HOW DO CHINESE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS STUDENTS DEVELOP BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN AUSTRALIA TO IMPROVE THEIR SELF-PERCEPTION OF THEIR EMPLOYABILITY?

A Thesis submitted by

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ABSTRACT

Immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic international education contributed over $37 billion to the Australian economy. Most students came from China and chose an Australian education because they expected it would improve their career prospects. However, evidence shows that even prior to COVID-19, international students were struggling to find opportunities to develop their employability, leading to dissatisfaction with their investment. Australia's third largest export industry may be at risk unless the problem of international student employability is addressed. Social capital is a key factor of employability, however international students are stripped of their social capital as soon as they arrive in Australia, instantly compromising their employability. The purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges that six international Chinese business students at the University of Sydney experienced as they rebuilt their social capital in Australia, and how they overcame those challenges to improve their self-perception of their employability. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used as the methodological approach as it allowed an in-depth exploration and interpretation of the meaning that the participants made of those experiences. The research found the challenges were a result of the tensions between the cultural expectations of Australians and the participants' Confucian heritage upbringing. The participants were able to navigate these tensions by having a *growth mindset*—they reframed challenges as learning opportunities. This enabled them to develop their bridging social capital, improve their employability and achieve their goal of finding work in Australia.

Keywords: international students, employability, social capital, growth mindset, Australia

CERTIFICATION OF THESIS

This Thesis is entirely the work of Susmita Das. The work is original and has not previously been submitted for any other award.

Principal Supervisor: Professor Peter McIlveen

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Student and supervisors' signatures of endorsement are held at the University.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In 2019, immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, international education contributed $37.6 billion to the Australian economy (Department of Education, 2019). In April 2019 there were 612,849 international students in Australia and 29%, the majority by far, came from mainland China (Department of Education, 2019). With an investment of up to $33,000 per year for an undergraduate degree and $37,000 per year for a postgraduate degree (Study in Australia, 2019), students and their families have an expectation that their investment will yield a competitive advantage in the labour market by developing their employability and including work experience opportunities (Gribble, Blackmore, & Rahimi, 2015). However, a study by Deakin University which surveyed over 1,150 graduate visa holders, found that only 42% were undertaking work related to their study (Tran, Rahimi & Tan, 2019) leading to growing levels of dissatisfaction with their Australian education (Gribble et al., 2015). Whilst many university students find developing employability challenging, little is understood about the unique challenges that international students face.

At the time of writing this thesis, I had worked for over ten years as a career development practitioner at various universities, predominantly with Chinese international students, and had witnessed first-hand, the difficulties they faced when trying to find work. While I was working for three years in Vietnam, I began to realise how western-centric my practice was, and that to best serve students from a Confucian heritage background such as China, Vietnam, Singapore, Korea and Japan, where learning is perceived as passive and based on memorising rather than understanding (Tran, 2012), I needed to acknowledge and consider the differences in cultural perspectives (Mate, McDonald, Morgan, Nhat Hoang, Das & Dinh, 2017; Nguyen, McDonald,

Mate & Taylor, 2018). In 2017 I returned to Australia to work at the University of Sydney, where my role was to manage an employability program called Job Smart that had been specifically designed for international business students. After my experience in Vietnam, I attempted to modify the program, and my behaviour, to be more culturally sensitive. Yet there was still a major piece of the puzzle that was missing because students undertaking the Job Smart program were still struggling to find work. Their stories were often so heartbreaking that I felt compelled to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges they experienced so that I could begin to address them in a more meaningful way. This was the impetus for undertaking the current research into how Chinese international business students develop bridging social capital in Australia to improve their self-perception of their employability.

Domestic student is an administrative term used by universities regarding fees. It does not denote ethnicity or cultural background. In fact, in 2018, about two percent of domestic students in higher education in Australia were born in China and spoke Mandarin at home (Department of Education, Skills and Training, 2018). The participants in the present study used the term *local student* to describe the cultural difference between themselves and students who were born in Australia, speak English at home and hold Western dominant viewpoints. Within the context of the present research, unless there is reference to government statistics, the reader should assume that *domestic student* infers the cultural characteristics of *local students*.

1.2 Research Problem

In 2017 the Australian Universities International Director's Forum (AUIDF) published findings of a survey that examined employment outcomes of international graduates of Australian universities. The study found that more than 80% of the respondents chose to study in Australia because they believed it would improve their employability and career prospects

(Matthews, Doyle & Clark, 2019). However, a recent study conducted by the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) (Chew, 2019) found that 16.8% of temporary graduate visa holders were volunteering; around 17% were working in low skilled jobs in retail and hospitality, and more than 20% were unemployed.

Whilst employment is the outcome of getting a job, *employability* is a multidimensional concept that refers to an individual's potential to obtain a job (Yorke, 2006). A crucial element of employability is *social capital*—the social relationships and networks with family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances that could facilitate access to job opportunities (Tomlinson, 2017, Pham, 2020) and frequently associated with the adage "it's not what you know, it's who you know." By virtue of living in Australia, domestic students are much more likely to have at least a basic level of social capital, be it friends, family, acquaintances, and colleagues. Yet most international students arrive in Australia stripped of any prior social networks, and often begin their education journey without knowing anyone (Neri & Ville, 2006). This means that compared to domestic students, their employability is instantly compromised. They face the additional difficulties of assimilating into a new culture and undertaking a degree in English, which for the majority is a second language. If maintaining growth in the international student market remains a strategic priority, which has become even more tenuous in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, resolving the problem of their compromised employability should remain a focus for Australian universities (Blackmore, Gribble, & Rahimi, 2017), otherwise the market will look to countries that can meet their needs (Tran, Rahimi, Tan, Dang & Le, 2020).

1.3 Research Purpose

Much of the recent research on international students and social capital focusses on acculturating and making new friends (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Glass, 2014; Neri & Ville, 2006;

Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, & Kashima, 2010; Wang, 2021). Yet little research to date has been conducted on their experiences of networking in Australia to develop their employability. Despite the various challenges they face, some international students are successful in developing social capital, and use their newly created networks to develop their employability and obtain vital work experience. To help universities better serve their international students' needs, research is required to gain insight into how these students interpret and make sense of those challenges. The current study attempts to contribute to this knowledge by using the qualitative research method interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to understand the lived experiences of six Chinese international students who developed their social capital to improve their self-perceived employability.

1.4 Context

In 2016 the University of Sydney Business School introduced an extracurricular program called Job Smart, designed to improve the employability of their international student cohort, the majority of whom are Chinese. There were several work experience activities embedded within the program which, along with professional skills development, provided opportunities to build social capital. While most students focused on skill development, some were very proactive in making the most of these opportunities to develop their networks and as a result, went on to secure work experience and employment. The Job Smart program provided a means to understand the lived experiences of a sample of international Chinese business students who managed to successfully develop social capital and improve their employability, despite the challenges they faced.

1.5 Research Questions

In setting out the parameters of the current study a main question and set of sub-questions were developed:

Main Question:

How do Chinese international business students develop bridging social capital in Australia to improve their self-perception of their employability?

Sub-Questions

a) Why do international students find it challenging to develop social capital in Australia?

b) What does it mean to them when they experience those challenges?

c) How does their mindset influence their interpretation of those experiences and subsequent actions regarding developing their employability?

1.6 Significance of the Research

This topic is an important area of study as the findings have the potential to inform future practice, policy, and research regarding the experiences and needs of international students. The research outcomes may be useful to policymakers, university careers departments, academics coordinating work integrated learning, and institutional executive leadership members who could use the data to provide adequate support for this large cohort of students and ensure Australian higher education remains an attractive option. Such effective changes can be made through the design or redesign of employability programs and work integrated learning courses that better meet the needs of international students, as well as policymaking changes that are inclusive of distinctive cultural considerations required by this group.

The scarcity of research on the experiences of international students' development of their social capital for the purpose of improving their employability highlights a gap in the

literature on a significant group of individuals. It is important that the experiences of international students be further investigated as they will influence their attraction, retention, and graduation rates.

Lastly, data collection for the present research was completed prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. It is argued that the topic and findings it has produced are now more significant due to the resulting decline Australia's international student market. During the lockdowns, many people in Australia lost their jobs. While domestic students were entitled to extra government financial support, international students received no support all. Without their part-time and casual jobs, they lost income they needed to survive, pay for their studies as well as opportunities to develop their employability (Blackmore, 2020). Many went into debt with their university fees and experienced severe financial hardship. A clearer strategy and commitment to support international students develop their employability is one way for Australian universities to demonstrate that they care for and are prepared to invest in their students' wellbeing and success, as well as being an effective marketing strategy at a time when universities are looking to rebuild their international student numbers.

1.7 Summary

International students, particularly those from Confucian heritage cultures, represent a significant market for Australian universities and are a major export earner for the country. However, many international students and their families are becoming dissatisfied with the return on investment in their education, which they expect in the form of increased employability and competitive edge in the global labour market. In fact, instead of enhanced employability, international students begin their time in Australia with compromised employability because by leaving their home country, they have lost a crucial component of employability — their social

capital. To be successful in the job market, especially when competing with domestic students, international students need to develop all aspects of their employability, but particularly their social capital. Yet, many struggle and are unable to overcome the challenges they face, resulting in inadequate employability and dissatisfaction in Australia by the time they graduate. The purpose of current study is to gain insight into how six international Chinese students, who completed an extracurricular program called Job Smart at the University of Sydney Business School, overcame those challenges and successfully developed social capital to improve their self-perception of their employability. This knowledge can be used to inform how institutions, faculty and staff, and other international students can improve their employability.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

The following chapter, Chapter Two, presents a critical review of the literature on the topics of employability and social capital and how these relate to international students. Chapter Three addresses the rationale and theory for the chosen methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It provides details on the procedures that were followed to obtain and analyse the data, as well as important ethical issues. Chapter Four presents the findings of the semi-structured interviews with the students and the main themes that emerged from these. The final chapter, Chapter Five, discusses the findings in relation to the literature, it outlines the limitations of the study, implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of current knowledge related to international students' employability. It will start by examining the concept of employability as well as exploring the employability agenda from the perspective of three of the major stakeholders in international education. It will then go on to review the concept of social capital and its relation to employability. It will conclude by examining literature that informs why international students may find it challenging to develop social capital. While undertaking this review it became apparent that there is a gap in the current literature regarding international students developing social capital to improve their employability, which is where current research project hopes to offer a contribution.

2.2 Employability

In the contemporary, highly mobile economy, the expectation that an employer will provide secure, long-term employment in return for loyal service, is being replaced by the concept of employability, which is an individual's self-perception of their ability to obtain and maintain employment throughout their career (e.g. Bridgstock, 2009; Cole & Tibby, 2013; Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Harvey, 200; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Harvey, 2001; Vanhercke, De Cuyper, Peeters, & De Witte, 2014). Whilst the concept of employability is now widely accepted, its definition, purpose and focus are still contested across different stakeholder groups (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). According to Healy, Hammer and McIlveen (2020) graduate employability research is conducted according to the interests of three main stakeholder groups: policies at a government level, institutional strategies, and the individual. The following section will review the employability agenda from these stakeholders' perspectives, that is, Australian

government, Australian universities and international students. Whilst the primary purpose of my research is to understand the lived experience of employability from the perspective of international students, it is important to acknowledge the tensions that exist between the stakeholders' employability agendas to contextually position the research.

2.2.1 Australian government's employability agenda

In the late 1980s Australia underwent widespread market-based economic reforms that are most frequently referred to in the literature as neoliberalism, but which became known in this country as economic rationalism (Barnes, Humphrys, & Pusey, 2018). This form of political economy continues to be the orthodoxy that underpins economic policy making in Australia today (Pusey, 2018). Starting in the 1980s the Australian government introduced the higher education contribution scheme (HECS), full up-front fees for postgraduate courses and the beginning of a massive marketing campaign to sell Australian university education to international markets to offset reductions in government funding to the sector.

In April 2012, the Council of Australian Governments agreed to a revised National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development and a new National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform (Council of Australian Governments, 2012). The aim of these reforms was to "provide the skills that Australian businesses and individuals need to prosper in a rapidly changing economy" by "supporting around 375,000 additional students over five years to complete their qualifications and improving training enrolments and completions in high-level skills" (Council of Australian Governments, 2012, p1).

In late 2017, the Australian education minister Simon Birmingham declared the need for universities to focus on the work-readiness of graduates and that the government would be

seeking to make funding contingent upon a range of performance metrics including graduate outcomes (McGowan, 2017).

Australia, like most developed countries around the world, has historically suffered and continues to have suffer from a national skills shortage (Junankar, 2009), which means "employers are unable to fill or have considerable difficulty filling vacancies for an occupation, or significant specialised skill needs within that occupation" (Department of Jobs and Small Businesses, 2018, n.p.) To fill these shortages, employers demand a steady supply of work-ready graduates from universities, claiming this is essential to Australia's success in the global marketplace and the nation's continued economic growth (McIlveen & Pensiero, 2008).

In June 2020, the Australian Government announced the Job-Ready Graduates Package from which the National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF) allocates grants for universities to prioritise the production of STEM-skilled, job-ready graduates. In July 2020, the National Skills Commission was established in Australia "to contribute to a labour market that effectively aligns skills needs with education and training". These demands by government and employers upon universities to produce job ready graduates are mediated by a neoliberal ethos in the guise of an employability agenda whereby university funding is contingent on graduate outcomes (Levidow, 2002). The social democratic model that viewed education as a fundamental right has been replaced by a free-market model where education is viewed as a commodity (Peters & Jandrić, 2018). Universities have been recast as large corporate businesses that are less about producing active and engaged citizens and more about what they can contribute to economic growth (Bridgstock, 2009) by producing job ready graduates with technical skills prescribed by employers (Clarke, 2018).

2.2.2 Australian universities' employability agenda

Since market values now dictate the way universities operate, the imperative is to make a profit through a process of corporatisation, massification and marketisation (Connell, 2013). Success is determined by graduate outcomes which, in Australia, is whether a student is in employment four months after graduation and is measured using the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT), a suite of surveys to measure quality in Australian universities (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2021).

Australian higher education institutions have accepted the government's neoliberal agenda by agreeing that "graduate employability is, and should be, a key driver and measure of university outcomes" (Clarke, 2018 p.1974). However, many universities have conflated graduate employability with the acquisition of *employability skills* which, in an attempt to provide a unique value proposition, they modify and call *graduate attributes* or "the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time in the institution" (Dacre Pool, Qualter, & Sewell, 2014, p.303). Graduate attributes are in turn often used interchangeably with *soft skills*, *graduate competencies*, *work-ready skills*, *generic skills* and *transferable skills* (Williams, Dodd, Steele, & Randall, 2016). Universities embed their version of employability skills in the curriculum in the hope that this will enhance graduate employability (Clarke, 2018). The underlying and somewhat simplistic assumption is that by embedding them in the curriculum students will have acquired them by the time they graduate which will result in enhanced graduate outcomes.

However, globalisation, technological disruption, and the volatility of free market economies have resulted in a constantly evolving labour market whereby work is no longer characterised by clearly defined tasks (Donald, Baruch, & Ashleigh, 2017). Consequently,

graduate employability "cannot be reduced to a simple formula based upon graduate credentials and employability skills" (Clark, Zukas, & Lent, 2011, p.148). Bridgstock (2009) argues that "employer-driven lists …do not address the full picture of what is required by the graduate facing the prospect of the labour market" (p. 34).

Similarly, the embedded employability skills approach has also been widely critiqued, with little evidence that possession of these graduate attributes has direct bearing on graduate employment success (Cranmer, 2006; Piróg, 2016; Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011). A recent study conducted by Brown, Hammer, Perera and McIlveen (2021) investigated whether the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) subscales Good Teaching (GTS), Graduate Skills (GSS), and Graduate Qualities (GQS) could predict graduates' employment status. They found there was a negligible link between the acquisition of employability skills and employment outcomes. This reinforces the point that acquisition of employability skills does not correlate to employment. In fact, some question the extent to which these skills and competencies can be taught effectively in the classroom and then transferred to the workplace (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Cook, 2018; Cranmer, 2006).

Employability also drives market pressures, as universities compete to attract students with assurances about future returns on their investments into their education (Divan et al., 2019). In response to these political, economic, and market pressures, universities have adopted a variety of pedagogical and strategic approaches in their efforts to support students' careers and employability learning (Healy et al., 2020) and employability capital development (Nghia et al., 2020). Where once the power to determine curriculum content and pedagogy was firmly in the domain of the universities, there has been an insidious shift in the balance of power so that now industry and

government influence curriculum content to meet their neoliberal agendas and demand for a steady supply of job ready graduates (Boden & Nedeva, 2010).

2.2.3 Students' employability agenda.

While policy seems to preference the needs of industry and the promotion of skill acquisition, the counterpoint is an employability agenda that best serves students. Research across multiple disciplines has provided more a nuanced understanding of employability (Fugate et al., 2004; Holmes, 2013; Okay-Somerville, & Scholarios, 2017; Vanhercke et al., 2014).

Much of this research emphasises the role of self-perception in job and career success by defining employability as an individual's perception of the possibility of obtaining and maintaining employment (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Vanhercke et al., 2014). Self-perceived employability is associated with the way in which an individual views his or her competencies (Van Der Heijde & Van Der Heijden, 2006) as well as their disposition or proactive attitude towards career and work (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; McArdle et al., 2007). A study by Rothwell, Jewell and Hardie (2009) on postgraduate business students found that self-perceived employability factors fell within two categories, structural and personal.

The structural components include items considered outside the control of individuals, such as labour market factors and demographics (Rothwell et al., 2009; van der Heijden, 2002). A student may possess the requisite skills and qualifications and proactive attitude, but their ability to get a job will be impacted by external factors such as competition for roles in their field, high levels of unemployment where they live, shocks to the global economy (e.g., Global Financial Crisis, COVID-19 pandemic) social class, gender, ethnicity, social networks and university status (Brown & Lent, 1996; Clarke, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Hesketh, 2004; King,

Findlay, & Ahrens, 2010; Tomlinson, 2017), and of particular relevance to international students, visa limitations (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019).

Personal factors relate to perceptions of abilities, ambition, career attributes and skills and job-seeking proactivity. Research conducted on 387 undergraduate students at a UK university into the personal factors, found that "taking ownership" for their career had a significant impact on self-perception of their employability (Donald, Baruch, & Ashleigh, 2017, p. 602). Similarly, Okay-Somerville and Scholarios (2017) surveyed 293 UK graduates and found that proactive career behaviours were important for self-perceived employability.

The most highly cited definition describes employability as "a psychosocial construct that embodies individual characteristics that foster adaptive cognition, behaviour, and affect, and enhances the individual-work interface" (Fugate et al., 2004, p.15) and is comprised of personal adaptability, career identity and social and human capital. Personal adaptability means high tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity as well as the capacity to change personal factors, behaviours and dispositions to meet the demands of their current situation which increases the likelihood of finding and retaining employment. Social capital refers to an individual's social networks and the strength and size of those networks and can significantly improve employment outcomes (McArdle et al., 2007; Fugate et al., 2004). Human capital includes attributes such as education, work experience and training and cognitive ability (McArdle et al., 2007).

The structural and personal dimensions of employability are intrinsically linked, in that, personal dimensions impact how the external structural environment is viewed and vice versa (Fugate et al., 2004). Although it is the synergistic combination of these dimensions that confer value to employability, each of the dimensions has value in its own right (Fugate et al., 2004). The current study will focus on the dimension of social capital as this is where there is the most

obvious disparity between domestic and international students, international students being at a distinct disadvantage.

2.3 Social Capital

The idea of *capital* referring to resources other than physical, financial and human was initially developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1990). It is the building and nurturing of personal and professional links with others to create a bank of resources, including contacts, information and support. Researchers assert that networking provides numerous beneficial career-related outcomes for both individuals and organisations (e.g., Fugate et al., 2004; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001; Wolff & Moser, 2009), through the building and maintenance of contacts who can provide relevant resources and information (Burt, 1997; Granovetter, 1973; Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001; Van Hoye, van Hooft, & Lievens, 2009).

There are several definitions of *social capital*. Scott (2009, p. 345) writes that social capital was originally conceptualised by James Coleman "to describe the types of relations that exist between individuals as located within both families and communities, and that are said to exert a strong influence on levels of educational achievement". Lin (2017) defines it as "resources embedded in one's social network that can be assessed or mobilised through ties in the networks" (p. 17). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has adopted the following definition: "social relations of mutual benefits characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity" (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2000, p.4). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) definition is "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups" (Cote & Healy, 2001, p.41).

Networking creates many forms of valuable social capital including advocacy, introductions and mentoring that would otherwise require the use of human or financial capital (Simon, 2013). Specifically, social relationships can provide access to career management resources that enhance employability (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973). However, having a social network does not guarantee that these effects or benefits will materialise (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Research tends to treat access to resources as self-assumed (see Anderson, 2008; Seibert et al., 2001 for some exceptions), yet network capital theory suggests that resources embedded in relationships actually need to be accessed and not just acquired in order to be valuable (Huggins, 2010).

2.3.1 Bonding and bridging social capital.

Social capital consists of two components described by Bain and Hicks (1998) as cognitive and structural. The *cognitive* component refers to support, trust and reciprocity—how people feel. The *structural* component refers to the extent and the strength of the links—how people behave. These two components link to Woolcock and Narayan's concepts of bonding and bridging social capital (2000).

Bonding social capital occurs within a homogenous group or community (ethnicity, religious, regional, socio-economic etc.) and is usually associated with close or *dense ties* with *people like me* (Putnam, 2000) and feelings of trust, and support in *getting by* (Healy, 2002).

In contrast, *bridging* social capital occurs between diverse groups, and is usually associated with *weak ties* with *people unlike me* (Putnam, 2000) to act and *get ahead* (Healy, 2002). This is because bridging social capital provides access to different networks and therefore, information and resources that could not otherwise be obtained from within the group. Social capital is a function of one's position in the structure of the social networks they are connected

to, not of the attributes of the individuals within the structure (Harper & Kelly, 2003). For example, a Chinese international student's position in a social network of other Chinese international students is not necessarily due to their personality or popularity but instead may be influenced by wealth, their parents' political connections, or attending a particular school.

In an effort to measure social capital in a holistic and comprehensive manner, an Australian study by Onyx and Bullen (2000) analysed 1211 responses to a questionnaire and identified eight distinct elements:

1. Particpation in local community;
2. Neighbourhood connections;
3. Family and friend connections;
4. Work connections;
5. Proactivity in social context;
6. Feelings of trust and safety;
7. Tolerance of diversity;
8. Value of life.

Harpham, Grant and Thomas (2002) explain that the first five factors are related to bridging social capital—what people do to develop connections. The last three are related to feelings of reciprocity, security and trust—bonding social capital. These measures will be used to identify suitable particpants for this current research.

One of the assumptions that underpins social capital theory is that access to resources serves as a mediating mechanism linking networking and perceptions of employability (Lin, 2017). Networking provides individuals with opportunities to use their social contacts to access information and resources that are relevant to their outcomes, demonstrating that both

characteristics of social capital, its structure and content (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) are important for graduate employability. This finding complements previous work in this domain, reinforcing the notion, that structural views provide just one side of the story. The way that individuals behave in relation to their social networks is equally important to both build relationship and access resources (Kilduff & Brass, 2010). Social capital needs to be utilised and capitalised upon in order for it to be beneficial (Anderson, 2008).

2.4 Cultural Challenges Faced by International Students.

When looking at the cognitive and structural dimensions of employability, the main factor that immediately compromises international students' employability, compared to their domestic counterparts, is their lack of social capital in Australia. Unlike many of the structural components such as visa status or labour market, over which they have no control, international students can begin to rebuild their social capital, though there are many challenges which will be described in the following sections.

2.4.1 English language

International graduates' inadequate English communication has been documented as one of the main concerns of local employers and industries (Pham et al., 2018). Good communication skills are considered one of the most highly desirable skills especially in the contemporary workplace where connectivity is growing as a key success indicator in various areas (Martin, & Rezveri, 2014; Pham & Saito, 2019). Language barriers also impede international students' attempts to make friends and interact with locals (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000). For instance, Barratt and Huba (1994) found that international students' English competency increased self-esteem and was positively associated with more interpersonal relations with locals. Similarly, Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, and Pisecco (2002) observed that the English competency of

international students was a predictor of their adjustment, which included ability to relate to locals. In their systematic review, Zhang and Goodson (2011) found that English proficiency was a predictor of both psychological and sociocultural adjustment. Furthermore, there is significant evidence in the literature demonstrating that lower levels of English proficiency are a predictor of acculturative stress, and depression (Dao et al., 2007; Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Sumer et al., 2008; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Anxiety was further investigated by Woodrow (2006) in English for Academic Purpose (EAP) students who were taking intensive language training prior to entering an Australian university. Her results indicate that anxiety was most often brought on by interactions with native English speakers.

2.4.2 Lack of knowledge about employer expectations.

Research commissioned by the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations in 2009 showed that while the international students in the study, the majority of whom were Asian, felt there was a lack of opportunities for relevant work experience, the issue may in fact be a lack of understanding of employer expectations (Arkoudis et al., 2009). Similarly, Rayner and Papakonstantinou (2015) found that Australian employers in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) professions place as much emphasis on hiring graduates with good transferrable skills that are valued across a range of professions, as they do specific content knowledge in the STEM area. While international students from Asia tend to focus on achieving high grades in their degree, what employers actually want are well rounded graduates with English proficiency, cross-cultural awareness and the potential to adapt to the Australian workplace (Arkoudis et al., 2009). This is reinforced by a report commissioned by the Australian Universities International Directors' Forum in 2013 where employers described the qualities and attributes required of international graduates as

English language skills, work experience, global perspectives, analytical skills, independence, work ethic and commitment (AUIDF, 2013).

As mentioned in section 2.2.2, Australian universities have prioritised implementing initiatives that embed employability skills in university curricula (Bridgstock, 2009). However, this approach has been critiqued for its ineffectiveness in equipping international students with generic skills (Jackson, 2016; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012) and practical and applicable working experiences (Gribble & McRae, 2015).

International students are also often faced with a complex process of decision-making regarding whether they will stay in Australia, return home after graduation or relocate to a third country. Singh (2020), identified the push and pull factors for international Chinese students trying to make that decision. The push factors to repatriate to China were stricter Australian migration policies, discrimination by Australian employers and difficulty in obtaining suitable employment in Australia. The pull factors were China's booming economy and family pressures. Their decision will influence how much they will choose to invest in understanding the needs to Australian employers.

2.4.3 Students invest in bonding rather than bridging social capital.

International students typically form three types of social networks, *co-national, multinational*, and *local* (Sakurai et al., 2010). Co-national colleagues and friends are those from the same country of origin, local colleagues and friends are those from the host country, and multinational friends are other international students from countries other than their own. Neri and Ville (2008) conducted a study exploring the creation of new friendship networks as step to develop social capital in a new country. Co-national friendships form bonding social capital while local and multi-national friendships equate to bridging social capital (Neri & Ville, 2008).

Neri and Ville found that international students, of which 82% of the sample were Asian, predominantly invested in bonding social capital with students from their own country. Only a minority of students forged relationships with domestic students or those in the local community that might have provided them with insights into the broader culture of the host nation.

With reference to Berry's conceptualization, international students use four main strategies to adapt to host cultures. Assimilation involves adopting host-country cultural norms while not maintaining one's original culture, and integration entails maintaining one's original culture while adopting the cultural norms of the host culture. Separation involves maintaining one's original culture and rejecting the host culture. Pan and Wong (2011) discussed the differential impact of integration and assimilation on negative affect among international Chinese students in Australia. Cheung and Jin (2016) we found that perceived employability was explained by acculturative hassles and the assimilation strategy of acculturation among nonlocal Chinese students in Hong Kong. Further review into the acculturation strategies might also inform how to address subsequent results about the struggle to find the balance between upholding the Confucian values they grew up with, and the cultural expectations of Australians.

Another study by Gomes (2015) also argued that Asian international students studying in Australia live in a parallel society, almost exclusively made up of fellow international students from their home country and the Asian region. This parallel society allows them to create a sense of belonging in Australia, but not to mix with Australian locals (Gomes, 2015), despite the fact that the majority desire and expect to develop personal relationships with members of the host community and to learn about the local culture (Sakurai et al., 2010). They find it easier to make friends with other Asians because of cultural familiarity, language and the shared experience of being international students living away from home (Gomes, 2015).

One of the critical factors impacting Chinese international students' capacity to secure work placements is their lack of local networks (Blackmore et al., 2014; Gribble et al., 2015). Research by Blackmore et al. (2014) and Gribble et al. (2015) indicate that in hindsight, international students realised that they should have been more socially active while they were studying and that their limited social networks reduced their capacity to acquire the necessary social capital for success in the labour market. Locals, even if only mere acquaintances served as more important weak ties as they diversified the networks of the students as opposed to strong ties they shared with their co-nationals (Neri & Ville, 2008).

2.4.4 Collectivism versus individualism

Triandis (2002, p. 909) explains that "in collectivist cultures people are interdependent within their in-groups (family, tribe, nation), give priority to the goals of their in-groups, shape their behaviour primarily on the basis of in-group norms, and behave in a communal way". In contrast, "in individualist societies people are autonomous and independent from their in-groups; they give priority to their personal goals over the goals of their in-groups" (Triandis, 2002, p.909). Most international students who study in Australia are from collectivist cultures, whereas Australia's individualist orientation, means they encounter social norms and values that emphasise individual achievement, competitiveness, and impersonal social relations (Triandis, 1995).

International students may feel considerable loss when living away from their family as collectivist cultures often consist of close-knit families (Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004). Difficulty forming friendships with locals may be compounded by the possible disinterest of domestic students in initiating friendships with international students (Ward et al., 2001, as cited in, Zhang & Brunton, 2007). International students from collectivist cultures may desire to maintain their

heritage sociocultural behaviours and values, whilst local students may expect international students to assimilate or integrate their attitudes to align with the host culture.

2.4.5 Confucian cultural norms

Confucian Asian cultures have a long history of regard and esteem for learning as well as an emphasis on effort to achieve academically. Its collectivist aspect underscores the importance of relationships such as filial piety, making personal sacrifices for family and maintaining social harmony in social interactions and relations. Putting together these salient features of Confucian Asian culture leads to the perception that individuals strive to achieve not only for their personal success but also for the honour their family and its standing in society (Huang & Leung, 2005; Mok, 2006; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Lee (2009) indicates that Confucian Asian students expressed higher levels of anxiety, pressure and self-doubt than their counterparts from other parts of the world. In the minds of Confucian Asian students, the distinction between self and family is not clear-cut, so that academic achievement is also family achievement. Consequently, Confucian Asian students become aware of and learn to take seriously the implications and consequences of their academic success and failure. From this vantage point, the internal pressure for academic achievement is probably higher in Confucian Asian societies than in the other parts of the world (Morony, Kleitman, Lee & Stankov, 2013; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Asian students with English as a second language find it stressful to talk to Australians for fear making mistakes, not being understood and losing face therefore avoid situations that could be potentially embarrassing (Gomes, 2015). Furthermore, Asian cultures place importance on emotional control (Kim et al., 1999; Kim et al., 2005), and students may believe that they should be able to handle emotional distress on their own (Wei et al., 2007). To seek help from peers and professionals for acculturative stress might imply personal failure to manage their

emotions, thus, resulting in shame, loss of face and embarrassment (Wei et al., 2007; Wei et al., 2008). Eaves (2011) has also noted that, in contrast to Australia, the social distance between teachers and students in Asian higher education settings is generally very high, posing a further cultural challenge to understand and overcome.

2.5 Summary

Most international students arrive in Australia stripped of any prior social networks, and often begin their education journey without knowing anyone (Neri & Ville, 2006). This means that compared to domestic students, their employability is instantly compromised. The ensuing difficulty these students experience in finding opportunities to undertake meaningful work is leading to increasing levels of dissatisfaction with their education. This is a problem for any Australian universities seeking to increase their share of the international student market. To address this problem, I wanted to understand how Chinese international business students develop bridging social capital in Australia to improve their self-perception of their employability. From the main research question, three sub questions were developed:

(1) Why do international students find it challenging to develop social capital in Australia?

(2) What does it mean to them when they experience difficulties in developing social capital?

(3) How does their mindset influence their interpretation of those experiences and subsequent actions regarding developing their employability?

The meaning conferred on the concept of employability varies according to which stakeholder need it is serving. The government ties university funding to graduate employment outcomes as a part of its broader policy objective to corporatise the sector in line with a free-market, neoliberal political economy. To receive this funding, Australian universities comply with the government's agenda by embedding employability skills into their curriculum in the

hope that possession of these skills will result in improved graduate employment outcomes. University students are now inculcated to view their education as a product that will furnish them with a specific set of skills, making them more competitive in the labour market. Yet for international students, simply acquiring a set of generic skills that have been embedded in the curriculum has not resulted in the desired work experience or graduate jobs that they expect from their investment in their Australian education.

The pertinent literature describes graduate employability as a subjective construct composed of both personal and structural factors and an important aspect related to personal factors is social capital. Social capital can be divided into bonding, or getting along, and bridging, or getting ahead. Individuals have much to gain by developing networking behaviours as this facilitates access to resources related to employability. Importantly, the literature indicates that networking behaviours can be developed (de Janasz & Forret, 2008).

International students experience specific disadvantages that their domestic counterparts do not, in particular the loss of social capital and the challenges they face when trying to rebuild it in Australia. These challenges can be correlated to the numerous differences between western and Confucian heritage cultures. By exploring the lived experiences of the challenges they faced when developing bridging social capital, the current research aims to understand the mindset of a sample of six Chinese international students who were are able to overcome those challenges in order to improve their self-perception of their employability.

The next chapter, Chapter Three: Methodology, outlines the methodological approach that was utilised.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide the rationale and methodological detail for the study. It will start by introducing the research design, including the underpinning epistemological and ontological position. This will be followed by introducing the chosen methodology of IPA and the rationale for selecting this approach. The methods section will describe the exact procedures that were followed to collect and analyse the data. The chapter will conclude by assuring quality of the research method and ethical considerations.

3.2 Research Design Overview

The purpose of the research was to use detailed personal accounts to capture and interpret international students' experiences of developing bridging social capital in Australia to improve their self-perception of their employability. It was therefore qualitative in nature and the analysis process was an inductive one, driven by the data. The study conforms to the Reporting Standards for Qualitative Research (Levitt, Bamberg, Creswell, Frost, Josselson, & Suárez-Orozco, 2018), which describe what should be included in a research report.

3.2.1 Rationale for research design

A research paradigm gives direction and path to conduct the research and is guided by philosophy, methodology, epistemology, and ontology. My purpose for this research fits with the philosophy, intentions, and strategies of an interpretive research paradigm. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The ontological assumption of this paradigm is there is no one single truth, but instead there are multiple interpretations and realities created by individuals through their social interactions and the meaning they ascribe to their lived experiences (Crotty, 1996). I do not believe it is possible to produce a set of timeless, universal laws concerning social behaviour.

Instead, knowledge is socially constructed and co-created between the researcher and participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). The axiological assumption is that I can only know subjective truth through interaction, therefore, it is impossible to remove my value biases from the research.

Rather than trying to objectively predict patterns of behaviour, which is most often associated with a quantitative approach to research, a qualitative approach allowed me to engage with, understand, and make sense of the students' subjective experiences, in all its diversity and complexity. I sought to understand the phenomenon subjectively, from the point of view of the students, therefore inductive reasoning was used, whereby data from detailed observations of the students were gathered from which interpretations were made. Instead of observing the students as objects from a distance, a qualitative approach allowed me to partner with the students to develop a co-constructed understanding of the phenomenon of developing social capital in unfamiliar environments (Creswell, 2013; Morse, 1991; Sipe & Constable, 1996). To achieve the aims of the research, the method needed to deliver four outcomes:

1. To gain a deeper understanding of why international students find it challenging to develop bridging social capital in Australia and what it is like to live that experience.
2. To examine the meaning the students ascribe to the challenges they experience.
3. To reveal insights into the mindset of a specific group, in this case, international Chinese business students who have built bridging social capital in Australia, to shed light on their interpretation of the phenomenon.
4. To align with my philosophical research assumptions.

3.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The chosen methodology that met the above four criteria was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which was initially developed in the early 1980s by the social

psychologist Jonathan Smith (2004). IPA is a qualitative approach, its purpose is to "understand what personal and social experiences mean to the people who experience them" (Shaw, 2010, p.178). This is done by exploring participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon, which is then followed by a subjective and reflective process of interpretation (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Since its beginnings, IPA has been used in hundreds of published studies, becoming one of the most popular approaches in qualitative psychology and allied fields (Smith & Osborn, 2015). IPA has been successfully used in studies on career development and employability of participants with a spinal injury (Hay-Smith, Dickson, Nunnerley & Sinnott, 2013) and ex-prisoners (Aresti, Eatough & Brooks-Gordon, 2010).

IPA is underpinned by the theories and philosophy of phenomenology and hermeneutics, which were originally influenced by historical scholars such as Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Dilthey and Schleiermacher (Shinebourne, 2011). Experience is thought of as a "lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings which are unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21). It takes an idiographic approach by seeking to understand the unique experience of individuals in their contexts. This is often practically achieved by treating each participant as an individual case study (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Shinebourne, 2011). This idiographic approach contrasts with quantitative approaches to psychology which aim to aggregate the experiences of large numbers of participants for the purpose of making generalisations to the broader population under investigation.

According to Sokolowski (2000), phenomenology is "the study of human experience and the ways things present themselves in and through such experience" (p. 2). Certain experiences are deemed significant enough in life that we reflect on and attributed meaning to them (Smith et al., 2009). For example, international students may feel that their experience of developing social

capital in Australia is significant because they found it challenging to do so in a new country and in a new language, yet it was meaningful because it helped develop their employability.

Hermeneutics is the theory and methodology of interpretation, and hermeneutic phenomenology focusses on how people interpret the world around them and how they make meaning out their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutics was a method initially established by Christian scholars to interpret biblical texts and discover whether it was possible to uncover the intentions or original meanings of the author. Modern hermeneutics seeks to understand how human beings interpret and create meaning in their lives (Smith et al., 2009). As IPA is an interpretative phenomenological approach it is closely aligned to Heidegger's description of phenomenology as a hermeneutic endeavour, “Without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret, [and] without the hermeneutics the phenomenon would not be seen” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 37).

Idiography is a particular feature of IPA. Most psychology is concerned with making claims about a group or population and establishing laws of human behaviour. However, IPA seeks to analyse in detail the individual’s experience of life in as much detail as possible (Smith et al., 2009). At its most basic the researcher, “is sacrificing breadth for depth” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 29). IPA is an attempt to understand what a particular experience is like from the participant’s perspective by metaphorically standing in their shoes, as well as by standing alongside the participant to analyse, interpret and make sense of the experience from the researcher’s perspective. IPA achieved the four main methodological objectives of this current research:

1. To gain a deeper understanding of why international students find it difficult to develop bridging social capital when they are in Australia, and what it is like to live that

experience. According to Smith et al. (2009) experience can be understood by examining the meanings people make from their experiences, which are embodied (physical), cognitive (thoughts), affective (feelings and emotions) and existential (practical) ways. Being grounded in hermeneutics, IPA seeks to understand human experience in the way the participants interpret these and how it leads to greater self-understanding (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, understanding in the context of IPA research, can be described as trying to see what an experience personally means to someone through a process of interpretation.

2. To examine what is significant and meaningful for the participants in the challenges and difficulties they face in their employability journey. Smith et al. (2009, p. 4) explains that "human beings are sensemaking creatures therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of what is happening to them".
3. To reveal insights into the experiences of a specific population, in this case, international Chinese business students who have built professional networks in Australia through the Job Smart program, to shed light on the phenomenon from their perspective. IPA research typically recruits a small and homogenous sample of participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) and its idiographic approach is well suited to capturing the unique experiences of each of the hand-picked participants, to provide a set of stories for other Chinese students to model and follow in their footsteps (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith & Osborne, 2015).
4. The philosophical rationale for IPA is linked to the ontological assumption that each participant constructs their own reality of their lived experience from their social interactions (Smith & Osborne, 2015). IPA is in alignment with the epistemological assumption that knowledge is subjective, and something that is co-created between the

researcher and participants (Ashworth, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2002) as it situates the researcher as a partner in the research process, where their observations made during the analysis of the participant accounts the product of interpretation. (Willig, 2008). Therefore, data are generated by both researcher and participant, rather than collected. This process is known as the double hermeneutic where "the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborne, 2015, p. 53).

3.4 Participant Recruitment Process

In IPA research the aim is to recruit a small, defined, purposive and homogenous sample of informants who can provide insights into the research problem and research questions through their personal experiences. In this current study the participants were Chinese international Masters business students who had completed the Job Smart program at the University of Sydney, and had developed their social capital. The participants were purposely sought out and selected because they had something to say about the phenomenon under study, they represented a perspective, rather than a population (Smith et al., 2009, p. 49). According to Reid et al. (2005) and Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011), the sample for an IPA study is typically ten participants or less, with each participant providing a detailed and rich account of their experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that between three and six participants is a reasonable size to provide enough data to examine the phenomenon without being overwhelmed with data.

3.4.1 Participant selection

Table 1 shows the criteria for selecting participants. I identified six Chinese participants who were recent graduates from the University of Sydney (graduated within twelve months) and

were employed. When the students were enrolled, they had undertaken a Masters degree in business and completed the Job Smart program. To ensure the participants had sufficient bridging social capital to be able to provide a meaningful contribution, the five factors, as identified by Onyx and Bullen (2000) were mapped to the Chinese international student context to develop the participant selection criteria.

Table 1

Participant Selection Criteria

Social capital factor	Participant selection criteria
Participation in local community	Active in non-Chinese university clubs and societies
Neighborhood connections	Have volunteered in Australia
Family and friend connections	Have non-Chinese friends
Work connections	Have over 20 LinkedIn connections
Proactivity in social context	Attended a networking event

Snowball sampling was used to recruit the participants. It is a technique in which the researcher recruits an initial participant, who is then asked to recommend other similar participants for the study, this "participant will suggest others, and so on" (Bryman, 2016, p. 415).

3.4.2 Researcher participant relationship

I had originally identified three suitable participants with whom I had maintained regular contact from my role as the ex-manager of the Job Smart program and used snowball sampling to ask them to help me find three more participants who met the criteria outlined in Table 1. Table 2 provides participant profiles to assist with contextualising the sample.

Table 2

Participant Profiles

Participant identifier	Age	Gender	Course of study	Years in Australia
S1	27	M	Master of Professional Accounting	3
S2	25	M	Master of Finance	2.5
S3	24	F	Master of Commerce (Human Resources)	2.5
S4	28	M	Master of Commerce (Marketing)	5
S5	26	F	Master of Finance	4
S6	25	F	Master of Commerce (Data Analytics)	3

3.5 Data Collection

Most IPA studies employ semi-structured interviews to collect data from participants (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Semi-structured interviews have the potential to generate rich, thick data about a participant's experiences producing detailed, first-person accounts of their stories, thoughts and feelings which, in the case of current study, was the participants' experiences of developing social capital in Australia to improve their employability.

The interviews allowed me and the participants to engage in a dialogue, guided by a set of open-ended questions, about how they built their social capital and what motivated them to do so. Although the semi-structured interviews used a set of discrete questions, they also provided enough space and flexibility for original and unexpected issues to arise, which I was then able to investigate in more detail with further prompting questions. This approach remained true to the inductive nature of IPA of going from the particular to the general, as each participant's story was taken idiographically, on its own terms (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

3.5.1 Interview schedule

The following is the list of questions that I asked after I had explained the concepts of employability and social capital to the students in simple language. The first question explored their experiences of developing social capital in Australia to improve their employability; the second question aimed to understand the meanings they made from their experiences; and the third question aimed to understand their motivations to improve their employability.

1. Please describe one or two of your more memorable experiences of developing networks with Australians or non-Chinese people. Prompts: What happened? How did you feel? What were you thinking? What were some of the challenges? What stopped you from staying in your comfort zone?
2. What did these experiences mean to you? Prompts: How do you think it affected you? How do you feel about the experience?
3. Tell me about how employable you feel now, compared to when you started your degree? Prompts: What makes you feel this way? How important was it to develop your employability and why? Why did you choose to do Job Smart? How important do you feel building your networks was to improve your employability?

3.5.2 Recording and data transformation

The interviews were audio recorded. These records were research data in themselves, which were then transcribed verbatim in preparation for analysis. The following analytical procedures were based Smith, Jarman and Osborn's chapter on IPA (1999, pp. 218-240).

3.6 Data-Analytic Strategies

Interpreting the data involves a detailed analysis of personal accounts followed by a presentation and discussion of the generic experiential themes together with the researcher's own interpretations (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). This occurs when the researcher engages in an interpretative relationship with the transcript through a sustained engagement with the text (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Although the primary concern of IPA is the lived experience of the participant and the meaning which the participant makes of that lived experience, the result is always an account of how the researcher thinks the participant is thinking—the double hermeneutic.

3.6.1 Reading the first transcript.

Analysis began with a detailed examination of the first transcript. I read it multiple times, highlighting and *making notes* in one margin of interesting or significant aspects of the experience including content, language use, context, and my initial interpretative comments. The aim was to immerse myself in the data as each reading of the transcript provided new insights and a deeper understanding of the participant's experiences.

3.6.2 Developing emerging themes.

Once I reached the point where I could not derive further new meanings, I synthesised the notes into *emerging themes* in the other margin. These themes did not necessarily correlate to any chronological appearance in the text, were at a slightly higher level of abstraction than the notes and represented the essence of what the lived experience of developing social capital in Australia meant to that participant.

3.6.3 Clustering the themes.

The next stage involved looking for connections between the initial list of emerging themes, by clustering them together according to conceptual similarities. Some of the emergent themes were dropped at this stage or combined into others if they no longer seemed so significant in relation to newer themes. A master list of clustered themes was developed which were checked against the transcript to make sure the analysis was an accurate representation of the students' experiences and not distorted by my own bias. Verbatim quotes were extracted from the transcript to both illustrate and validate the clusters.

3.6.4 Identifying shared themes across the group.

The process was then repeated for the other five transcripts, treating each one like new so as to not be influenced by the previous transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 2004). This resulted in clusters of themes being generated for all six of the participants. All these clusters were collected together and examined to a produce an aggregate master list of *subordinate themes* for the sample. These themes were not derived based on how often they appeared in the data but on their significance to the participants, highlighting the multi-dimensional nature of their experiences. These subordinate themes were then clustered into *superordinate themes* to further distil the most meaningful aspects of the participants' lived experiences, crystalising them into a few words.

3.7 Methodological integrity through reflexivity

My preconceptions of the participants' experiences are of significance to the IPA process. To ensure fidelity to IPA's philosophical assumptions and the constructionist paradigm used for the research, I needed to reveal my own beliefs, perceptions and experiences so that I could enrich my interpretations rather than them being an obstacle to making sense of the participants' experiences (Shinebourne, 2011). The reason I chose to undertake this research was because I

have heard so many heartbreaking stories about the difficulty international students face when trying to find work and the pressure they felt to succeed. However, as Alase (2017) describes, an important aspect of the IPA research study is to remain aware of any explicit and implicit biases that may jeopardise the goal and integrity of the study. I attempted to do this by bracketing (removing) my personal experience from the 'lived experiences' of the research participants. Methodological integrity was also achieved through reflexivity, which Rennie (2004, p. 183) defined as "self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness". As suggested by Morrow (2005) I kept a self-reflective journal to keep an ongoing record of my experiences, reactions, assumptions, or biases. I also consulted with peers who served as a mirror, reflecting my responses to the research process as well as acting as devil's advocates, proposing alternative interpretations to mine. I also invited the participants to verify that my interpretation of the data accurately represented the themes in their transcripts.

3.8 Data Presentation

The data will be presented in the Findings, in Chapter 5, in the format recommended by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) and Smith and Osborn (2015). This will involve producing a table of superordinate and subordinate themes to illustrate the patterns and connections of meaning-making shared by all the participants I formulated from the process of analysis. This will be followed by a description of each superordinate and subordinate theme and exemplifying them with extracts from the transcripts. Using the participants' own words to illustrate the themes enables the reader to assess the pertinence of my interpretations, and it retains the voice of the participants' personal experience.

3.9 Ethics

The present research received approval from the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) Human Research Ethics Committee — approval number H19REA193.

In any type of research, it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that no harm comes to themselves or the participants, therefore the research design must ensure that: (a) consent is given by the participant, that their participation is always voluntary and they can withdraw from the study at any time, and for any reason, (b) the participants' privacy is protected at all times, and, (c) the research design does not involve deception of any sort (Sales & Folkman, 2000).

There were ethical issues related to the interviews, as participants shared elements of their personal life. Therefore, I needed to ensure their privacy and confidentiality of the data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017). To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were attached to the collected data. I gave the participants the opportunity to review the data extracts obtained from their interviews to ensure they were satisfied with how they presented themselves and gave them the opportunity to clarify certain details post-interview.

I was aware of issues of unequal power relationships between the participants and myself. Therefore, only participants who had graduated from the University of Sydney and finished the Job Smart program were asked to participate. However, even though I was no longer the manager of the Job Smart Program and the participants were no longer students, they knew me from that period so I was aware that there may have been some residual unequal power relations. As noted above, participation was wholly voluntary, and it was made clear that there would be no consequences if they chose not to participate. These conditions were outlined on the participant information details that all participants received as part of the USQ Human Ethics Guidelines.

The participants were Chinese nationals with English as a second language. Although their English was of a satisfactory standard to undertake a degree in Australia, the participant information and consent letter was written in plain English, to explain the research in a way that was easy for them to understand. My contact details were available to provide an opportunity for them to ask questions and to discuss any aspect of the study prior to the start of the interviews.

USQ's Research Data Bank service was used to store and securely share data with supervisors. A data management plan was completed to comply with the responsibilities for the effective management of research data and material as stated in the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2018) and USQ's Research Data Management Policy.

3.10 Summary

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to explore the lived experiences of six Chinese international business students as they developed their bridging social capital in Australia to improve their employability. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews which were transcribed for analysis. Analysis involved the double hermeneutic—my interpretations of the participants' experiences. The analysis produced eight subordinate and three superordinate themes that were shared across the participants. These will be described in detail in the following chapter, Chapter Four, Findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the findings from the data. My analysis of the participants' interview transcripts exemplifies the concept of the double hermeneutic, in that they are my interpretations of the participants' interpretations of their lived experiences. The themes I constructed relate to the research questions:

(1) Why do international students find it challenging to develop social capital in Australia?

(2) What does it mean to them when they experience difficulties in developing social capital?

(3) How does their mindset influence their interpretation of those experiences and subsequent actions regarding developing their employability?

My analysis yielded eight subordinate themes shared across the participants, which I clustered into three superordinate themes. I will start by describing each superordinate theme followed by the subordinate themes that were clustered under these. I will use direct quotes from the interviews to exemplify and demonstrate the rationale for each of the themes.

Table 3

Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme
The goal is to stay in Australia	Appreciation of Australia's multiculturalism. Desire to fit in with Australians. Bridging social capital is a competitive advantage.
Developing social capital is challenging	We are not in China anymore! It is harder for international students to develop social capital. Embarrassment about English mistakes.
Attitude to challenges	Countering Confucian cultural norms. If it doesn't challenge you, it doesn't change you.

4.2 Superordinate Theme 1: The Goal is to Stay in Australia.

All the participants shared the goal of wanting to live and work in Australia after they graduated. They had quite different reasons, but their goal was clear. Very soon after he arrived in the country, S1 knew that he wanted to stay:

> "I decided to stay in this country. To work here after my graduation. So, I start planning this when I was in my first semester. I know what I want so I start developing the skills how to deal with people from different countries."

S2 had family in Australia:

> "The reason why I want to stay in this country is because many of my relatives are here. I used to live in Australia when I was a kid, but I moved back when I was very little. But still I got a lot of relatives, even my grandparents that live in Sydney. They'll stay in Sydney so that's the reason want to come back and study, and change myself, and fit in the country."

S5 resigned from a prestigious job in Beijing to be with her husband who had permanent residency in Australia:

> "My initial motivation is that I wanted to stay in Australia because my husband is here. So, I'd have to find a job after graduation. So, I knew that upon commencement of my degree. So, I thought I had to plan ahead as early as I could."

S3 realised she wanted to stay in Australia after experiencing the work culture.

> "I like the work climate here. Because, like, back to my country it is very hierarchical. I will prefer flatter structure, so I can express my own ideas, and then I can try to utilise my skills."

For S4, staying in Australia represented a second chance to live a different life and choose a different career path from the trajectory he was on in China:

> "Because when I was working in China, I feel like… I feel like... I did a job that was really boring to me. I was trying to press myself into a version of S4. That's the reason I came to Australia. I told myself, "Hey S4, you got another chance to do a Masters, and try a different life.""

The first superordinate theme was that each participant had made a conscious decision to stay in Australia and were very clear about why they had made that decision.

4.2.1 Subordinate theme 1: Appreciation of Australia's multiculturalism.

Although the participants had quite different primary reasons for their goal of staying in Australia after they graduated, they shared a secondary reason, which I coded as a subordinate theme of 'appreciation of Australia's multiculturalism'. S2 demonstrates this by explaining:

> "For example, when I was volunteering, and I met S7 from India and he's really intelligent. And ever since then we became good friends, and we exchange good ideas very often. So, I can just see his different ideas from Indian perspective. I think that's going to be very different from how Chinese people think."

S3 shared her realisation that she prefers meeting people from different cultures.

> "I think it's [Australia] a multinational country. It provides a lot of different opportunities. I can touch base with lots of different cultures in this country. I love its diversity."

S4 expressed his curiosity about how different people from different cultures think:

> "I want to learn opinions from people who come from very diverse background."

For the participants, it was important to be able to meet and learn from people from diverse cultural backgrounds and living in Australia provided more opportunities to do this compared to China.

4.2.2 Subordinate theme 2: Desire to fit in with Australians.

My interpretation of the data revealed that the participants did not want to feel like tourists during their time in Australia, merely observing the culture, they also wanted to try and immerse themselves in an experiential way, which generated the next subordinate theme as S5 explains:

> "So, you have to adapt. You have to disseminate into the local community. I think that's the goal that I want to have."

S1 realised that in order to achieve his goal of staying in Australia he needed to acculturate:

> "If you really want to land a decent job in Australia or try to fit in the society, you should fit in a country and learn their culture."

S2 wanted to fit in to Australian culture so he did not feel left out:

> "I don't want to be excluded from the conversation. For example, you just have to try to find what they are really interested in. I have a lot of directors and colleagues from Europe. You can definitely notice they are really interested in football."

However, not all international students have this attitude, as S2 explains:

> "So, from my experience I have a lot of Chinese friends, but they tend to be reluctant to talk to local people. For example, they tend to stick to their own groups, so they do hot pot, they watch Chinese TV together. What I heard is always speak Chinese to their friends. They don't really have to write English because they only communicate on

> WeChat. They type Chinese, they speak Chinese, they live with Chinese and study with Chinese."

While the participants of this present research valued cultural diversity and wanted to fit in with Australians, it is not necessarily a value shared by all international students.

4.2.3 Subordinate theme 3: Bridging social capital is a competitive advantage.

All the participants knew that, not only was bridging social capital a crucial component of their employability, but it would also provide a competitive advantage over students who were not developing networks.

S3 had direct experience of this advantage:

> "Because, like, personally I got the internship from networking. Networking allowed me to understand the Australian employment market better. Because I got to talk with people in different area. So, I got to know how it was like, so later when I get the interview with similar organisation or the similar position, I will get to know how to answer a question and to know how the job is done."

S6 describes how she benefitted from making the effort to develop bridging social capital compared to bonding social capital:

> "I think it's different to network with non-Chinese. For example, I can find out from Australians about how to get graduate job in Australia. Without such a network I would not find out how people connect with each other or the insights of the local community. I will never know how important volunteering activity would be without networking."

S5 reflected on the advantages of her ability to make connections with new people:

> "It's [networking] a good skill to have. It means more opportunities. Because I'm good at networking it means more opportunities that I may have than other students. It means more exposure in the industry."

The participants chose to invest in developing bridging social capital, not only because it is a key component of employability, but also because when they were competing for jobs, it put them ahead of their rivals.

4.3 Superordinate Theme 2: Challenges to Developing Social Capital.

The second superordinate theme was that, although all the participants were clear about their goal to stay in Australia and knew that developing bridging social capital was important to achieve this, they still found it very challenging. I formed these challenges into three subordinate themes.

4.3.1 Subordinate theme: We are not in China anymore!

The first challenge that they shared was the realisation that job hunting in Australia was different to China. As the participants were all Masters students and had worked in China before coming to Australia they had assumed that the rules for getting a job in China would apply in Australia. However, S2 quickly realised how much more important social capital was in Australian:

> "I guess that's the big gap, you know, for international students. Especially for Chinese students. To know how to network. How to… get relationships. Because of our cultural background we didn't know that there is such a way to networking. I think it is really important to me if I want to find a job in Australia."

S1 explains his understanding of the hidden job market and how social capital provides access to unadvertised jobs:

> "Networking is quite helpful because, like, although lots of jobs are advertised… available on the website… but there are lots of jobs is not available on the website. So, if you have good networking, if some job is available in the company, the people can just tell you to go for it, just go to apply for it. And then you submit your resume and HR, like, has got some information about you from your referee. It will be very easy for you to find a job compared with some people who don't have the networking. So, first of all, it's easy to get the information like the job description like this, and secondly it's easy for you to pass the interview when you have some kind of networking."

S3 was studying Human Resource Management and describes how, through networking, she went from a casual sales job, to working for the organisation in the Human Resource department:

> "[Networking] it's important for me. It can help me to create to new opportunities and get on with my colleagues for the getting new opportunities. For example, with my past job I was working in the sales department, but I got a chance in the HR department. So later when they were hiring, they did contact me to ask me if I was interested. So that was kind of networking."

The participants in this current study not only understood, but put into practice, the concept of developing their networks to access the hidden job market.

4.3.2 Subordinate theme 2: Developing social capital is harder for international students.

As well as not knowing the rules for finding work in Australia or knowing what employers were looking for, the participants felt that comparatively, it was harder for them to develop bridging social capital because domestic students had at least a basic network of friends and family, and it was assumed they knew how to network. S1 explains it as follows:

> "Because, if you think about it, if I'm competing with local students to find a job, they know how to networking, but I didn't. That's a big disadvantage for me."

S5 describes her experience of trying to make small talk during a networking event:

> "I compare myself to the local students because… I have this strong feeling that a lot of the local students… I feel like they are comfortable just talking casually but feel like I'm not that comfortable or proficient in those casual chit chats, so that's the difference."

Basic social interactions that domestic students may take for granted are actually quite challenging for international students, as illustrated by S1:

> "For example, when I was doing my intern I didn't speak to anyone in the kitchen. Except if they ask me questions then I would definitely talk to them. But I didn't… I still didn't know how to start a conversation. Now at least I know some techniques and some topics to start a conversation. How was your weekend etc. etc. At that point I had no clue how to start the conversation."

International students find it difficult to start conversations and make small talk, even in informal situations, let alone formal networking events. The next subordinate theme may explain the reason for this.

4.3.3 Subordinate theme 3: Embarrassment about English mistakes.

The feeling of embarrassment if the participants made a mistake in their spoken English, seemed to hold a great deal of significance, to the extent that they would rather not try, than run the risk of making a mistake**.** S5 describes an example:

> "That was the first ever networking event that I attended. It was not huge. It was just a drink after class. So, the professor invited one or two industry people that came to the class, and then the professor said everyone is invited to go for a drink afterwards. So, I

> didn't even go to the first one. So, I decided to go to this one, but I didn't dare to speak. I was just listening, and I was embarrassed. I didn't know what to say. I was just listening over one or two hours."

S1 explains the difficulty he faced when trying to start a conversation with industry professionals:

> "I still remember the first time I attend networking event, I feel really embarrassed because I don't really know what I should… the topic of… or how I start a conversation with those experts. You have a lot of ideas in mind, you just don't know how to say it in English."

S2 recalled a situation when his Chinese friend was complaining about how hard it was for international students to get a job in Australia:

> "But when I asked her "Did you try to talk, for example, to that guy over there?" because we were in networking event. And she said "No, because I'm so bad at English it's embarrassing for me to say 'Hi!' What if I don't understand what he's talking about?"

While the participants understood that developing bridging social capital was important to achieve their goal of living and working in Australia, they all found it very challenging because it required them to try and adapt themselves to fit into western ways of being that were mysterious and alien to them. The following superordinate and subordinate themes illustrate their attitude to facing these challenges.

4.4 Superordinate Theme 3: Attitude to Challenges.

This final superordinate theme describes the participants' experiences of navigating the challenge of walking in two cultures—Chinese and Australian. It includes how they experience the tensions between Confucian ideas such as "saving face" and "not standing out" with their goal of developing employability in Australia.

4.4.1 Subordinate theme 1: Countering Confucian cultural norms

The following quotes illustrate some of the Confucian cultural norms experienced by the participants in China and how they have countered them. S6 explains:

> "From our experience when we were growing up, we are taught by teachers that imperfect is bad. So, you better not make any mistakes otherwise you will lose face and losing face is not good. In Australia if you stand out it's good. Making mistakes is not terrible."

Despite her upbringing, she goes on to say:

> "I'm not afraid to lose face. I don't care that much about these things. And development is more important. A few setbacks doesn't stop me from doing that. That's just who I am. I will just start thinking "What did I do wrong? And I try again."

S3 describes her schooling:

> "When you have the wrong answer, some teachers make you feel terrible penalty. Like standing for 10 minutes. It was just terrible. It makes you get some bad memories about making mistake. If I can make the wrong answer, I may be punished. So, they don't stand out. Chinese environment, losing face is terrible. You will get affected forever by those kinds of concepts."

However, she has not allowed those experiences stop her from taking chances or running the risk of making mistakes:

> "I was very anxious. Because I think that's what stops anyone to do something. But finally, I said, "I'm a student. Even if it's a mistake, how much can it hurt me? It's easy!" And then I just thought that, "This time, this person, we may never meet again.""

Despite their Confucian upbringing, in order to achieve their goal of living and working in Australia, the participants were able to navigate the tension between eastern virtues of humility and pursuit of perfection, and western expectations to stand out from the crowd, and learning from mistakes.

4.4.2 Subordinate theme 2: If it doesn't challenge you, it doesn't change you.

To subvert and overcome the fear of making mistakes and the possibility of embarrassment, the participants shared a mindset whereby challenge is necessary to grow, and mistakes are inevitable. For example, S4 describes the benefit of getting out of his comfort zone:

> "Because I will never, ever find a better version of me in my comfort zone. That only exists outside the comfort zone. Because I understand myself really well. Because I want to discover myself, so I have to step out of that. That's the only way I can do it."

He goes on to describe his attitude to challenges:

> "And such a strong attitude help me to go through 117 job rejections I've got in a year. I feel like every time… after every time I got a rejection, I was kind of happy because that means I will get to move to success a bit closer."

S1 sees making mistakes as an opportunity to improve:

> "Maybe there is sending the wrong email or maybe the word in the email is not that good. So, then you can improve yourself and then you get more replies in the future. Review yourself and improve yourself."

He goes on to say:

> "At least you can learn some lessons and do the different things with the next person. And just practice."

4.5 Summary

Analysis of the data produced three superordinate and eight subordinate themes that the participants had in common. The first superordinate theme was the participants had a clear goal to stay in Australia after their degree. Though their primary reasons varied, they shared three subordinate themes. These were their appreciation of living in a multicultural society; the decision to fit in with Australians and acculturate as much as possible; and their commitment to developing bridging social capital, knowing it would provide a competitive advantage towards gaining employment and therefore their goal of staying in Australia.

The second superordinate theme was that they all found it challenging to develop their bridging social capital, the reasons for which fell into three subordinate themes. These included realising there was a hidden job market and the necessity of social capital to access these jobs; feeling disadvantaged compared to domestic students, because when they arrived in Australia they had little or no bridging social capital; and worrying about their spoken English, which was compounded by fear of losing face and embarrassment if they made mistakes.

The third superordinate theme was their attitude to these challenges. These fell into two subordinate themes. The first was their capacity to navigate the tension between their Confucian upbringing and western paradigms. The second subordinate theme was their attitude to making mistakes—rather than seeing them as devastatingly embarrassing, they saw them as opportunities to learn, grow and improve.

The following and final Discussions chapter, Chapter Five, will interpret and describe the significance of the findings in relation to the existing literature on graduate employability, social capital and international students. It will conclude with implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

The final chapter will provide an analysis of the main contributions stemming from the findings and discuss how these relate to the existing literature. In keeping with the double hermeneutic of IPA, what follows are my interpretations of the participants' sense making (Smith et al., 2009). Participant quotes will be used to further demonstrate the discussion points. The chapter will conclude with the limitations of the study as well as implications for future research, policy and practice. The chapter will be structured by addressing each of the research questions posed in Chapter One. The main research question is: how do Chinese international business students develop bridging social capital in Australia to improve their self-perception of their employability? The three sub-questions were:

a) Why do international students find it challenging to develop bridging social capital in Australia?

b) What does it mean to them when they experience those challenges?

c) How does their mindset influence their interpretations of those challenging experiences and any subsequent actions to develop employability?

5.2 Why Is It Challenging to Develop Bridging Social Capital in Australia?

The challenges that the participants faced in developing their bridging social capital relates to the subordinate themes of "I'm not in China anymore", "It's harder for international students to develop social capital" and "Embarrassment about making mistakes in English."

5.2.1 We are not in China anymore!

The participants did not initially appreciate the concept of the hidden job market and the importance of developing bridging social capital to access these. One of the participants

reflected: “That was a new concept to me… quite a surprising new idea for me.” The Chinese practice of *guanxi* refers to using one’s family or personal connections in business, education and other realms of life to gain a desired outcome. It is a transaction that comes with reciprocal obligation and indebtedness (Gold, Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002). Guanxi, like social capital could be used to access the hidden job market in China and while there are similarities guanxi is “one of the components of social capital rather than social capital itself” (Ruan, 2016, p. 37).

When Chinese international students arrive in Australia many must start over again in developing their social capital. The ability to access jobs through networks and referrals is even more vital for international students, since there is evidence that employers discriminate against written applications from candidates who do not have Anglo-Saxon names (Booth, Leigh & Varganova 2012). Despite this knowledge, international students tend to invest more in bonding than bridging capital (Gomes, 2015).

The participants in this present research did not realise that as well as playing a major role in finding work, developing social capital is also an important workplace skill. Australian employers want well-rounded graduates who have good English proficiency and a degree of cross-cultural awareness (Arkoudis et al., 2009). S2 describes making that realisation during the Job Smart program:

> “I got a lot of hands-on experience now compared to the first semester. I knew nothing. I don't even know what business acumen is. I don't know how to communicate to people from a diverse background and also learn different cultures. That's one of the most important parts I think a good employability skills includes—how to react to people from diverse backgrounds. Learn their culture.”

A similar outcome was reported by Rayner and Papakonstantinou (2015) who found that Australian employers emphasise employability skills, one of the more important ones being the ability to build relationships with stakeholders and team—social capital. This preference tends to be at odds with Confucian styles of education and attainment where the focus is on getting good grades as opposed to developing a student's broader repertoire of communication and interpersonal skills.

5.2.2 Developing social capital is harder for international students.

The research participants believed that they were at a disadvantage when it came to building networks compared to their domestic counterparts. The assumption was that domestic students had at least a basic level of social capital through family, employment, leisure and friendship networks, which they had developed over a much longer period. Also, domestic students did not necessarily have to negotiate the same set of emotional challenges related to English language proficiency and understanding the social norms related to networking in Australia. S6 explained:

> "It's very easy and very comfortable staying at home with your parents, with your family, with a lot of connections. But here, without family without little connection, it's hard for us to stay here."

The two participants who had been in Australia previously, had primarily invested in developing bonding social capital during that time. This behaviour is borne out by the research conducted by Gomes (2015) who found it was quite common for international students to live in a parallel society with other international students who spoke the same language and shared the same culture. This would be described as bonding social capital with close or dense ties (Healy, 2002), whereby international students find it much easier to establish and maintain contacts with

other international Chinese students. These contacts provide a sense of belonging while the students are away from home, living in Australia, without necessarily having to interact with Australians (Gomes, 2015). This is despite many international students wanting to develop relationships with Australians and to learn about the local culture (Sakurai et al., 2010).

5.2.3 Embarrassment about English mistakes.

International students' perceptions concerning their abilities to speak English is one of the most reported challenges they face (Pham et al., 2018), and it was no different for the participants in the current study. There is good reason for their feelings of anxiety when it comes to employability. Being able to communicate well and fluently in English is considered the number one skill that Australian employers are looking for in their new hires (Pham et al., 2018). The participants were anxious that they would make mistakes, embarrassing themselves, which would lead to a loss of face (Stankov, 2010). S5 describes his anxiety about attending networking events because of his fear of making mistakes:

> "If you think about networking, if you say something wrong, that really harm the relationship. Especially the first impression of what somebody thinks. And I guess, for most international students they got a similar situation."

The English language abilities of international students have been found to affect their self-esteem and interpersonal relations (Barratt & Huba, 1994), as well as their ability to adjust to the new environment (Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

5.3 What Meaning Was Made from Challenging Experiences?

By choosing to join the Job Smart program, which was voluntary, the participants were acknowledging that when it came employment, what had worked for them in China would not necessarily work in Australia, and that developing bridging social capital was vital for their

employability. Their active engagement in the program demonstrated what Fugate et al. (2004, p.14) describes as “work specific (pro)active adaptability”.

5.3.1 What did the cultural differences in getting a job mean?

The participants realised that even though getting a job in Australia was different and, for them, more challenging than getting one in China, achieving the goal was paramount and they were prepared to do what it took to adapt and overcome those challenges (Eden, 2014). S2 sums this up by saying:

> “I don't feel like… I don't think we really know the direction or what kind of skills that we really need for the Australian job market. So that's why I participate in events such as Job Smart to get… to know the directions. So, I can just focus on these skills, communication, teamwork resilience etcetera. So, you know how to deal with criticism, cultural shock, and you meet different people.”

S5 describes the difference between her experiences of getting a job in China compared to getting a job in Australia, what it meant to her when she understood the importance of the hidden job market and how she changed her behaviour, which resulted in getting a job:

> “As we were taught in Job Smart 70% of the jobs you get through referrals for hidden market. When I came to Australia I just applied because I got my first job in China through an online application etc. So that was quite a new idea for me. And I gradually found it that was true. Because I got this current job from my friend’s referral. So, especially for international students it's very hard to get those graduate programs, just like applications where you're competing with local students. You don't have PR etc. Whereas it's much easier if you have someone to refer you.”

The participants realised that Australian employers value different qualities in potential candidates and so they were prepared to acquire those skills as S2 shows:

> "Because I think it's definitely necessary to develop these kinds of soft skills to be able to get a job in Australia in general. Because I don't think workload is an excuse for you to ignore this part. I know a lot of students, they only care about their grades and their studies. They don't really care about extracurricular activities or even volunteer work."

5.3.2 What did feeling disadvantaged as an international students mean?

Even though the subordinate theme 5.2.2. describes how the participants felt they were at a disadvantage when it came to employability compared, to domestic students, the subordinate theme "Desire to fit in with Australians" in section 4.2.2 showed that it meant more to the participants to take action to try and fit in with domestic students, rather than concern themselves about the disparity of their situation. The actions they took involved moving out of their comfort zone. Eden (2014) observed that developing students' employability is as much about learning to overcome emotional challenges as it is about learning skills. She writes that students reflected on "being pushed out of their comfort zone" which forced them "to be more proactive, tackle unfamiliar activities and develop emotionally" (Eden, 2014, p. 266). S2 demonstrates this by saying:

> "I think you can't avoid that challenge forever. You cannot run away from this. If you really want to land a decent job in Australia or try to fit in a society… fit in a country and learn their culture. That's why it motivates me to keep trying, because I feel genuinely interested in learning their culture and fit in with Australians."

5.3.3 What did embarrassment at making English mistakes mean?

Though the participants in this study sometimes felt it would be easier not to say anything than run the risk of making a mistake in their spoken English and losing face, they were able to overcome their fear of potential embarrassment. S5 describes her initial experience:

> "So, I decided to go to this one [networking event], but I didn't dare to speak. I was just listening, and I was embarrassed. I didn't know what to say. I was just listening over 1 or 2 hours."

S2 describes how he reframed what mistakes meant to him by realising that most Australians cannot speak Mandarin, so there was no need to be embarrassed by a few mistakes.

> "I think baby steps. There's nothing to be ashamed about. These people don't speak Chinese either. So at least you speak Chinese and a little bit of English. But they don't speak Chinese at all. So, you don't have to be ashamed. It's always like that, you learn from mistakes. So, baby steps. Unless you try otherwise you will never be able to speak to a local people."

S6 had developed self-confidence which meant she was much less embarrassed when she made a mistake in English:

> "I am more confident, especially the language speaking. Because you see me grow. Yes, I'm more confident in speaking. I know I haven't improved that much in my English speaking. But my confidence was improved a lot. Which allows me to the opportunity to practice my English. More confidence can easily change a person and I'm the one that's benefited."

5.4 How Does Personal Mindset Influence Interpretations of Challenges?

Confucian cultures place an emphasis on high academic standards and gaining good grades, and the concepts of saving face and maintaining family honour have a significant influence on behaviour (Huang & Leung, 2005; Mok, 2006; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). However, when interpreting the participants' thinking and behaviour in relation to cultural dimensions, for example collectivism or Confucianism, care needs to be taken not to apply these in a monolithic fashion. It is important to acknowledge the interplay between these cultural dimensions and the individual's mindset that orientate the way situations are handled (Klein, 2016) and how this interplay influences the actions the participants took regarding the development of their employability (Baldwin, 2019).

The research participants were part of the group of students who invested in social capital and thus improving their employability. They had a growth mindset and saw challenges as opportunities rather than blocks, compared to other students who were more influenced by their Confucian heritage mindset. The fear of loss of face if they made a mistake during networking was greater than the potential to develop their employability

5.4.1 Confucian cultural norms

In the process of adjusting to Australian culture, the participants reflected upon their own Chinese culture where they were taught by parents and teachers to avoid mistakes at all costs, and not to stand out. Chinese culture could be broadly described as a *tight culture*, which have many strong social norms, a low tolerance of deviant behaviour, strict rules and restrictions and harsher disciplinary measures (Gelfand, Raver, Nishii et al., 2011). S6 shared a translation of a Chinese saying, "If you stand out you might be destroyed sooner." She went on to explain what this meant to her — "It's not easy to stand out.

> Standing out may mean you may be targeted by some person. You may be destroyed by some other person." This contrasts with Australian workplace culture where value is placed upon egalitarianism, that it is acceptable to stand out for a positive performance, to speak up and share good ideas and that everyone from an intern to the CEO is expected to contribute constructively to discussions (Ashkanasy & Falkus, 2008). Until Australian employers are more sensitive and accommodating to cultural difference, learning to transcend these deeply engrained social norms is important if international students are to succeed in the Australian labour market. S6 reinforces this challenge: "The Chinese students, it's difficult to adapt to this culture. They may lose the opportunity to speak out to… stand out and practice their English. They just want to be right, be perfect."

By speaking up and offering an opinion the participants ran the risk of making mistakes, thus publicising their imperfections, which in turn, leads to a potential loss of face. For many Asian people, a loss of face means letting down or bringing shame on their family (Gomes, 2015). This is related to the collectivist culture where there is less separation between the individual self and the family. S6 shared her observations:

> "I know that many students could know the right answer. But they just didn't want to say it because they were afraid in case it was wrong. Even if it's 1% chance of being wrong they don't want to risk it."

In contrast, making a mistake is less significant in meaning for their Australian counterparts. As an individualistic culture, making mistakes rarely has ramifications beyond the individual.

Another source of tension is that Asian cultures tend to expect that individuals should be able to endure emotional distress, such as the embarrassment of making a mistake, on their own (Wei et al., 2007). To seek help from others might imply personal failure, again, resulting in

shame and loss of face (Wei et al., 2007; Wei et al., 2008). Yet one of the skills that employers look for in graduates is their ability to draw on support when they need it, to ask questions, to seek clarification. These skills have been described as “open communication strategies” (Gordon & Hartman, 2009, p. 115). There are numerous tensions between Chinese and Australian cultures that international students have to negotiate if they want to succeed in gaining employment in the Australian workplace (Ma, Menzies & Zutshi, 2019).

5.4.2 What did countering Confucian cultural norms mean?

For international students to find work in Australia requires re-evaluating the cultural norms that they have grown up with and finding their own point of equilibrium where they feel comfortable to exist across both cultures. Depending on where that point of equilibrium sits will determine how much they can adapt to a different culture and the actions they are prepared to take to achieve their goals. For example, the idea of losing face had much less meaning for S6 than many of her peers.

> “I'm not afraid to lose face. I don't care that much about these things. And development is more important. Losing face — who cares? And also, sometimes I know my answer is right. I'm standing out. By standing out, I take much more compared to losing face. Standing out can bring you a lot more benefits. It makes you feel terrible, but the next time I will still choose to lose face. I know that what I can get from standing out has much more benefit and much more than losing in face and keeping silent.”

5.4.3 Growth mindset.

The students demonstrated a positive attitude when it came to adapting to Australian culture and were prepared to undertake what was required to succeed. They had an attitude of “if it doesn’t challenge me, it doesn’t change me”. They were less concerned or influenced by a

potential loss of face when they made mistakes. They were willing and able to transcend the social norms that had been instilled in them from a young age from schoolteachers, parents and social interactions and relations. One way to interpret the participants' positive attitude toward improving their employability and adjusting to Australian culture and employment conditions is to invoke Carol Dweck's (2007) theory on *mindsets*.

Dweck (2007) observed two different types of mindsets: (1) the *fixed* and (2) the *growth mindset*. Those with a fixed mindset believe that you can learn new things, however, this does not change your intelligence or the kind of person you are. Those with a growth mindset believe that you can change your intelligence no matter what kind of person you are. An important aspect of the growth mindset is that errors and mistakes in life are viewed as opportunities, fertile grounds for learning. Dwek's research questions the idea that exceptionality is innate or fixed, instead high achievers tend to possess the temperamental and motivation dimensions that are characteristic of the growth mindset. "Most often people believe that the 'gift' is the ability itself. Yet what feeds it is that constant, endless curiosity and challenge seeking" (Dweck, 2007; p. 63).

> "Individuals who believe their talents can be developed (through hard work, good strategies, and input from others) have a growth mindset. They tend to achieve more than those with a more fixed mindset (those who believe their talents are innate gifts). This is because they worry less about looking smart and they put more energy into learning." (Dweck, 2016, p. 214)

The concept of the growth mindset is exemplified in the following quote from S4 who was willing to take risks and to use it as a learning experience:

> "If you say, "OK I stumbled and I don't want to get out again and keep going", that's the attitude that stops people, stop students, from keep going. But my attitude is, I stumbled

and I definitely screwed up. But the thing is every coin has two sides and that's negative. But what is the positivity? What is the positive? OK I learnt from that. What is the worst-case scenario? Nobody is going to remember who I am, so I just go to the next one. Like, the first one I can forget it. But before I forget it let me learn something that I can put on paper. OK this is A, B, C, D, E and I learnt from that — this stupid thing I will never do that again. OK I only do that A, B, C, D. You forget about it."

5.5 Central Contributions of This Study

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of a sample of six Chinese international students, to contribute towards answering the research question, how do Chinese international business students develop bridging social capital in Australia to improve their self-perception of their employability? A synthesis of the extant literature with an interpretation of the findings has led to the following insights:

1. Having a goal to stay and work in Australia after graduation, appreciation of multiculturalism and a desire to fit in with Australians are indicators that students are more likely to invest in developing their employability.
2. Being stripped of their social capital when they arrive in Australia places international students at a disadvantage when it comes to employability compared to domestic students. Yet the findings indicate that the participants commitment to their goal motivates them to overcome this disadvantage.
3. Developing bridging social capital is challenging because there are many Confucian cultural and social norms that need to be negotiated, including embarrassment about their English, fear of making mistakes and losing face.

4. Having a *growth mindset* supports students to deal with the discomfort of these challenges and reframe their mistakes as important learning experiences, allowing them to build their bridging social capital.
5. Developing bridging social capital in Australia improves their self-perception of their employability.

5.6 Limitations

There are three main limitations of this present research. The first is conceptual. As the current research is based on concepts of employability that have predominantly been developed in the west, they may only be applicable in the western context. Therefore, the relevance of this research is limited to international students who are seeking work in western contexts. As highlighted by the participants, Chinese employers have different expectations so, for students who intend to work for Chinese employers or their family business, the concept of *guanxi* may play a more important role than social capital.

The second limitation is methodological. Though most of the international student cohort in Australia are currently from China, universities are always seeking to find new markets such as the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and South America. Also, IPA is to designed to be used on small homogenous samples so the findings of this research cannot be generalised, nor can they be applied to other cultures and contexts. However, exploring a small group of participants in this in-depth way helps to understand the variables involved for conducting quantitative research on larger sample sizes in the future. Another factor is the limitations of the Job Smart program itself as it was developed as a pilot only a year prior to me conducting the research and was being updated and improved to better serve international students.

The third limitation is practical. English is a second language for the participants. Though each was highly proficient, some of the meaning they wanted to convey may have been lost in translation, therefore the quality of the data may be limited. The hermeneutic nature of IPA is based on interpretation, but the integrity of the data may have been stronger if the interviews were conducted in Mandarin.

5.7 Implications

The impetus for conducting this research came from witnessing the struggles that international students faced as they tried to develop their employability in Australia. The study found that having a *growth mindset* can help them overcome the challenges of developing their bridging social capital to improve their self-perception of their employability. This has implications for three main stakeholders mentioned in Chapter 2 of this current study.

Prior to COVID-19, international education was Australia's third largest export industry, contributing over $37 billion to the Australian economy. The Department of Education, Skills and Employment carries out research to identify skill shortages in the Australian labour market and the Australian government seeks to fill these gaps by providing immigration visas to individuals who are qualified to work *or train* in an eligible skilled occupation (Department of Home Affairs). The National Strategy for International Education 2025, launched by the Australian Government in April 2016, recognises the role of international students in the Australian workforce but as this present research has shown, international students face extra challenges, and therefore require extra support to develop their employability so they can meet the needs of employers. An implication is that if the Australian government provided support and incentives for universities to deliver tailored employability programs for international students, this would create a more effective talent pipeline to address the skills shortage.

Over the last 30-years, Australian universities have become increasingly reliant on the income from the international student market to remain financially viable, therefore growth in student numbers will remain a strategic priority, despite COVID-19. Though they depend on their money, Australian universities expect a lot from international students. As well as paying large tuition fees, they are expected to adapt quickly to social norms, improve their English, fit in, enjoy themselves and to not become a burden on university services, and develop their employability. As this current study indicates, they are effectively being asked to learn a new set of cultural norms in a short period of time. To remain an attractive option, Australian universities need to pay more careful attention to their international students. As the main reason for choosing to study in Australia is to improve employment outcomes, investing in their employability would go a long way to meeting their needs, keeping market share and filling shortages across the labour market.

This present study has shown that for international students, employability is as much about learning to overcome emotional challenges as it is about employability skills (Eden, 2014). Jackson and Bridgstock (2021) conducted a study on the relative merits of curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular activities to enhance graduate employability. Though the results indicated that participation in these programs, such as Job Smart, do not necessarily correlate to employment outcomes, they do enhance self-confidence and self-awareness which, as this current research shows, is crucial for the employability of international students. Therefore, an implication is that employability programs for international students should include opportunities to develop a growth mindset through “learning from failures and setbacks and using feedback to improve” as well as other noncognitive skills such as “grit, resilience, and adaptability” (Baldwin, 2019, p. 59). Government and universities should invest in these students who are

investing in the Australian economy both in terms of the money they inject into the economy and the value they add to the labour market, otherwise they may go elsewhere.

While international students come to Australia for a variety of reasons and with various intentions, the majority express a desire to meet local Australians and find opportunities to gain a competitive advantage in the global labour market. Though navigating the tension between their cultural upbringing and Australian culture is very challenging, to achieve their goals they need to be prepared to step out of their comfort zone, which by definition is uncomfortable. Teaching the principles of a growth mindset will help international students step out of their comfort zone and deal with the emotional discomfort that will inevitably arise as a result. This will allow them to take the necessary steps to develop their bridging social capital, therefore improving their self-perception of their employability.

5.8 Suggestions for Future Research

The current study employed qualitative research (IPA) to understand how six Chinese international business students developed their bridging social capital in Australia to improve their self-perception of their employability. To move this important research agenda forward four suggestions for future research include:

- Examining the concepts of personal adaptability and growth mindset in relation to employability.
- A quantitative study to survey a larger sample of international Chinese students so that some broader generalisations can be made about how they develop social capital to improve their employability.
- Using the same methodology but a different sample such as international students from the Indian subcontinent which is a growing market in Australia. It would be interesting to

see whether or not they face similar challenges in developing social capital as Chinese students.

- Investigating the challenges international students face in developing some of the other employability factors, for example career identity, psychological resilience and the ability to exercise agency (Pham, Tomlinson & Thompson, 2019).
- Investigating why some students are unmotivated to develop their employability.
- Analysis and comparison of social capital between domestic and international students

5.9 Conclusion

I chose to conduct this research because, in line with the findings of Jackson and Bridgstock (2021), I observed that despite taking part in employability programs that had been specifically created for them, such as Job Smart, international students still found it challenging to gain employment. I wanted to understand why—what was the missing piece of the puzzle? A review of the literature showed that social capital, in particular bridging social capital, is a key factor of employability, however, international students are stripped of their social capital as soon as they arrive in a new country. Even though Job Smart taught networking skills and provided opportunities to develop bridging social capital, similar to Gomes' findings (2015), the majority of international students who participated in Job Smart, invested in bonding social capital. However, some were successful in developing their bridging social capital which in turn improved their self-perception of their employability. I wanted to understand the mindset of these students and chose IPA as the methodology to gain insight into the lived experience of six Chinese international business students who successfully built their bridging social capital. The findings showed that the participants struggled to find the balance between upholding the Confucian values they grew up with, and the cultural expectations of Australians. This struggle

affected their attempts to develop bridging social capital. For example, they tried to navigate the tension between the Australian expectation of speaking up and expressing opinions, and the fear that if they spoke up but made a mistake it would lead to loss of face and shame. Similarly, this tension had a major impact on their confidence to speak English. The fear of embarrassment from making mistakes in English sometimes outweighed the benefits of expanding their network and improving their employability.

This research found that the students who were able to develop their social capital were those that had a growth mindset. Rather than viewing mistakes with shame, and loss of face, they saw them as opportunities to learn and improve. The implication of these findings is that employability programs for international students should include growth mindset training to deal with the challenges of navigating cultural tensions.

The Australian government needs international students to address the national skills shortage, and universities want to maintain and grow their share of the international student market. To achieve this, the government and universities must meet international students' needs. As international students choose to study in Australia because they expect their education to result in a competitive advantage in the global labour market, universities need to focus developing international students' employability. This includes programs that develop a growth mindset and bridging social capital to improve their self-perception of their employability. The government and universities need to invest in these students who are making a significant financial investment in the Australian economy.

I hope that this research and any future research goes towards helping international students feel heard, acknowledged and cared for in Australia, especially during these extremely challenging times of COVID-19.

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Appendix 1

Interview Schedule

1. Please describe one or two of your more memorable experiences of developing networks with Australians or non-Chinese people.
    - What happened?
    - How did you feel?
    - What were you thinking?
    - What were some of the challenges?
    - What stopped you from staying in your comfort zone?
2. What did these experiences mean to you?
    - How do you think it affected you?
    - How do you feel about the experience?
3. Tell me about how employable you feel now, compared to when you started your degree?
    - What makes you feel this way?
    - How important was it to develop your employability and why?
    - Why did you choose to do Job Smart?
    - How important do you feel building your networks was to improve your employability?