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How Social Practice Experiences Shape College Students' Employability: Evidence from a Case Study in Chongqing, China

Weiguang Li, Tubagus Achmad Darodjat

Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep, 10120, Bangkok, Thailand

KEYWORDS**ABSTRACT***Graduate employability;**Social practice;**Higher education management;**Social capital;**Chongqing Case Study;*

This study examines how social practice experience shapes the employability of college students through a qualitative case study conducted in Chongqing, China. Although practical education has been widely promoted, existing research often indicates whether practice is beneficial rather than explaining how it helps improve employability. This study proposes a three mechanism framework consisting of human capital development, identity and psychological resource formation, and social capital accumulation, guided by the perspectives of experiential learning and graduate capital. The interview evidence explained in conjunction with publicly available employment indicators suggests that when students engage in real tasks, receive feedback, reflect on career expectations, and gain access to employment related networks, their employability becomes apparent. The research findings indicate that practice serves as both a learning environment and an opportunity interface, linking higher education with labor market access. This study contributes to the study of employability by providing mechanism oriented explanations based on non coastal Chinese backgrounds, and provides insights for higher education management, including structured reflection, employment quality assurance, and practice design based on partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

The employability of graduates has become a core focus of global higher education, as people increasingly expect universities to not only provide subject knowledge, but also transferable skills and workplace preparation to help students adapt to the rapidly changing labor market. The commonly accepted definition of employability in higher education describes it as a series of achievements - skills, understanding, and personal attributes - that increase the likelihood of graduates finding employment and succeeding in their chosen careers. Importantly, employability is not a single skill, but a multidimensional ability that includes human capital (such as skills and knowledge), psychosocial resources (such as adaptability and self-efficacy), and the ability to navigate opportunities. This complexity explains why many institutions are shifting towards learning designs that go beyond classroom teaching, immersing students in real-world environments where they can practice, reflect, and transform learning into job-related abilities.

Among these methods, 'social practice experience' (such as internships, volunteer service, community engagement, field research, and practice based projects) is often seen as a practical pathway for developing employability. These experiences connect students with practical tasks, social networks, and workplace norms. In a broader international literature, Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is often linked to the development of employability skills, although challenges and quality gaps in implementation remain widespread. There is evidence to suggest that well-designed internships can enhance communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and professional awareness - skills that employers typically expect graduates to possess. Similarly, research has found that service learning and community experience have a positive impact on students' personal development and social abilities, which are closely related to employment outcomes such as self insight, social understanding, and interpersonal communication skills. However, the empirical question is

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: cdhmxmc@gmail.com

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not just whether these practices are "effective", but how they operate - through what development mechanisms and under what conditions.

In theory, experiential learning provides a powerful perspective for understanding how social practice shapes employability. The experiential learning theory emphasizes that learning is generated through the transformation of experience, typically involving concrete experiences, reflective observations, conceptualization, and active experimentation, rather than just passive acceptance of knowledge. When students participate in real social practice, they test classroom ideas, receive feedback from real stakeholders, and have a more realistic understanding of work and society. At the same time, research on employability conceptualizes employability as a psychological, social, and adaptive structure: an individual's ability to respond to changes in the labor market, mobilize resources, and align with opportunities. From this perspective, social practice not only influences employability by improving "hard" and "soft" skills, but also shapes identity, confidence, and networks related to professions.

Despite these advances, there are still several gaps in existing research that are particularly relevant to academic education management. Firstly, many studies rely on surveys or short-term evaluations that can demonstrate associations but often provide limited insights into the process, such as what students actually do in practice, what they learn from key events, and the role of reflection and institutional support. Secondly, although WIL and internship research are growing, the quality and outcomes of these practices vary depending on the environment, curriculum design, and local labor market conditions. Thirdly, most of the evidence regarding employability comes from Western higher education backgrounds, and the transferability of these models to other systems (especially large-scale policy driven systems) requires more context sensitive research.

This study addresses these gaps through a qualitative case study of Chongqing, China, a region with a large population of higher education and a continuously developing regional economy. Chongqing provides a meaningful case for educational management research, as it represents a non coastal development background where universities, local industries, and public sector organizations jointly shape students' practical opportunities and employment transformation. By focusing on students' life experiences

and development trajectories, this case study aims to go beyond "computational participation" and provide a mechanism centered explanation for the formation of employability.

This study is guided by the following questions and aims to provide practical insights for universities seeking to design higher quality social practice projects by providing rich background evidence from China, contributing to the international debate on employability:

What types of social practice experiences do Chongqing students engage in, and how are these experiences organized and supported?

2. Through which learning processes (such as skill acquisition, reflection, feedback, and identity formation) do these experiences affect abilities related to employability?

3. What background factors (such as institutional design, internet access, and perceived labor market constraints) promote or limit the development of employability in social practice?

By answering these questions, this study aims to enrich the evidence base on employability in the Chinese context and contribute to the ongoing global discussion on the design of employability in higher education.

1.Literature review and theoretical framework

1.1.Graduates' employability: a multidimensional perspective

Graduate employability has been widely discussed in higher education research, but it remains a controversial concept. Scholars no longer equate employability solely with the outcome of obtaining a job, but increasingly conceptualize it as a set of abilities that enable graduates to obtain, maintain, and develop employment in a constantly changing labor market environment[1]. This viewpoint emphasizes that employability is a result of the development of higher education.

In addition to the definition based on skills, employability is also understood as a psychological and social structure. [Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth conceptualized employability as including professional identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital, emphasizing the ability of graduates to navigate career transitions. Similarly, Tomlinson proposed the "Graduate Capital" framework, which views employability as the accumulation and

mobilization of various forms of capital - human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological. This approach is particularly valuable for context sensitive research as it acknowledges that employability is not only influenced by individual attributes, but also by institutional structures and local opportunity patterns.

Therefore, in this study, employability is understood as a multidimensional skill that includes knowledge and technical skills, adaptability and confidence, career identity, and social networks related to employment.

1.2.Social Practice Experience and Employment Ability Development

Social practice experience, such as internships, community participation, volunteer work, and practice based projects, is widely regarded as an important way to cultivate employability. International research on Work Integrated Learning (WIL) suggests that these practical experiences can enhance skills related to employability, although their outcomes largely depend on factors such as curriculum design, supervision, and opportunities for reflection (Jackson, 2015). Empirical research on higher education in China also emphasizes how institutional arrangements and support structures affect the learning outcomes of students who participate in internships and practical activities (Li, Clotey,&McCombs, 2020).

Service learning and community practice are also related to positive employment outcomes. Meta analysis suggests that these experiences have beneficial effects on students' personal, social, and cognitive development, which are closely related to employability (Yorio&Ye, 2012; Celio et al., 2011). Recent research on Chinese university students further suggests that community service learning can enhance career adaptability and social responsibility (Pong et al., 2023).

Despite these findings, most literature focuses on whether social practice is beneficial and has limited understanding of how these experiences can be transformed into employability. Specifically, the mechanisms for promoting skill development, identity formation, and access to job-related resources through practice have not been fully explored, especially in the context of China.

1.3.Theoretical Framework

To address these gaps, this study combines experiential

learning theory [Kolb, 1984] with a capital based perspective on employability. The experiential learning theory explains how specific experiences can be combined with reflection and application to promote learning and skill development. From a capital based perspective, it is further believed that employability is caused by the accumulation of human, psychological, identity, and social capital[2].

Based on these theoretical foundations, this study proposes that social practice experience shapes employability through three interrelated mechanisms:Skill and knowledge development;Professional identity and psychological resource formation;Accumulate social capital through network expansion.

This framework guides the design and analysis of case studies in Chongqing.

2.Method

2.1.Research design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore how social practice experience shapes the employability of college students. The case study method is suitable for this study as it focuses on answering the questions of "how" and "why" and attempts to provide a deep, context sensitive understanding of complex social and educational processes, rather than aiming to obtain statistically universal findings. This case study is essentially exploratory and explanatory, aimed at investigating students' life experiences in social practice and how these experiences contribute to the development of employability related abilities[3].

2.2.Case selection: Chongqing, China

There are three main reasons why Chongqing was chosen as the research site. Firstly, as a major city in western China, Chongqing represents a non coastal higher education background and is underrepresented in international employment capacity research. Secondly, Chongqing has numerous higher education institutions closely related to manufacturing, service, and public sector organizations, providing students with various social practice opportunities. Thirdly, the region is facing enormous employment pressure and policy driven practical education, which provides an ideal background for studying the role of social practice in the development of employment capacity.

2.3.Participants and Sampling

Participants are selected through purposive sampling, which is a common technique in qualitative research for identifying informative cases. The sample includes undergraduate and graduate students who have participated in structured social practice activities, as well as a small number of university staff who have participated in organizing or supervising such activities.

The criteria for selecting student participants are as follows:
 -Participate in at least one form of structured social practice (such as internships, community service, or practice based projects).
 -I am studying at a university in Chongqing.
 -Willing to reflect on one's own learning and career development experiences.

2.4.Data Collection: Semi structured Interviews

The data is mainly collected through semi-structured interviews, which allows participants to elaborate on their experiences and enables researchers to explore key themes related to employability development. The interview questions mainly focus on:

- The nature and organization of social practice activities.
- Perceived learning outcomes and challenges.
- Reflection on skill development, professional identity, and professional consciousness.
- Interaction with supervisors, colleagues, and external stakeholders.

Each interview lasts about 40-60 minutes and is conducted with informed consent. The interview was recorded and transcribed word for word for analysis.

3.5 Ethical considerations and integrity

According to institutional requirements, the study has obtained ethical approval. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Using pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

To enhance credibility, the study employed strategies such as carefully recording and analyzing decisions, and using direct citations to support explanations[4].

3.Method

Test items	Sub-Themes (Child Nodes)	Description / Indicators
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Human Capital Development	Skill acquisition	Communication, teamwork, problem-solving, technical skills
	Work-related knowledge	Understanding workplace norms, organisational processes
	Learning through feedback	Supervisor comments, performance evaluation
Identity & Psychological Development	Professional identity	Career clarity, sense of professional role
	Self-efficacy & confidence	Increased confidence in work tasks and job search
	Adaptability	Coping with uncertainty, adjusting to new environments
Social Capital Accumulation	Network expansion	Contacts with supervisors, colleagues, community members
	Access to information	Career advice, job-related information
	Opportunity linkage	Internships, recommendations, employment leads

Table.1.Coding Framework for Employability Development Mechanisms

Source: The coding is directly sourced from the literature [Fugate et al., 2004; Tomlinson, 2017; Kolb, 1984]

4.Survey results: Chongqing cultivates employability through social practice

4.1.Background: The Supply Pressure of Graduate Students and the Expansion of Higher Education in Chongqing

The continuously expanding participation in higher education and the growing output of graduates in Chongqing have created a structural environment, and employability has become a prominent issue. According to the Chongqing Statistical Bulletin (2023), there are 72 higher education institutions in the city with 299400 undergraduate/university

graduates and 27700 graduate students. These numbers reflect a steady increase in the number of graduates entering the labor market.

The following year, the Chongqing Statistical Bulletin (2024) reported on 73 higher education institutions, with the number of undergraduate/university graduates increasing to 317000 and the number of graduate students increasing to 30100. These numbers highlight the continuous expansion of graduation production, which may intensify competition for entry-level positions and emphasize the increasing importance of practice based employability development.

The labor market indicators for 2024 indicate that although the overall employment environment remains stable, it still faces enormous pressure. Official statistics show that the urban survey unemployment rate is 5.3%, with 719000 new urban job opportunities added in 2024. In addition, the Chongqing Municipal Government emphasizes targeted support for graduates and youth employment, including measures to promote graduates' employment and entrepreneurship throughout the city.

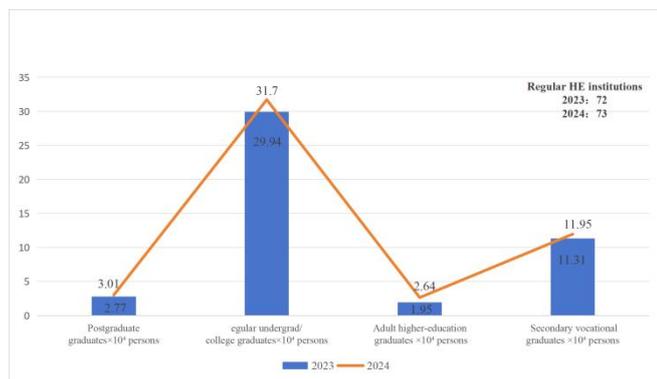


Fig.1.Chongqing Education Output (2023–2024, official statistics)

4.2.Institutional Evidence of Chongqing Graduates' Employment Quality Report (Triangle Dataset)

To supplement urban level statistical data, institutional level evidence can provide valuable insights into how graduates evaluate their employment outcomes and readiness in practice oriented higher education. The latest "2024 Annual Report on Graduate Employment Quality" from Chongqing University of Economics and Business provides a specific dataset for triangulation, including survey indicators for graduates and employers, as well as job search challenges.

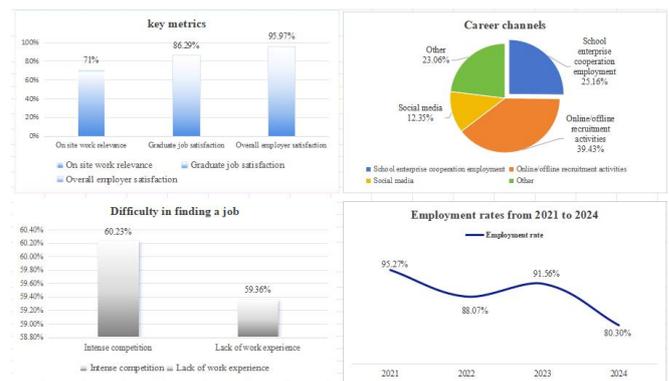


Fig.2.Report on the Employment Quality of Graduates in Chongqing

The report shows a significant decline in employment rates in 2024, indicating fluctuations and challenges in the employment outcomes of graduates from the institution.

4.3.Mechanism based Discovery Consistent with Theoretical Framework

Participants described how social practices such as internships, volunteer services, and community projects expose them to real-world tasks and performance expectations[5]. Through repeated practice and feedback, students reported progress in communication, coordination, problem-solving, and task execution skills, which are often considered crucial for employability. This approach conforms to the logic of experiential learning: when students reflect on task outcomes and adjust their behavior, specific experiences and feedback become learning resources. Evidence from NVivo code, such as skill acquisition, job norm awareness, and feedback driven learning, suggests that students often mention improvements in job-related skills, such as communication and problem-solving. For example, a participant stated, "I coordinated a community project, received feedback from my supervisor on my time management, and improved my task execution ability in the next stage." However, there were some exceptions where participants described low-quality internship experiences, repetitive tasks, and a lack of meaningful feedback, resulting in minimal learning outcomes. This highlights the importance of high-quality, structured social practice in cultivating employability. Based on the current situation in Chongqing, the data on "lack of work experience" in institutional reports (59.36%) is consistent with students' understanding that experience is the main obstacle to obtaining a job, emphasizing the importance of practical

skills development in this socio-economic context. Participating in structured social practice can help students bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world employment skills, making this pathway systemically relevant.

Students often describe social practice as a 'reality check', helping them clarify their career preferences, understand role expectations, and build confidence in unfamiliar environments. Some participants reported that practice reduced occupational ambiguity and improved self-efficacy, while others experienced a discrepancy between expectations and reality and needed to adjust their strategies to adapt. Evidence from NVivo code, such as clarity of professional identity, self-efficacy/confidence, and adaptability under constraints, indicates that many students reported clearer career goals after social practice experiences. A participant shared, "During my internship, I realized that I enjoy marketing, which I had never considered before. After receiving positive feedback from my supervisor, I feel more confident about working in this field." In contrast, some students found their experiences frustrating. One participant mentioned, 'I thought I would like accounting, but these tasks are repetitive and I don't see how they relate to my future career,' which illustrates how practice can clarify career paths or lead to career reassessment. The triangulation of public data such as graduate job satisfaction (86.29%) and main job relevance (71%) shows that in Chongqing's practice oriented environment, career fit and satisfaction are measurable and significant, further confirming that practice based experience contributes to career clarity and confidence.

Social practice also expands students' weak connections and bridge networks, involving supervisors, colleagues, and community stakeholders, providing avenues for obtaining career information, recommendations, and visibility of opportunities. Many participants reported that mentors provided advice on the recruitment process, or their internship environment became a gateway for interviews and job opportunities. Evidence of NVivo code, such as network extensions, access to job information, and opportunity links/recommendations, suggests that students have established valuable professional networks in social practice. Recruitment activities (39.43%) and campus enterprise cooperation (25.16%) indicate that institutional and organizational interfaces are key entry points for employment opportunities[6]. This supports the concept of

social capital, where interpersonal and mentor relationships can promote career opportunities. Although the data suggests that these channels have influence, qualitative interviews help explain the underlying mechanisms driving these connections.

4.4. Discussion

The research results should first be understood from the structural conditions of the rapidly increasing supply of graduates in Chongqing, which intensifies early career competition and enhances the perceived value of practice based ability development. Official statistics show an increase in higher education institutions and the number of graduates, while institutional evidence suggests that lack of experience and competition are the main barriers to employment. In this environment, social practice not only becomes an educational activity, but also a transitional mechanism connecting education and work.

Only when practice provides real tasks and structured feedback can human capital gains be achieved, and the results show that participation alone does not generate employability; On the contrary, skill development occurs when students participate in meaningful tasks and receive evaluation feedback that allows for iterative improvement. This supports the explanation of the learning process of practice: skills related to employability are developed through performance correction and internalization of work norms rather than exposure. The actual meaning is that despite formal participation, poorly structured resettlement may result in minimal development returns.

Social practice helps to improve employability, enabling students to test their expectations based on real career environments and build clearer career self understanding. Through reflection on success, difficulties, and mismatches, students develop confidence, adaptability, and career clarity. These psychological resources help explain why subjective job fit and satisfaction remain the core of employment outcomes in practice oriented systems[7].

Overall, these findings support a comprehensive explanation: human capital promotes performance, psychological capital maintains career agency, and social capital promotes opportunity acquisition. The weaknesses of any approach will limit the improvement of employability, which means that effective practice design must simultaneously coordinate task structure, reflection, and external

participation.

Conclusion

This study suggests that social practice shapes the employability of college students through a multi-mechanism process rather than a single skill effect. In the context of Chongqing, employment ability is developed through the following ways: (1) forming ability through real task participation, (2) forming identity and confidence through reflective experience, and (3) obtaining opportunities through network expansion. Therefore, this study redefines social practice as a structured transitional process that links higher education participation with labor market entry.

6.2. Impact on Higher Education Management

The research findings indicate that universities should prioritize the quality of practice over the quantity of participation by defining competency goals, embedding feedback cycles, and formalizing reflective learning. In addition, institutions should manage practice as a coordinated system involving supervisors, students, and external organizations, ensuring that internships bring both learning and opportunities [8]. Finally, a fair distribution mechanism is necessary so that employment benefits are not limited to students with previous advantages.

6.3. Policy implications

At the policy level, the employment plan for graduates should go beyond the number of employed individuals and include quality indicators such as mentor intensity and learning outcomes. Regional coordination between universities and employers can stabilize practical channels, while youth employment policies should combine ability development with recruitment channels to address barriers related to experience.

Limitations and Future Research

This study provides an analytical summary explanation, but still relates to the institutional and labor market environment in Chongqing. The dependence on participants' perceptions introduces subjectivity, and triangulated institutional data contextualizes causal relationships rather than verifying them. Therefore, the research results explain the mechanism, but cannot estimate the size of the effect or the strength of

causality.

Future research should compare regions with different opportunity structures, use mixed methods to quantify mechanism relationships, and develop measurable quality indicators for practice. Vertical design will further elucidate how employability capital accumulates in multiple practical experiences and early stages of career development.

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