

Unpacking University Career Support: A Multi-Dimensional Analysis of Factors Shaping Chinese International Students' Perceived Employability in Malaysia

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Abstract – Enhancing the employability of Chinese international students has become increasingly important for higher education institutions, particularly in host countries such as Malaysia where employment competition and cross-cultural labour market challenges are evident. Although university career support is acknowledged as a key driver of employability development, prior research has mainly examined its components in isolation, resulting in limited understanding of the relative effectiveness of different support dimensions. To address this gap, this study aims to unpack university career support as a multi-dimensional construct and examine how six support dimensions—Curriculum, Personal Development, Work Experience, Real-World Activities, Career Guidance and Counselling, and Extra-curricular Activities—influence perceived employability among Chinese final-year undergraduates in Malaysia. A quantitative research design was adopted, and survey data were collected from 412 respondents and analysed using SPSS through descriptive, correlational, and multiple regression analyses. The findings reveal that although all six dimensions show positive associations with perceived employability, only Work Experience and Career Guidance and Counselling significantly predict employability outcomes, indicating that experiential learning and structured career support have the strongest influence. These results highlight the need for universities to prioritise high-impact, experience-based, and guided career interventions to enhance international students' employability. The study offers practical implications for higher education policy and service design, while contributing empirical evidence to inform targeted improvements in career support strategies for international students.

Keywords – Internationalisation of Higher Education, University Career Support, Perceived Employability, International Students, Career Development;

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the central objectives of higher education is to develop graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also employable—that is, capable of obtaining, maintaining, and progressing in meaningful work (Yorke, 2006). Employability is widely understood as a multi-faceted outcome that combines students' discipline knowledge, transferable skills, personal attributes and the capacity to

adapt to changing labour markets (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004). In an increasingly competitive and globalised higher education landscape, perceived employability—the student's own assessment of their readiness for employment—has become an important indicator for universities, prospective students and policymakers alike (Yorke, 2006). Host countries that attract large numbers of international learners, such as Malaysia, must therefore attend carefully to how university practices and supports shape these students' employability perceptions and outcomes.

Malaysia is a major regional hub for international higher education and hosts a substantial population of Chinese undergraduate students, many of whom view study abroad as a pathway to enhanced career opportunities either in Malaysia, in China, or internationally. Recent studies of Chinese students in Malaysian institutions indicate that institution-level factors—ranging from curriculum and pedagogical practices to language support and industry linkages—play an important role in graduates' employability perceptions and labour-market outcomes (Kiong et al., 2019). At the same time, national and global disruptions—including the long tail of the 2008 economic crisis and the shocks introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic—have reshaped employer expectations and constrained entry-level opportunities, increasing the urgency for universities to provide purposeful career development support. Such contextual pressures make it imperative for host institutions to identify which forms of university support most effectively translate into students' perceived readiness for employment.

Extant empirical work provides clear evidence that various university initiatives—such as curriculum design, career guidance services, placement and work-experience programmes, real-world and industry-linked activities—can each contribute to student employability (Ho, 2022; Padgett et al., 2023). However, much of the literature treats these supports in isolation, examining the effect of a single type of intervention at a time (for example, the impact of placements or the effect of career coaching), rather than unpacking the university career support ecosystem as a multi-dimensional construct. This fragmentation limits the field's ability to compare the relative contribution of different support types and to provide pragmatic prioritisation guidance for universities operating with constrained resources. Moreover, relatively few studies focus specifically on international student subpopulations—such as Chinese final-year undergraduates in Malaysia—whose needs and labour-market trajectories may differ from domestic students.

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Motivated by these gaps, the present study adopts a multi-dimensional perspective on university career support and empirically evaluates the relative influence of six distinct support dimensions—Curriculum, Personal Development, Work Experience, Real-World Activities, Career Guidance & Counselling, and Extracurricular Activities—on perceived employability among Chinese final-year undergraduates studying in Malaysian universities. By using a single dataset containing responses from 412 students, the study applies multiple regression analysis to estimate the unique contribution of each support dimension while controlling for the shared variance among them.

The purpose of this study is to identify which types of university career support exert the strongest influence on international students' perceived employability and to provide empirical evidence that informs institutional strategies for enhancing graduate career readiness. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ: Which dimensions of university career support significantly predict the perceived employability of Chinese international students studying in Malaysian universities?

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews the literature and develops the study hypotheses. The methodology section describes the sample, measurement instruments and analytical procedures. The finding section reports the reliability, descriptive, correlational and regression findings. The final sections discuss the implications for policy and practice, limitations, and directions for future research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Human Capital Theory (HCT), originally advanced by Gary Becker (1964) and Theodore Schultz (1961), posits that investments in education, training, and experience enhance individuals' knowledge, skills, and abilities—and thereby increase their productivity and value in the labour market. For instance, studies have shown that higher levels of human capital (in terms of academic performance, skills acquisition, and work experience) are positively associated with students' perceptions of employability (Fei et al., 2025). In the context of higher education, this suggests that university provided opportunities—such as curriculum content, internships, career guidance, and extra curricular activities—can be seen as mechanisms through which students accumulate human capital. As a theoretical lens, HCT supports the proposition that when universities actively invest in and facilitate these forms of support, students enhance their individual human capital and consequently perceive themselves as more employable. In the present study of Chinese final-year international undergraduates in Malaysia, we extend HCT to frame the university career support construct as comprising six distinct dimensions. Each dimension represents a specific type of institutional investment that contributes to students' human capital accumulation.

Empirical evidence highlights that each dimension of university career support can positively influence employability, though effect sizes and mechanisms vary. Curriculum interventions, particularly those integrating work-integrated learning, industry projects, and scaffolded career modules, consistently improve students' workplace readiness (Nyagope, 2025; Morrell & Morrell, 2014; Pitan, 2016; Scandurra et al., 2023). Personal Development programmes enhance confidence, career clarity, and employability, especially when culturally responsive strategies are adopted for international students (Wardle & Geronikos, 2024; Jackson, 2014; Xu et al., 2025). Work Experience and Real-World Activities are frequently identified as the strongest predictors of employability, providing direct exposure to host-country labour markets, practical skills, and professional networks (Shanfari et al., 2024; Jackson & Rowe, 2023; Syafinaz & Athirah, 2019; Leong, 2012). Career Guidance & Counselling and Extracurricular Activities further support employability by fostering job search skills, networks, and broader competencies, though their independent effects are sometimes contingent on engagement and integration with experiential learning (Monteiro et al., 2024; Swingler et al., 2022; Upton & Sporton, 2022; Xu et al., 2025).

Collectively, the literature positions university career support as a multi-faceted construct, with experiential and practical components often yielding the strongest influence on perceived employability, while curricular, guidance, and developmental supports act as enabling structures. Despite abundant research, few studies examine these six dimensions simultaneously within a single international student sample. The present study addresses this gap by evaluating the relative contributions of each dimension to perceived employability among 412 Chinese final-year undergraduates in Malaysian universities, offering practical insights into which forms of institutional investment most effectively enhance employability outcomes. Accordingly, six hypotheses are proposed, corresponding to the six dimensions of university career support (Figure 1):

H1: Curriculum has a significant positive influence on the perceived employability of Chinese international students in Malaysia.

H2: Personal Development has a significant positive influence on the perceived employability of Chinese international students in Malaysia.

H3: Work Experience has a significant positive influence on the perceived employability of Chinese international students in Malaysia.

H4: Real-World Activities have a significant positive influence on the perceived employability of Chinese international students in Malaysia.

H5: Career Guidance and Counselling has a significant positive influence on the perceived employability of Chinese international students in Malaysia.

H6: Extracurricular Activities have a significant positive influence on the perceived employability of Chinese international students in Malaysia.

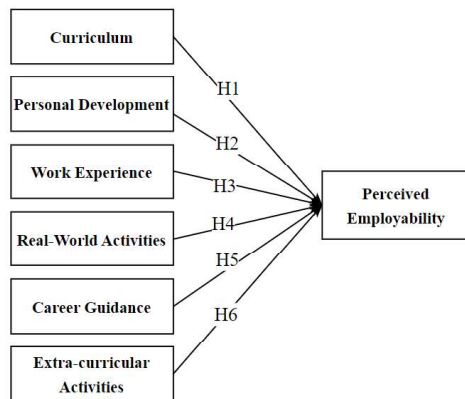


Figure 1. Hypothetical model

III. METHOD

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine the influence of university career support on Chinese international students' perceived employability in Malaysian universities. The survey instrument combined two validated measures: the Employability Development Opportunities (EDOs) scale (Pitan & Muller, 2021) and the Spanish Self-Perceived Employability (S-SPE) scale (Vargas, Sánchez-Queija, Rothwell, & Parra, 2018). The EDOs scale was adapted to measure six dimensions of university career support, comprising Curriculum (4 items), Personal Development (4 items), Work Experience (4 items), Real-World Activities (5 items), Career Guidance and Counselling (5 items), and Extracurricular Activities (5 items). The S-SPE scale included 12 items assessing students' perceived employability. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

As the target respondents were Chinese international students, a bilingual (English–Chinese) questionnaire was used to ensure clarity and accessibility. The questionnaire was translated into Chinese and then back-translated into English following Brislin's (1970) back-to-back translation procedure to ensure semantic, conceptual, and cultural equivalence. Minor contextual wording adjustments were made to align the items with the Malaysian higher education context, while retaining the original meaning and structure of the scales. Treating each support dimension as a separate independent variable enabled a detailed examination of their relative contributions to perceived employability.

The study targeted final-year Chinese undergraduate students at three leading public universities in Malaysia's Klang Valley: Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Final-year students were chosen due to their critical transition stage into the labor market and high engagement with institutional career resources. A proportionate stratified random sampling strategy was employed, with systematic random selection within each university stratum facilitated by the international offices. A total of 412 valid responses were collected (UM: 73, 17.7%; UKM: 190, 46.1%; UPM: 149, 36.2%),

representing 25.2% of the target population. Participants were predominantly aged 19–22 years (68.5%), with 30.6% aged 23–26, and 1.0% aged 27 or older.

Survey data were analyzed using SPSS 27.0. Descriptive statistics summarized participants' demographic characteristics, followed by correlation analysis to examine relationships among variables. Multiple regression analysis was then conducted to determine the relative impact of each university career support dimension on perceived employability. This approach enabled the identification of the most influential forms of institutional support, providing actionable insights for higher education institutions aiming to enhance Chinese international students' employability outcomes.

IV. FINDINGS

Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

The reliability analysis indicated that all constructs demonstrated excellent internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha values for Curriculum ($\alpha = 0.903$), Personal Development Planning ($\alpha = 0.879$), Work Experience ($\alpha = 0.890$), Real-World Activities ($\alpha = 0.913$), Guidance & Counselling ($\alpha = 0.918$), and Extracurricular Activities ($\alpha = 0.910$) all exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019), confirming strong internal consistency.

Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table I. Mean scores ranged from 3.23 to 3.50, indicating moderate levels across constructs. Skewness (–0.28 to 0.14) and kurtosis (–0.81 to –0.29) values suggest that the data were approximately normally distributed, within acceptable thresholds (Kline, 2015).

TABLE I: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variables	Mean	S. D	Skewness	Kurtosis
Curriculum	3.32	0.95	-0.12	-0.71
Personal Development	3.23	0.90	0.14	-0.74
Work Experience	3.49	0.93	-0.28	-0.72
Real-World Activities	3.31	0.92	0.07	-0.81
Guidance & Counselling	3.50	0.93	-0.24	-0.75
Extracurricular Activities	3.28	0.90	0.01	-0.80
Perceived Employability	3.28	0.78	-0.11	-0.29

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients among the six university support dimensions and perceived employability are shown in Table II. All six dimensions were positively and significantly correlated with PE at the 0.01 level. Work Experience ($r = .441, p < .001$) and Guidance & Counselling ($r = .433, p < .001$) exhibited the strongest correlations. Curriculum ($r = .321, p < .001$) and Real-World Activities ($r = .343, p < .001$) showed moderate correlations, while Personal Development Planning ($r = .280, p < .001$) and Extracurricular Activities ($r = .283, p < .001$) were weaker. Strong intercorrelations

among the six dimensions ($r = .501-.697$) indicate that students perceiving high levels of one type of support tended to perceive high levels of other supports.

TABLE II: PEARSON CORRELATION MATRIX

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Curriculum	1						
Personal Development	.548**	1					
Work Experience	.601**	.548**	1				
Real-World Activities	.551**	.515**	.577**	1			
Guidance & Counselling	.625**	.554**	.697**	.640**	1		
Extracurricular Activities	.606**	.598**	.567**	.544**	.501**	1	
Perceived Employability	.321**	.280**	.441**	.343**	.433**	.283**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis examined the relative contribution of each support dimension to perceived employability. The overall model was significant ($F(6, 405) = 19.813, p < .001$), explaining 22.7% of the variance ($R^2 = .227$; adjusted $R^2 = .215$), indicating that the six dimensions collectively predict perceived employability. VIF values ranged from 1.880 to 2.571, confirming no multicollinearity concerns.

As shown in Table III, Work Experience ($\beta = .259, p < .001$) and Guidance & Counselling ($\beta = .222, p = .002$) were significant positive predictors. Curriculum, Personal Development Planning, Real-World Activities, and Extracurricular Activities did not show significant direct effects ($p > .05$), suggesting their influence may be indirect or require integration with experiential and career-focused initiatives.

TABLE III: MULTIPLE REGRESSION RESULTS

Variables	B	SE	β	t	Sig.	VIF
Constant	1.735	.159	—	10.904	.000	—
Curriculum	.003	.053	.004	0.058	.954	2.132
Personal Development Planning	-.017	.052	-.019	-0.322	.748	1.880
Work Experience	.219	.057	.259	3.873	.000	2.341
Real-World Activities	.050	.052	.058	0.947	.344	1.983
Guidance & Counselling	.187	.059	.222	3.176	.002	2.571
Extracurricular Activities	.002	.054	.002	0.039	.969	2.046

Hypothesis Testing

The results of the correlation and regression analyses provided a comprehensive test of the six proposed hypotheses. Correlation analysis indicated that all support dimensions were positively and significantly related to perceived employability, providing preliminary support for all hypotheses. However, multiple regression results revealed that only H3 (Work Experience \rightarrow Perceived Employability) and H5 (Guidance & Counselling \rightarrow Perceived Employability) were supported, as these

predictors exhibited significant positive effects (Work Experience: $\beta = .259, p < .001$; Guidance & Counselling: $\beta = .222, p = .002$) (Table IV).

In contrast, H1, H2, H4, and H6 were not supported ($p > .05$). This suggests that while these dimensions are positively perceived by students, they may not directly translate into employability confidence without stronger integration with practical or career-focused initiatives. Overall, the findings highlight that experiential learning and structured career guidance are the most influential factors in shaping Chinese international students' perceived employability in Malaysian universities, while other support forms may serve as complementary or enabling factors.

TABLE IV: HYPOTHESIS TESTING RESULTS

Hypothesis	IV	DV	β	P-value	Finding
H1	Curriculum	Perceived Employability	0.004	0.954	Rejected
H2	Personal Development	Perceived Employability	-0.019	0.748	Rejected
H3	Work Experience	Perceived Employability	0.259	<0.001	Supported
H4	Real-World Activities	Perceived Employability	0.058	0.344	Rejected
H5	Guidance & Counselling	Perceived Employability	0.222	0.002	Supported
H6	Extracurricular Activities	Perceived Employability	0.002	0.969	Rejected

V. DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the extent to which six dimensions of university career support influence perceived employability among Chinese final-year undergraduates in Malaysia. Guided by Human Capital Theory (HCT), the study conceptualised these six dimensions as institutional investments that enhance students' human capital and thus improve employability perceptions. The findings partially support the theoretical assumptions of HCT, revealing that not all forms of support exert equal influence on students' perceived employability. Although all six dimensions demonstrated positive correlations with perceived employability, only Work Experience and Guidance & Counselling emerged as significant predictors in the regression model. This suggests that while students recognise multiple forms of support as beneficial, only specific types of institutional investment translate into meaningful employability confidence.

Work Experience was the strongest predictor of perceived employability, affirming the substantial role of experiential learning in enhancing students' skills, labour market knowledge, and professional identity. This finding aligns with prior studies showing that internships and other work-integrated learning opportunities provide valuable exposure to host-country employment norms, networks, and practical competencies (Jackson & Rowe, 2023; Shanfari et al., 2024). For Chinese international students, who may be unfamiliar with Malaysian workplace culture

and face integration barriers, such experiences are critical for building employability capital. Consistent with HCT, the results indicate that direct, hands-on experiences contribute most effectively to human capital accumulation.

Guidance & Counselling also significantly influenced perceived employability, highlighting the value of structured career services in supporting students' transition into the labour market. This finding reinforces evidence that career guidance enhances job search skills, self-efficacy, and labour market readiness, particularly when culturally tailored to international students' needs (Monteiro et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2025). As career services help students make sense of labour market expectations and strategise their career pathways, they serve as a critical institutional mechanism for transforming educational inputs into employability outcomes. This supports the HCT notion that advisory and developmental support constitutes a form of human capital enhancement.

In contrast, Curriculum, Personal Development Planning, Real-World Activities, and Extracurricular Activities did not exhibit significant direct effects on perceived employability, despite their positive correlations with the outcome variable. This divergence suggests that these forms of support may contribute indirectly, for example by enhancing students' foundational skills, confidence, or engagement, which then facilitate the benefits of experiential or career-specific interventions. The findings also imply that if such support is not explicitly linked to labour market skills or lacks strong industry engagement, students may not perceive it as directly improving employability. This aligns with emerging literature that calls for stronger integration between curriculum, personal development initiatives, and career-focused experience to generate tangible employability gains for students (Wardle & Geronikos, 2024; Scandurra et al., 2023).

VI. Implications and Limitations

The findings offer several theoretical and practical implications for research on international students' employability. Theoretically, this study enriches Human Capital Theory by demonstrating that not all forms of university career support translate equally into perceived employability, especially in a cross-cultural international student context. While HCT traditionally assumes that all educational investments enhance human capital, our results reveal a hierarchical effect, wherein experiential learning (work experience) and structured career intervention (guidance & counselling) exert a direct impact, whereas curriculum, developmental programmes, real-world activities, and extracurricular involvement show indirect or enabling effects. This distinction advances the literature by positioning university support as a differentiated construct rather than a uniformly effective investment, thereby contributing to a more nuanced theoretical understanding of how various forms of institutional support translate into employability outcomes among international students.

Practically, the results emphasise that Malaysian universities should prioritise high-impact, experiential,

and guided career interventions for Chinese international students. Universities are encouraged to strengthen access to internships and work-integrated learning opportunities, particularly within the Malaysian labour market, as these experiences build localised human capital and increase employability confidence. At the same time, expanding personalised career counselling services—especially those sensitive to cultural adjustment, visa challenges, and job-seeking barriers faced by Chinese students—will yield meaningful gains. Institutions should consider redesigning curriculum-based career content and personal development activities so they are more applied, industry-linked, and integrated with career services to convert these currently indirect supports into more impactful ones.

This study is not without limitations: the cross-sectional design prevents causal inference, and the focus on three public universities in one geographic region limits generalisability. Future research should adopt longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to assess how employability perceptions develop over time, explore mediation or moderated mechanisms (e.g., cultural adaptation, language proficiency), and compare Chinese students across countries to determine whether these support effects vary across host-country contexts.

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