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FACTORS AFFECTING THE EMPLOYABILITY OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATES

This paper is aimed to identify the factors affecting the employability of international graduates based on the review of relevant international literature. The study groups a wide range of factors associated with employability into four categories, namely higher education institutional factors, (graduate) individual factors, employers' perspectives, and contextual factors. Based on the analysis, implications for higher education institutions are developed in terms of enhancing their international students' employability along with suggestions for future research in this underexplored field.

Keywords: international education, graduate employability

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the employability of graduates is often used as a performance indicator to measure the quality of higher education (HE) by national governments and international rankings (Teichler, 2009). The potential students are also beginning to pay more attention to the employment prospects when selecting a place to study. Given the increasingly spreading practice to charge tuition fees for higher education, the global competition for international students is becoming more rigorous. The problem of ageing population and the resulting shortage of skilled labour in many countries (Gordon, 2009; Manpower Group, 2012) adds to the fact that the international graduates' employment is becoming a concern in terms of both attracting potential (fee-paying) international students and supporting the national economic competitiveness. Thus, having full understanding of factors affecting the employability of international graduates is crucial for policy makers and higher education administrators willing to develop strategies for attracting and retaining foreign talent.

In spite of a big volume of literature dealing with the graduate employability agenda, the existing studies mainly look at issues from narrow perspectives often failing to explain the employment outcomes for graduates from different demographic groups (Holmes, 2008). In particular, the international graduates have not been given due attention yet in the research of HE-to-work transition (Mosneaga&Winther, 2012; Huang, 2013). Therefore, there is a need to synthesize the literature for developing a comprehensive understanding, and therefore, this paper tries to answer the following research questions: «What are the factors affecting the employability of international graduates?»; and «What recommendations can be elicited for higher education institutions based on the review of these factors?»

2. Methodology

The main approach employed in the study is through a review of international literature on the topic. The summary of the major studies reviewed in this article is given below.

Major studies on international graduate employability reviewed in this article

authors and name of the study	scope and focus of the study
Cai, 2012. Understanding Employers' Perceptions of International Graduates: An Investigation of the Employment Prospects of Finnish-Educated Chinese Graduates in Finnish Companies Operating in China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – interview with representatives of 16 Finnish companies in China, responsible for recruitment. – employers' perceptions of the educated abroad graduates returning to work in their home countries
Bartley, 2002. International students: employment ready and marketable?	– Graduate Destination Survey with 5563 international graduate respondents educated in Australia
Hemmer et al., 2011. Erasmus Mundus: Clustering Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses and Attractiveness Projects: Lot 2: Employability. Survey Results.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Graduate impact survey with 3660 respondents – international students and graduates of Erasmus Mundus Master programmes – 51 interviews with programme coordinators
Brooks, Waters, Pimlott-Wilson, 2012. International education and the employability of UK students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Interviews with 85 British graduates who have recently completed studies abroad – to investigate to what extent overseas education can be seen as part of a broader strategy to get distinction in the labour market
Huang, 2013. International experience and graduate employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – interviews with nine Chinese international students in UK – to explore their career intentions and approaches to managing their employability
Mosneaga&Winther, 2012 Emerging Talents? International students before and after their career start in Denmark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – interviews with 43 international students and graduates in Denmark – to explore the connections between decisions to study abroad and continuing the career in the host country after graduation
Shumilova, Pekkola&Cai (2012). Valoa study on Employability of International graduates educated in Finnish HEIs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Survey of and interviews with the international graduates of 2009–2010 educated in Finnish HEIs (N=363 and 10 respectively); -10 interviews with employers – issues related to employment situation of international graduates including skills (mis-) match, obstacles in finding a job, relevance of Finnish HE to the labour market, etc.
Støren&Wiers-Jenssen, 2010. Foreign Diploma Versus Immigrant Background: Determinants of Labour Market Success or Failure?	– statistical comparison of employment outcomes of four groups of graduates: immigrants and ethnic Norwegians graduated in Norway and immigrants and ethnic Norwegians graduated abroad.

The articles have been selected on the basis of relevant key words search in electronic libraries and search engines and then the snowball eliciting from the reference lists was done. As mentioned above, very few studies have been identified in the literature on employability of international graduates; hence the sample is deemed representative. NVivo 10 has been used to code and analyze the texts of the articles under the identified factor categories. Based on this review, recommendations for the higher education institutions and suggestions for future research are elaborated.

By international graduates in this paper we refer to the individuals who have undertaken a full programme of study outside their home country (similar to the definition of international students by Jones, 2013:4). The focus is on recent graduates – up to two years after graduation, as we are interested in HE-to-work transition, and the majority of graduates find work within this period of time. Also, considering any longer period after graduation is not expedient as the effects of HE training are diminishing over time and work experience takes over (Cranmer, 2006). The reviewed studies have focused on different groups of graduates in terms of their post-graduation mobility, and even international students in some cases, which is useful for exploring the effect of contextual factors on employability and the influence of individual career intentions respectively.

3. Employability concept

Before addressing the issue of factors affecting the employability a definition of the employability concept needs to be reviewed. Cranmer (2006) objectively notes that there are many complexities in defining, measuring and developing employability as it is an elusive concept. In a recent study, Holmes (2013) distinguishes between three perspectives for understanding the concept of employability, namely «possessive», «positioning» and «processual». Such a framework can help better understand various definitions of employability in the literature.

The «possessive» perspective sees employability as an individual attribute, treating skills or competencies as if they are amenable to being processed or used. Such perspective is reflected in traditional but more common understandings of employability based on supply-side factors (skills agenda)

(Holmes, 2008; Huang, 2013), which involves the graduate's ability and skills to gain, retain and (when necessary) find new fulfilling/satisfying work (Harvey, 2001; Hillage and Pollard, 1998). In this respect, it can be defined as «a set of achievements—skills, understandings and personal attributes—that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy» (Yorke, 2004, p. 8). The professional success can be described by a number of subjective and objective indicators such as: »a) the smoothness of the transition from higher education to the labour market (duration of job search); b) income and socio-economic status; c) a position appropriate to the field and level of educational attainment; d) desirable employment conditions (independent, demanding and responsible work); and e) a high degree of job satisfaction» (Pavlin, 2010, p. 5).

The positioning approach regards employability as part of the process of societal production by universities. Lindberg (2008) uses the notion of 'institutional employability' to view employability as the set of outcomes of the universities' implicit and explicit measures to enable graduate employability. In this case, the employability serves as an indication of quality of individual institutions as well as the social relevance of higher education as a whole (Harvey, 2001).

The processual perspective strongly emphasizes the concept of graduate identity. In this perspective, a graduate's employability is dependent on the identity of being a person worthy of being employed. The identity is assigned by others, particularly gatekeepers of employment opportunities. For example, employers are the most important gatekeepers as they make final recruitment decisions. As such, Thijssen et al. (2008) consider employability *through the eyes of employers* as the propensity of the graduate to exhibit the skills that employers expect to be necessary for efficient functioning of their organization.

The processual perspective is very important in the development of the concept of employability for two reasons. First, it implies that employability is a very relative term, which concurs with Brown, Hesketh, and Williams (2004), who argue that employability is not merely a matter of individuals' knowledge, skills and attributes, but is also a positional game, e.g. con-

cerning how graduates can strategically deploy their assets and successfully market themselves in the labor market to gain a vantage position. Second, it points out to the relevant stakeholders in the field. However, the employability is not only subject to stakeholders, such as employers but also depend on a variety of the labor market contexts (Hemmer et al., 2011).

Against the above background, for studying employability there is an urgent need to develop a more inclusive but simple enough definition. In this study we define employability as a graduate's ability to gain and retain satisfying/decent work, conditioned by employers' beliefs and interaction of individual (e.g. skills, socio-cultural background), institutional (educational background) and contextual factors (e.g. labour market situation).

Hence, we recognize that the concept of employability is multi-dimensional; it involves not only the individual's skills and competences developed during HE studies, but also an interaction between the individual and other actors in the labor market and a multitude of factors, such as gender, ethnicity and social class; access to networks and previous work experience; career intentions and attitudes – making up a part of a unique graduates' identity (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Holmes, 2008; Huang, 2013) shaped in its turn by the country-specific labor market contexts.

4. International experience and employability

As this study focuses on the employability of international students, it is necessary to understand the relations between international experience and employability. With the beginning of campaign on enhancing the attractiveness of European HE associated with the Bologna process; the ever increasing academic mobility; the anticipated demographic changes and the overall tightening global competition for talent – the policy makers and researchers have started investigating more actively the factors that encourage international students to take up studies abroad and the role of these experiences for further careers. Yet, the majority of studies focused on the effects of short-term mobility (Brooks et al., 2012) and the HE-to-work transition and factors leading to labour market (dis)advantage still remain the underexplored element of international student mobility (Mosneaga&Winther, 2012; Huang, 2013). In this section we briefly highlight the major puzzling considerations that emerge when dealing with the topic.

When exploring the links between international education and employability we can observe a paradox. On the one hand, it is widely recognized that international graduates are a potential source of high-skilled labor force valued by employers for their broad range of positive attributes including awareness of other cultures and mastery of more than one language (Mosneaga&Winther, 2012; Jones, 2013). It is also argued that in a global environment graduates with international experience (the internationally savvy “global citizens”) would happen to be more employable than those with only local knowledge (Crossman&Clark, 2010; Brooks et al., 2012; Huang, 2013).

On the other hand, the results of international graduate surveys show that this demographic group is often more vulnerable (Walters, 2011), often less employable than local graduates (Bartley, 2002; Støren and Wiers-Jenssen, 2010; Majakulma, 2011), and facing a number of obstacles when transiting to the labour market. The examples of such obstacles are given by the graduates surveyed in Finland, although they are similar to the experiences of graduates in other countries (Kärki, 2005; Raunio&Forsander, 2009; Vehaskari, 2010; Australian Government/Australian Education International, 2010; Hemmer et al., 2011; Shumilova et al., 2012; Sykes&Chaoimh, 2012):

- the language barrier
- closed professional networks
- lack of opportunities to gain work experience during studies, especially through internships
- lack of career guidance in HEIs
- discrimination in the labour market
- restrictive bureaucracy regarding residence permits
- concerns about family migration.

Hence, while international graduates possess a number of positive attributes that make them an attractive group of skilled migrants, they cannot overcome the mentioned obsta-

cles simply by studying in the country and still need a number of services to assist in their (re-) integration and transition to the labour market (Sykes&Chaoimh, 2012). Bearing in mind the multitude of factors affecting the labour market outcomes of international graduates, it is deemed necessary to group these factors in categories and look into them in more detail.

5. Factors affecting employability

As stated above, we recognize that employability cannot be a purely individual or institutional achievement, rather an outcome of the joint efforts of the involved stakeholders including – students, graduates, academics, program coordinators, employers, and policy makers (Harvey, 2001; Crossman and Clarke, 2010). Bearing this in mind, the factors affecting (international) graduate employability can be grouped into four main categories (Cai, 2012a; CHERI, 2002; Harvey, 2001; Krempkow&Wilke, 2009; Leuze, 2010; Lindberg, 2008; Pavlin, 2010):

1) *Individual factors* – such as the skills and competences obtained by graduates, their socio-economic background (e.g., gender, age of entering higher education, parents' education and income, ethnicity); access to information and social/professional networks; the peculiarities of the job search behaviour and prior work experience;

2) *Factors related to higher education* include, among others, the structure of higher education systems (stratification), the content of study (occupational specificity), career services offered and links to the enterprises.

3) *Employers' perceptions*, beliefs and needs vis-à-vis the graduates they hire;

4) *The contextual factors* including economy, (work) culture, labour market situation and the relevant policies in the country. Lately, the role of the *linking agents*, such as non-profit organizations, associations and (supra-) nationally funded projects aimed to enhance the employability of international graduates, has been highlighted.

Even though the boundaries between the identified groups of factors can be blurred we have structured our further literature review accordingly focusing on the international education context.

5.1. Factors related to higher education

HEIs have an admittedly important role in helping students prepare for the labour market by developing their professional expertise and the generic or transferable skills, through internships, career services and specific types of teaching, etc. The study of UK universities (Mason et al, 2003; Cranmer, 2006) has shown, however, that the explicit efforts directed at embedding the employability skills development in the teaching and assessment practices do not have any significant effect on graduates' labour market outcomes, while providing structured work experience (providing an opportunity to polish one's skills to speak about his-her skills in mock job interviews) and involving employers in course design proved to be more efficient. For this reason we will focus more on the structural attribute of HE in this section such as the *type of institution attended*, the *level of the degree* obtained and *major subjects studied*.

The *types of institutions* are usually associated with the stratification of the higher education system: the vertical stratification of HEIs associated with prestige and high positions in university rankings, or a horizontal stratification of binary systems comprising the university and non-university sector (colleges, polytechnics, etc.).

With relation to the former, King et al. (2010) explain: '*Students who...study in an international arena, especially if they attend high-prestige universities, accumulate multiple and mutually-reinforcing forms of capital—mobility capital, human capital (a world-class university education), social capital (access to networks, 'connections'), cultural capital... and, eventually, economic capital*' (in Jones, 2012, p. 4). Such line of thinking, where prestige of the university was more important than the fact of studying abroad, was found to be true some for British and Malaysian students, who strategically chose to get a well-recognized qualification to enhance their employability upon returning home (Brooks et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the Western education is often considered 'by default' to be more prestigious than local (e.g. in Asian coun-

tries). As such, for example, the employers in Hong Kong, who often studied abroad themselves, give preference to job applicants with a Western degree (*ibid.*).

The horizontal stratification of HEIs is linked to the *subject differences* implying a more academic focus of the studies at universities or more vocational/professional training at colleges, universities of applied sciences, polytechnics. In terms of subject differences, the labour market position of vocational science/hard applied major graduates (e.g. computing and medicine, engineering, law) is in general more favorable, as compared to the position of non-vocational arts/pure soft discipline graduates (e.g. art, humanities and languages) (Allen & van der Velden, 2009; CHERI, 2002). Yet, as argued by Leuze (2010), in some countries the *type of degree* obtained might be even more important than the discipline. For instance, Fachhochschule-degrees and Staatsexamen in Germany are linked to specific labour market segments and are mutually exclusive (Leuze, 2010).

With relation to the *level of the degree* obtained, there is no consensus, on which one offers better opportunities in the labour market. According to the Europe-wide study of employers' perceptions of graduate employability (The Gallup Organization, 2010, p. 32), «a slim majority of employers (55%) answered that graduates with bachelor's degrees would best match the skill requirements in their company, while 35% said that graduates with master's degrees would be a better fit». In their multi-country general employability study, Allen and van der Velden (2009) confirm that both groups have the same unemployment rate, with the only difference that Master degree graduates more often experience the education level-job mismatch, while the Bachelor degree graduates are more often mismatched in the education field-job dimension. However, the studies on international graduates prove that taking a postgraduate degree is viewed as a strategic step to enhancing one's employability by increasing the scarcity/value of their credentials (Lindberg, 2008; Shumilova et al., 2012; Huang, 2013). And, indeed, the employment rates of those with Master's degrees are slightly higher than those with Bachelor's (cf. 93% employment rate among Masters Research programme graduate in Australia vs. 81.2% among Bachelors (Bartley, 2002)).

Finally, following Majakulma (2011) that focused on international graduates from Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences, we have found that not only the type of HEI, the field and level of educational program attended have an effect on further employment opportunities, but also the *language of instruction*. As the international programs tend to provide fewer courses than their full-fledged national counterparts, there is a legitimate concern among some employers about the quality of such programs. In addition, the students pursuing programs taught in English in Finland do not manage to develop their Finnish language skills well enough to be able to use them in the workplace (Majakulma, 2011).

5.2. Individual factors

Apart from the institutional factors described above the individual characteristics, such as the person's socio-economic background, job searching techniques, the sub-optimal knowledge of the language of the host country and access to social networks may become intervening factors in graduate employment (CHERI, 2002). Hence, in the context of international graduates seeking employment outside one's home country, *ethnicity* appears to be one of the most important factors. Previous studies demonstrate that being a foreign graduate can be a disadvantage when applying for a job due to discrimination and prejudice (CHERI, 2002; Majakulma, 2011; Shumilova, Cai, & Pekkola, 2012; Vehaskari, 2010). For instance, the employment rate of the international graduates educated in Finland is 70% (Shumilova, Cai, & Pekkola, 2012), which is lower than the national level (87%) (Statistics Finland, 2012). The labour market vulnerability of specific ethnic groups can be exemplified with graduates from African countries educated in Finland being least employable (55% employment rate) (*ibid.*). Similarly, in Norway, non-Western immigrants graduating from Norwegian universities and colleges have displayed a higher risk of unemployment than ethnic Norwegians with the same type and level of education (Støren, 2004). Other studies confirm that this appears to be

a general trend for international graduate employment rates (Bartley, 2002; Hemmer et al., 2011). Yet, these differences in employment outcomes should be attributed to the employer's perceptions rather than individual factors.

The (CHERI, 2002) concedes that individual *job searching techniques* such as the time when graduates start searching for a job and the methods used have clear effects on their employment situation. Those who started searching before their graduation and used the contacts developed during course of study are in many respects in a better position than those who delay the search until the time of graduation or even longer and use traditional job searching methods. In general, the surveyed Erasmus Mundus programme graduates, for instance, feel that they have found a job faster than their fellow graduates who studied at home (Hemmer et al., 2011). The fact that the majority of the employed graduates found their job within half a year might be attributed, among other factors, to the urgency coming from the need to extend one's residence permit.

Linked to the job search techniques is the *access to relevant social/ professional networks* or 'social capital' which is becoming increasingly important. Their significance is explained by the assumption that employers and job seekers have limited information about each other; (Ahmad, 2005; Majakulma, 2011). The lack of information on foreign academic credentials encourages the employers to rely on other signals when recruiting foreign talent, such as references from current employees. The dilemma is that both the internationally educated job-seekers returning home and the ones who stayed in the host country might miss on these professional ties to help them enter the world of work (Støren and Wiers-Jenssen, 2010).

The VALOA study findings also confirmed the fact that personal connections and recommendations from the teaching staff helped graduates find jobs, although it happened only in 13% of cases and it was reported that it is difficult and time-consuming to build a genuine network (Shumilova, Cai, & Pekkola, 2012). On the whole, the top methods of job search coincide with the ones identified in the CHEERS and Reflex surveys (Teichler, 2009, p. 241), that is, applying for a vacancy or contacting the employer on one's own initiative, while the help of careers/placement offices in HEIs was least frequently used.

Finally, the *skills/ competences* agenda is very prominent in the debates around the factors affecting graduate employability. There have been many attempts to classify skills and abilities with the major distinction being made between specific and generic ones. Although these classifications are rather artificial, various researchers have identified lists of important skills, abilities and competences for the world of work (Allen & van der Velden, 2012, 2009; Badillo-Amador, García-Sánchez, & Vila, 2005; Department of Education Science and Training of Australian Government, 2002; OECD, 2012; Shmarov & Fedyukin, 2004). Following the classification used by Allen and van der Velden (2012) and (Hemmer et al., 2011) these skills and competences can be grouped into the following categories: professional expertise, functional flexibility, innovation and knowledge management, technical skills, mobilization of human resources and international orientation.

In the context of international education, it is the *country-specific skills and international competences* that add value to its graduates (Støren & Wiers-Jenssen, 2010). Such competences are becoming increasingly important in the global labour market and in multicultural work environments that become a reality worldwide. They include the ability to write and speak in a foreign language; professional knowledge of other countries; knowledge/understanding of international differences in culture and society (*ibid.*). Besides these, the researchers (Garam, 2005; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009) argue that studies abroad enhance the development of a broad range of other general skills such as social or life skills; a deeper understanding and respect for global issues, more favourable attitudes toward other cultures, improved personal and professional self-image, self-confidence, ability to handle ambiguity and difficult situations, insight into their own value systems and overall maturity.

All these skills appear to be appreciated by the employers internationally, with one interesting exception (Jones, 2013). The *mastery of a foreign language* or multilingualism did not

seem to have any significant statistical importance for employment outcomes (Støren and Wiers-Jenssen, 2010; Shumilova et al., 2012, Jones, 2013), while the awareness of cultural nuances and protocols was deemed to be more important. However, the foreign language might be seen as a complementary skill only if both the employer and the job applicant have fluency in the official working language. As the case of Finland showed the lack of Finnish language skills caused a lot of problems to international graduates seeking employment in Finland in areas outside the IT and telecommunications (Shumilova et al., 2012). On the other hand, as suggested by Støren and Wiers-Jenssen (2010), the time of residence in the host country might be more important in the case of international graduate employment. Indeed, the job-seekers who lived in the country longer would have better social and professional networks and presumably better labour market opportunities even without adequate mastery of the local language.

Unfortunately, with all this added value the international graduates might be considered overqualified and, as a result, be forced to lower their job expectations and take jobs that require a lower degree of education or no higher education whatsoever (Shumilova et al., 2012).

5.3. Employers' perceptions of international graduates

The successful transition from international HE to the world of work is largely associated with the way the employers perceive the international graduates (Cai, 2012b). In general, the employers unanimously subscribe to the fact that the nature of work in the modern world is changing and becoming more varied, creative, self-guided, risk-taking, experimental, *networked and global* in scope (Confederation of Finnish Industries, 2011). In this case the students who took up (part of) their degree studies abroad might better fit in these changing trends with their potential to bridge cross-cultural differences, access to professional networks in more than one country, foreign language mastery and other highly developed soft skills (Cai, 2012b). According to the world-wide study «Talent shortage survey» one third of the companies are experiencing a lack of available skilled talent with the right technical competences and employability skills, and 12 % of the employers are already expanding the candidate search beyond the local labour market (Manpower Group, 2012).

These perceptions of employers would depend on whether they are dealing with the international graduates educated in their country or abroad. While in both cases the employers might appreciate the added value of international education, the assumption is that international graduates returning to their home countries may have better employment prospects (Cai, 2012b). Yet, even these graduates might experience some challenges when trying to secure a job at home. Cai (2012b) notes at the example of China, that the employing companies that are involved in international operations or foreign companies based in the graduate's home country appreciate the returnees more, despite the fact that sometimes those have unrealistic salary expectations. However, the employers operating nationally may consider the graduates returning from their studies taken abroad – overqualified (Garam, 2005) or lacking the necessary social/professional networks (Cai, 2012b).

Another challenge for the employment prospects could be the fact that international credentials are less known to the employers located outside the host country of one's studies, thus raising the issue of the portability of cultural capital across national borders (Brooks et al., 2012). Our experience of conducting a quality assurance of one Erasmus Mundus programme along with the Hemmer et al., (2011) study proves that the joint degrees tend to be especially confusing for the employers.

On the whole, the employers are not unanimous with respect to degree studies taken abroad. For instance, one report from Sweden indicates that employers prefer recruiting graduates who have undertaken part of their education abroad, rather than graduates who have undertaken their entire study programme abroad or solely in Sweden (Støren and Wiers-Jenssen, 2010). In fact, only 25% of surveyed employers in the Europe-wide study on employers' perceptions agreed that it was very important to have studied or worked abroad (The Gallup Organization, 2010). And only

large international companies where English is used as official working language seem to make the full use of the foreign or internationally educated human capital.

Furthermore, the majority of employers highlight that the benefits of studies abroad can be enhanced if the graduates have prior work experience in the field, as 87% of employers strongly or rather agree that prior work experience appears to be a highly positive influence on employability (The Gallup Organization, 2010). In terms of skills requirements, apart from professional (subject-specific) skills, qualifications and educational background, the employers are looking for the following set of attributes in job applicants:

«Energy, ambition, ...evidence of being an achiever, and goal minded person. Self-motivated characteristics and attitude», «negotiation & presentation skills», «understanding of economic matters», «innovativeness and the independent research skill», «ability to work without supervision» (Shumilova, Cai and Pekkola, 2012, p.76)

However, as mentioned before, even having all the necessary skills does not guarantee smooth transition from HE to work for international graduates in the host country, with the mentioned above ethnic discrimination in the recruitment process being one of the obstacles. As an illustration, 52% of Finnish employers responding to Eurobarometer survey in 2009 mentioned ethnic origin/skin colour as a factor that might put a job applicant in a disadvantaged position when choosing from two candidates with equivalent skills and qualifications (Larja et al., 2012).

5.4. The contextual factors

The above mentioned factors are also shaped by the *socio-economic context, immigration and the labour market policies* of a specific country. Never the less, many studies of graduate employment «are based on general, i.e. not country specific assumptions» (Teichler, 2009, p. 198). In relation to the general labour market conditions, for instance, there has been a growing concern since 1970s about the overproduction of the overqualified labour force associated with the massification of HE and the subsequent increase in the unemployment rates among HE graduates (Leuze, 2010). Brooks et al. (2012) have also remarked that with the increased academic mobility the value of study abroad experience and the employment premium have somewhat deflated.

In the case of international education-to-work transition, the more specific contextual factors would include the degree of internationalization of the labour market, the link between the attraction and retention policies towards foreign talent (including the immigration regulations) and the existence of agents or liaisons (Vehaskari, 2010) bridging the relevant stakeholders and striving to help international graduates become more employable.

Unfortunately, international students are generally regarded as temporary migrants, and apart from the opportunity to extend the residence permit for up to a year to look for a job, the government does not support their integration (Sykes&Chaoimh, 2012).

Given the existing gap between policies aimed to attract and retain foreign students (National Report from Finland for EMN Study, 2012), and the fact that many HEIs do not yet sustain the relationships with their international alumni (Shumilova, et al. 2012) – the role of the linking agents or liaisons is becoming more prominent. Such agents may include the community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations (Gordon, 2009) or associations, networks, and projects. The main function of these liaisons in the context of international HE-to-work transition is to maximize the local available resource, bridge the relevant stakeholders (HEIs, students, alumni, employers and policy makers), discuss the ways and share the best practices in enhancing international graduate employability.

As way of example, a number of linking agents have appeared in Finland in the form of the EU and nationally co-funded projects that aim to enhance international graduate employability by providing networking forums for immigrants, HEIs and employers. These projects organize a range of activities, including mentoring programmers and skills development sessions for immigrants, informative sessions on «How

to find a job in Finland» and Finish working culture, company visits and work placements, studies on cultural diversity in the workplace and employers' views on hiring foreign talent. International exchange organizations such as AIESEC are also currently active, particularly in their recruitment of business students and place around 4,000 students across 50 countries annually (AIESEC 2007, p. 13 in Crossman&Clark, 2010). We believe that the role of this new stakeholder group needs to be studied in more detail.

Finally, to corroborate the significance of the contextual factors it is important to highlight the variance in the employment rates depending on the post-graduation mobility pattern of international students. While the difference between those who stayed in the host country and returned home is insignificant (72 and 70% employment rate), those who moved elsewhere appeared to be less employable (54,5%), according to the VALOA study.

6. Implications for HEIs

Prompted by the employability policy agenda, HEIs have started putting efforts in embedding the employability skills in their curricula. Yet, the major tasks of HEIs in terms of the teaching component are still largely seen as recruiting, educating and 'graduating the students, especially in the countries where funding is based on the number of entering and graduating students. As shown by the existing studies on international HE-to-work transition, the university career services have been least used when applying for jobs. In addition, according to the results of International Student Barometer survey (CIMO, 2011), the services of the career service departments were the ones with which international students were less satisfied. It seems there is a lack of knowledge on the part of HEIs (especially in countries that are only starting to charge tuition fees) of how to provide customized assistance to international students in terms of their future career development. It was also reported that it is more difficult for international students to find places for internships (Shumilova et al., 2012). Moreover, not all HEIs even keep their international alumni database.

All this calls for improvements informed by country and HEI-specific research on the skills needed by employers, eliciting the feedback from graduates on the relevance of HE to the labour market needs. Furthermore, HEIs may want to consider the following:

- use the employability indicator (alumni feedback, statistics) as a way to attract international students;
- provide help to international students with finding internships, language studies and choosing the labour-market relevant courses (Majakulma, 2011);
- provide more classes in which international and local students would be mixed – as a way to enhance one's integration into the host society;
- maintain the international alumni database, track and monitor their labour market outcomes (Sykes&Chaoimh, 2012);
- manage alumni relations, by inviting them to share the success stories with other international students and act as mentors;
- promote their graduates to employers and explain the value of educational credentials (e.g. joint degrees, in particular).

When developing the employability HEIs need to take into account the career and the post-graduations mobility intentions of their international students. This seems like a lot to manage in the context where HE funding is being cut. Hence, HEIs might think of joining their efforts and providing services in the network of institutions or looking for externally funded (e.g. by European Social Fund) linking agents to help them cope with these pressures.

7. Conclusions

While there is a common consensus that graduate employability is not only a matter of graduates but also subject to labour market fluctuations and interactions with other stakeholders, there is a lack of efforts in developing a working definition of employability to embrace such multi-dimensional understandings as well as in building an analytical framework for understanding a variety of factors which have impacts on

graduate employability. This study is an effort to fill both gaps. The definition of employability provided in this study is heavily based on wide discussions of the concept in existing literature. We tried to make it inclusive but still simple and generic at the same time. The main output of the paper is the framework for understanding what factors affect graduate employability, in which four categories of factors are identified as important, namely individual attributes of students/graduates, HEIs, employers, and labor market contexts. Although our focus is to develop the framework for international graduates, it can also be useful for understanding graduate employability in general.

Guided by the framework, the study has also provided suggestions for HEIs on how to enhance their capability in graduate employability development. Our critique is that when HEIs develop their strategies for enhancing graduate employability, they are not taking sufficiently the roles of other factors, such as employers and labor market contexts. For instance, while they are preparing international students for different labor markets in the worlds, the HEIs still tend to use one-size-fit-all approaches. Rather, they need to study and project what destinations would be for their graduates in the global labor market, and they should accordingly plan diversified approaches to support the students. Moreover, HEIs have so far done little in developing strategies to influence the employers' beliefs (Cai, 2013b), though there are emerging actions on engaging with employers in e.g. the development of curriculum and internship to meet the employers' needs. However, the employers may sometimes be short-sighted in identifying the prospective employees, understanding the competencies and potentials of graduates, and predicting possible added values brought by the graduates, especially in an international context. HEIs should beware that their missions are not confined to preparing students for the future needs in the labour market, but also about transforming the future of the labour market and bringing in new values into society (Cai, 2013a).

To respond to the new demands, it is indeed very challenging for HEIs as they have limited capabilities and carry much traditional inertia. It was pointed out that the linking agencies might help HEIs in terms of enhancing (international) graduate employability by gathering HEIs, employers and policy makers for round table discussions, sharing best practices and complimenting HEIs' efforts in developing the employability skills. The linking agencies will presumably better 'heard' by all the stakeholders as they do not have vested interests with any of the sides. Nevertheless this study is a very preliminary attempt in this direction. It has its own limitations, and for further exploration more research are needed.

Furthermore, in terms of *future research*, there is still need for more studies, especially systematic, longitudinal and comparative ones on the transition of international graduates to the world of work. Below is a list of recommendations for further research:

- While the analyzed studies focused on recent graduates, it would be interesting to track their careers at a later stage, e.g. five years after graduation. This will reveal more clearly where the international graduates eventually end up. Also it would be useful to further compare the employment situations of international vs. local graduates.
- As discussed above, employability is more than the ability to gain any employment; it is closely related to early career success. Hence, instead of relying solely on employment rate figures, using an aggregate variable that would include several parameters related to quality of employment might provide a better ground for comparisons (See Hemmer et al., for example).
- Bearing in mind the multifaceted nature of the 'employability' concept, it should also be explored from the point of view of other stakeholders through policy analysis and by investigating the HEIs' strategies of responding to the changing labour market demands (Teichler, 2009).
- Also, the way the employers' beliefs and perceptions about international graduates are shaped need to be further studied in order to be able to affect them (Cai, 2012b).
- Finally, in future studies on international graduates' career paths the disciplinary background differences need to be addressed in more detail – beyond the hard/soft disciplinary divide (Pavlin, 2010).

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