) and social science (e.g., Giddens (1984)).

Social-cognitive theory undertakes a comprehensive psychological effort to explain the human functioning and behavior behind the exercise of agency. Scholars advocating this perspective claim that human beings are able to control the

environmental surroundings and their life circumstances because they have agentic features like a belief in the capacity to exert influence over life (Hitlin & Elder, 2007), self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001), sense of control (Ross & Mirowsky, 2002), and decision-making and self-determination (Schlosser, 2015). These capacities and skills assist people to manage their behaviors, emotion, and actions; thus, they are able to engage with or control intentional activities which they initiate. Individuals with agentic features also have the capacity to visualise desired future states and set future goals which match their strengths and preferences, and then break down these goals into a hierarchically structured system of achievable sub-goals (Bandura, 2001, 2006; Clausen, 1991). Another agentic action is the capacity to initiate changes like actively sharing suggestions, ideas, and revising the nature of work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Meanwhile, social science scholars explore the relationship between individuals and the society in a more complex way. For example, Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration argues that individuals possess interpretive frameworks or "schemes" which enable them to understand the world through their own lenses. Therefore, structures do not exist outside individuals but operate through them, and are reproduced and modified by them (Tholen, 2015, p.776). In this sense, people do not mindlessly follow normative expectations but frame the world based on their interpretations. Although individuals have shared meanings, they may use "practical consciousness" (Giddens, 1984) to engage with different actions to produce and reproduce shared meanings. This means that individuals will have different interpretations of society, inducing their engagement in various actions although they may aim to reach the same goal. Giddens (1984) strongly advocates individual agency by claiming that individuals use their interpretive schemes to constitute and communicate meaning of a structural system, and then take actions with intended and unintended consequences (Tholen, 2015). In this way, Giddens (1984) perceives humans as agents with capacity and power who can make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events.

In summary, this paradigm assumes that human beings are agents of power and change. They have capacity to control their current and future life circumstances

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(Bandura, 1986, 2006) by exercising agency, individuals can put themselves in more advantageous situations that are physically and socially less constrictive, and that offer numerous options for personal development (Goller, 2017, p. 41). Agency is often implicitly or explicitly used as a notion of human freedom, individual volition, or power within a given social structure. However, due to their strong advocation for individual agency, these theoretical accounts have been criticised by various researchers. For instance, Fuchs (2001) and Archer (2000) question if individual agency exists at all, how much agency individuals have, and what is the more "correct" interrelation between structure and agency.

How was employability agency depicted in these theoretical accounts?
The data analysis showed that many graduates possessed agentic features and were able to initiate agentic actions. They achieved desired employability outcomes based on a range of personal qualities, and short- and long-term intentional activities – an important condition for agency to be exercised (Bandura, 2001). Amongst the participants, three academics emerged as the best examples representing this group. They had strong beliefs in their research and intellectual capacities, and demonstrated durable persistence in pursuing their career in academia. Therefore, they strategically built teaching and research records very early, and persistently refused part-time work that did not support their profiles as an academic (e.g., working at supermarket or cooking at a restaurant). Here, their agency is demonstrated in the confidence they have about their capacity to achieve their objectives (Bandura, 2001) as well as a selective capacity (Billett, 2001).

Some other participants also demonstrated the possession of agentic features through their "unusual" job seeking approach. Through socialisations with friends, they knew that local employers often equate Asian names to English unproficiency and were not keen on shortlisting Asian-origin applicants. However, these graduates were very confident with their English fluency and desperately wanted to prove this to employers. Therefore, they did not submit their job applications online but went knocking doors of companies directly. After many attempts, they eventually succeeded in securing their jobs.

Some others experienced more ups and downs before achieving their goals. Their employability trajectories were interrupted by a range of unforeseen incidents and adversities, leading to the investments of more time, effort, health, and finance. The majority had thought obtaining PR would enable them to find jobs easily, and thus, enrolled in disciplines aligned to the Migration Occupations in Demand List, although many did not share a genuine interest in these areas. Unfortunately, having a PR did not guarantee employment. Consequently, some had to do another degree in a new discipline due to their lack of engagement in the "wrong" profession. These pathways were particularly common amongst young graduates. For other cases, continual changes in PR policies even altered their career plans. They experienced career interruptions for several years due to the sudden discontinuation of the Skilled Independent visa. After completing their studies, instead of using the obtained degrees to apply for PR as initially planned, they had to leave Australia because their majors had been removed from the Demand List. After years of staying and doing different jobs in the home country, they returned to Australia and either enrolled in a new degree or did different types of work.

Employability agency was also demonstrated in how the graduates worked on their communication competencies – an area evidenced as a concerning limitation of international graduates (Pham, 2021b). Most improved English in their study program but there were some exceptional cases. These graduates wanted to enhance their English to the level of a native. They engaged in learning the authentic language via social media like Facebook and LinkedIn because this suited daily conversations more. They also engaged in self-reflections and observations so that they could pick embodied cultural norms. Interestingly, these graduates could not only integrate in the mainstream society and perform their work better, but also improve their whole-person development, i.e., a desire to enhance both social and personal identities (Archer, 2000). Some received satisfactory outcomes, whereas some did not. Those who achieved better outcomes were often those who had work and living experiences in Australia. Real-life experiences allowed them to reflect on how what they had learned in universities differed from reality and then how they had to adjust. By contrast, the graduates who could not improve communication competencies much were often those who lacked these experiences. Therefore, the latter often

faced a sense of being stuck because they found it confusing and hard to decode embodied cultural values in the labor market. For instance, a graduate expressed their depression when experiencing how "professionalism" was applied very personally at their workplace in a way which was entirely different from that learned in universities. In fact, universities and the labor market are two different discourses. Without experiences of an insider, international graduates often found it hard to transfer knowledge and skills obtained in universities in the market (Pham, 2021b).

Interestingly, English proficiency limitations forced some graduates to seek space where they could use their mother tongue. Many succeeded in obtaining employments in either their co-ethnic community or multinational enterprises which had collaborations with clients in their home countries. In these cases, ethnic capitals are international graduates' unique or unofficial power (Collin et al., 2010), and these graduates were able to tap into them. As such, Giddens is right in these cases when they claim that individuals have capacity to use power to influence social events.

What were the limitations of these theoretical accounts in informing employability agency?

As discussed above, these theoretical approaches are right when they claim that agency manifests in individuals' strong beliefs, self-determination, persistence, intentional actions, capacities, experiences, and power. Many graduates' employability trajectories were influenced by contextual structures, but they eventually succeeded in achieving their desired career goals.

However, the data analysis also revealed these theoretical lenses were not sufficient to explain several other signifiers. In their employability negotiation journeys, the graduates clearly did not have absolute power and capacities to fully control their career trajectories, as Giddens and Bandura claim. By contrast, contextual factors had both obvious and hidden impacts on employability trajectories, although their influences varied in different cases. Obvious impacts included how governmental policies about PR and supply-demand in the workforce profoundly and immediately influenced graduates' career trajectories (as discussed in the first part of this paper). Furthermore, many graduates lost jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hidden impacts were observed in how universities continue disseminating the human capital doxa and embed assumptions that higher education leads to improved employment outcomes (Blackmore et al., 2017; Chen, 2014). International students and their parents internalised the policy doxa about the importance of qualifications, degrees, and university-based resources promoted by universities, and therefore, placed great emphasis on attaining academic performance and technical knowledge. The graduates only realised the lack of a range of other capitals like social, cultural, identity, and psychological when they started the transition to the workforce (Pham, 2021c). The abovementioned theoretical approaches do not provide conceptual guidance for the investigation of how employability agency was shaped by structural factors in these ways.

Furthermore, as explained before, employability is not limited to one-off employment outcomes but involves other aspects like job sustainability, job satisfaction, and personal and professional growths; these can only be unpacked during the process through which international graduates negotiate their employability. This means working contexts and discourses at the workplace need to be examined so that insights can be obtained to unpack how they limit or resource employability agency. Institutional conditions and professional relationships like material facilities, mentorship, supervision, organisation culture, and power relations can determine the extent to which international graduates engage with their work, stay with their job, or alter their career pathways. The aforementioned theoretical approaches do not consider these structural and relational factors as well as examine them enduringly. This limitation renders these theoretical approaches as one-dimensional views. Furthermore, different career trajectories revealed that the graduates had different levels of interests in pursuing career goals. They also engaged with constraints and affordances associated to their employability differently. Some had great passion, and thus, desperately looked for solutions to overcome struggles and made improvements. They perceived that their personal and professional enhancements were not only for the sake of obtaining employment but also for whole-person development. Some others only fulfilled their commitments at a minimal level. Therefore, they actively decided what is "judged worth of participation" (Billett, 2004,

p. 320). As such, individuals' interests and priorities were also signifiers of employability agency but were underestimated in these theoretical perspectives.

Finally, as discussed before, work and living experiences played a significant role in guiding the graduates' navigation of structural barriers. Those who had these experiences and constantly engaged in self-reflections experienced smoother trajectories, and showed more confidence about their management strategies of personal and professional matters. This finding compensates Giddens' (1984) notion of "practical consciousness" because the author did not really explain what can help individuals become conscious about their actions. For Giddens, individuals can initiate intentional actions but cannot fully control their consequences; however, the author did not explain why. As found in this study, work and living experiences can be seen as "reasons" of why because they could enable international graduates to control the outcomes of their actions.

Towards a conceptual framework guiding a fuller understanding of employability agency

This section discusses a conceptual framework that allows for a fuller understanding of the employability agency of international graduates. The above discussions inform that this framework needs to consist of essential components as captured in Figure 1.

First, international graduates' subjectivities "must" be considered when examining their employability agency. These subjectivities include their initial motivation, on-going personal and professional growths, cross-border living experiences, aspirations and expectations in the home country, dual and multiple citizenships (applied in many countries), attachments, connections, language, and cultural values in both host and home countries. All these can both constraint and resource students' employability agency. The two "extreme" theoretical paradigms above incorporate the context – dependent structures (e.g., visa policies, supply-demand regulations, and COVID-19 pandemic) and human psychological and cognitive dispositions (e.g., beliefs,

confidence, and self-management) – which do not adequately examine unique personal, living, and career characteristics of international graduates.

Subjectivities drive international graduates to exercise agency and engage with the world via discursive, practical, and embodied actions (Archer, 2000, 2003) in a unique way. Without examining these subjectivities, international graduates are more likely to be trammed in the only discourse and field dominated by Western habitus where there is little space for them to exercise employability agency. The traditional approach often neglects the complexity of international students' subjectivities, and consequently, views them as inferiors. The socio-cultural perspective (e.g., Billett (2006); Hodkinson et al. (2008)) has argued for the consideration of a range of contextual factors in individuals' professional agency; however, it tends to focus on technical and social tools and circumstances. Subjectivities of international graduates should be understood as a broader picture.

The need to consider subjectivities has become even more necessary in today's uncertain labor contexts where globalisation, restructuring of industries, changes in governments' migration polices, constant labor movements, and COVID-19 have become common phenomena (Pham & Jackson, 2020a; Pham, 2021a). Graduates have faced a greater level of job insecurity, underemployment, and economic uncertainty (Pham & Jackson, 2020b). They have to be more independent and construct their work careers on an individual basis, and be enterprising and mobile as well as able to manage their career trajectories (Jackson & Wilton, 2017). Their subjectivities have then become important determinants of any career decision.

For international graduates, as unpacked in this research, two important areas that had important impacts on their subjectivities and thereby the exercise of employability agency were the possession of ethnic capitals, and the articulation of work and living experiences in the host country. Their ethnic capitals included ethnic community, social networks with co- and similar ethnic people, and home-country habitus and mother tongue. These ethnic capitals both facilitated and hindered their employability outcomes. For instance, many could use ethnic capitals to obtain full-time, part-time, and casual jobs when they failed to compete with local graduates in the mainstream

labor market. They could also use ethnic knowledge and skills to transform work practices in the mainstream society (e.g., combining home-country knowledge with that of the host country to create hybrid pedagogies and curricula). Their ethnic community was the space where they could develop and use "relational agency" – a capacity to work with others to achieve shared goals (Edwards, 2010). However, many also became disadvantaged due to the possession of these ethnic capitals because the possession of non-Western capitals could make local employers think negatively about them due to stereotypes about non-Western habitus.

Work and living experiences allowed international graduates to understand literal and embodied expectations of local industries. The graduates could then adjust their subjectivities and exercise employability agency in a more "acceptable" way. Nonetheless, to do this, graduates needed to engage in self-reflection and use reflexive agency to accumulate self-knowledge, review their evolving commitments, sort their priorities, reflect on the external world as an object, and weigh their actions in relation to external factors affecting their interests (Archer, 2000; Marginson, 2021, p. 9). However, the desire to use ethnic capitals, and obtain work and living experiences could put international graduates in a contradicting position. This is because to obtain work and living experiences in the mainstream, international graduates sometimes need to depart from or even give up some of their ethnic capitals. To overcome these contradictions, international graduates need to understand their subjectivities (e.g., what are their priorities? what are their identity commitments?). As such, the significance of subjectivities in employability agency becomes even clearer.

Second, the analysis of the graduates' biographical data revealed a common pattern: graduates actively engaged in constructing their own life and career. As discussed above, many had employability trajectories with a range of struggles. However, they proactively cultivated their personal development by continuously reflecting on past experiences, envisioned short and long futures, and worked on possibilities for present actions. These enduring journeys resonated with a line of research that emphasises the need to examine agency during one's life-course but not merely from a momentary and cross-sectional viewpoint (Biesta et al., 2015; Eteläpelto et al.,

2013; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Especially, Biesta and Tedder (2007) claim that agency cannot be fully understood without considering the historical continuum of an individual person's life course. Similarly, Biesta et al. (2015, p. 626) and Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue for the need to consider individuals' active engagement in the "interplay" with "influences from the past and orientations towards the future". Here, the life-course notions of agency also allowed for the examination of variations of employability agency. The graduates' employability agency was determined by the interplay between structural conditions, and subjectivities which changed and evolved. Therefore, employability agency varied over time, contexts, and conditions. The graduates used and showed multifaceted aspects of employability agency differently through their employability trajectories. Some prioritised employment at some point, and thus, had strong agentic features and took various agentic actions to achieve this goal. However, they also neglected their career at some points due to other commitments, and thus, did not engage in activities associated to their career development.

Finally, the deployment of a life-course perspective also allows for the examination of identity development (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Marginson, 2014). Here, identity commitments emerged as an important element driving the graduates' employability agency. Identity commitments that one has internalised and their social behaviors are connected. Identity commitments guide, direct, motivate, and hinder how people take actions and engage in activities to achieve their goals; in other words, individuals practice agency "in the very performance of those identities" (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 58; Hitlin & Elder, 2007). The connections between identity commitments and agency manifest even more clearly in the case of international students. This is because international students engage in the self-formation process through which their multi-identities, including home, host, student, professional, and hybrid identities, keep evolving (Marginson, 2014). These identities do not stand separately but interplay by pulling and pushing each other. Thus, when exercising employability agency, it is unavoidable that international graduates need to consider the fulfilments to their various identities.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to contribute to the field by conceptualising employability agency of international graduates based on existing theoretical frameworks and empirical insights. The term "employability agency" proposed in this paper furthers the concept of "agentic capital" initiated by Pham and Jackson (2020a) by unpacking the interdependent relationship between "employability agency" and five components including contextual structures, subjectivities, host-country resources, ethnic capitals, and agentic dispositions and actions. As data were collected only in Australia, this framework may not be highly applicable in other contexts. Future research should further explore how employability agency occurs in larger-scale studies and in other contexts so that this conceptual framework can be tested and refined.
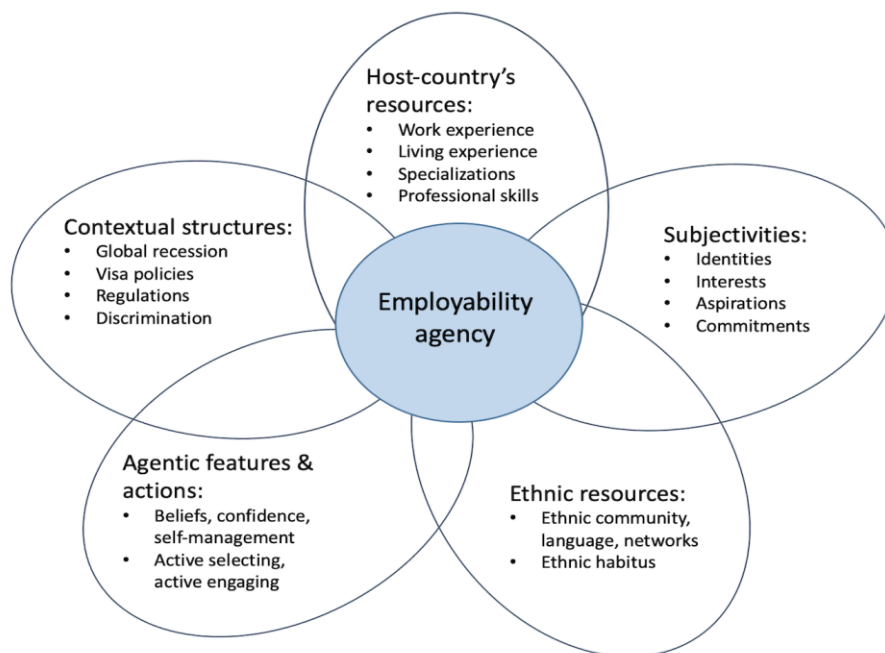
Figure 1: Employability Agency Framework (EAF)

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