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**I want to be employable!**  
**Constructions of employability from university students and  
recent graduates in New Zealand**

A thesis  
submitted partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of  
*Master of Social Sciences in Psychology*  
at  
**The University of Waikato**  
by  
**Chian Yow Kwek**



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

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## **Abstract**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to changes driven by neoliberal ideology, global markets, and innovations in technology, the labour market has become more competitive in most industrialised countries, and people carry more individual responsibility for their employment. When uncertainties in the process of gaining employment increase, young graduates are one particular group that can face greater challenges because they are often considered as “inexperienced”. From the social constructionist approach, this thesis explores how final-year university students and recent graduates in New Zealand understand the contemporary labour market and the concept of employability from their everyday life experiences.

Narratives were collected from four participants using two semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation exercises. The narratives and images were interpreted from a case-study approach using psycho-societal perspectives. This thesis demonstrates how participants’ experiences of family, culture, and societal constraints influence how they construct their understandings of the social world and the ways to respond to it. As the four participants are all from middle-class backgrounds, they have an unquestioned desire to participate in higher education in preparation for employment. They also express anxiety towards their unknown career future. When securing a job is an uncertain journey, there are two main challenges in becoming employable: (1) the constant changes in meeting the demands of employability, and (2) the need to fulfil multiple social expectations, especially those from employers. As a result, developing a good quality support network for graduates while dealing with the anxiety raised by job-hunting is vital. The network needs to extend beyond the immediate social sphere of the individuals concerned to include governments, employers, and wider social groups. In order to raise employers’ awareness, governments should make policies and provide subsidies, accordingly, shifting the responsibility of gaining employment from solely at an individual to a collective level.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Paid employment is central to meeting personal economic needs, but also societal needs and expectations. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the spread of globalisation and neoliberalism around the world altering the nature of work. In many industrialised countries, labour markets have become more competitive as flexible and casualised employment opportunities have increased whereas secure and stable employment options decrease. As such, many workers can no longer expect that a particular job will offer a secure pathway to a stable life (Standing, 2012, 2013). At the same time, success in the labour market is increasingly seen solely as an individual responsibility and concern (Foster, 2017; 2014; 2008; Prilleltensky & Stead, 2011; Sutton, 2015). As a result, people are under increasing pressure to become employable. One social group that is particularly influenced by neoliberal views of employment are graduates from tertiary institutions, who anticipate translating their educational knowledge into skills and abilities for the current neoliberal workforce.

There is some research exploring the perspectives of students or graduates in higher education on employability, in terms of how they define it and how to obtain the skills and ability that they consider are important for employment (S. P. Campbell, Fuller, & Patrick, 2005; Huang, Turner, & Chen, 2014; Z. Li, 2013; McAlpine, Amundsen, & Turner, 2013; McAlpine & Emmioglu, 2015; Read & Peter, 2001; Shafie & Nayan, 2010; Tymon, 2013). However, there has been less relevant research conducted in New Zealand. Further exploration is needed to understand the experiences of New Zealand university students in relation to their employability. As such, the purpose of this research is to discover how final-year students (undergraduate and post-graduate qualifications) and recent graduates construct their understanding of employability. The relevant focuses are: the ways participants obtain valuable skills and abilities for employment; how important employability is for them; what struggles and challenges they face while obtaining employability; and how they cope with these difficulties.

The critical literature review around my research topic is presented in this chapter, which contains three major parts: (1) how neoliberal and human capital discourses have impacted on society; (2) the employment issue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and (3) the issues around employability.

## **Keep on Doing Your Best! – Neoliberalism and Unemployment**

Since 1980s, neoliberal ideology has become dominant across many industrialised countries including New Zealand (Nairn, Higgins, & Sligo, 2012; Olssen, 2001). The prevalence of these neoliberal beliefs means that people are increasingly expected to take more personal responsibility for their own economic security (Jessop, 2002), indicating that people are expected to upskill themselves to become a qualified job-seeker. Human capital theory (HCT), which is informed by neoliberalism, claims that individuals need to invest in their personal abilities for employment. Given unemployed people are viewed as lacking a work ethic, unemployment is seen as a form of personal failure, which creates social and economic costs to those who do not seek to make themselves more employable (Beder, 2000; Foster, 2017).

This section explains (1) neoliberalism and HCT; and (2) the impacts of neoliberalism and HCT on the issues surrounding employability and the threat of unemployment.

### **The dominant neoliberalist ideology and human capital theory**

The definition and effects of neoliberalism are widely debated (Jessop, 2002). For this thesis, I concentrate on the core neoliberal ideas surrounding individual responsibility, ‘choice’ and free-market competition. Neoliberalism is a political and economic concept that is based on free-market exchange within both national and international contexts (Jessop, 2002). Neoliberal theory prioritises individual liberty, and claims that this is best preserved by minimising the role of governments, while maximising the responsibility of individuals for their free choices (Beder, 2000; Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2010; Ireland, 2008; Jessop, 2002). Under neoliberalism, ‘free choice’ is largely constructed as choices tied to economic exchange within the market. As a result, individuals are assumed to benefit from having more freedom of choices to earn income and to be a consumer of goods, and services as the primary means to seek to progress their own well-being and fulfilment (Brown et al., 2010; Ireland, 2008). This indicates that individuals are expected to take more responsibility for themselves and for living prosperous lives. Governments who adopt neoliberal ideas, therefore, tend to encourage people to be more entrepreneurial and ambitious in making a living (Brown et al., 2010; Foster,

2017). Accordingly, states, organisations, and individuals are focused on ensuring personal advancement in a free-market context (Standing, 2013).

In neoliberalism, the expectation that employability is achieved solely at the individual level, is underpinned by human capital theory (HCT). This theory emphasises that people can increase their productivity in their jobs by gaining more knowledge, skills, and abilities. Becoming a more productive worker requires a significant and often ongoing investment in education and training which increases one's value to an employer (Heery & Noon, 2017b; Olssen, 2001; Tan, 2014). A key assumption underlying HCT is that individuals all have the same opportunity and free-choice to invest in their human capital (Heery & Noon, 2017b; Tan, 2014). Investment in human capital benefits not only on individuals but also on the economic growth of a nation. Important concepts in education associated with HCT are the idea of meritocracy, and competence-based training and pay systems. For example, personal income should be differentiated according to the competency and productivity that a person owns (Heery & Noon, 2017b; Tan, 2014). However, alternative perspectives emphasise that people in society do not have the same free-choices to decide all aspects of their current lives and future (Bagguley & Hussain, 2016; Diemer, 2007; Read & Peter, 2001). Nevertheless, the key assumption of HCT reinforce the idea that individuals should carry more responsibility for their earnings and the view that individuals have their free-choice to decide how much money they would like to earn.

### **Self-reliance in employment**

In the neoliberal era, developing one's human capital is a priority, and thus people are encouraged to work not simply to fulfil their daily needs, but also to pursue a better life and personal pleasure (Beder, 2000; Foster, 2017); and to contribute to a nation's wealth (Beder, 2000). However, welfare systems have significantly reduced the support to unemployed people (Beder, 2000; Foster, 2017). For example, Foster (2017) argues that the welfare system in the United Kingdom provides little practical assistance to unemployed people. Instead, the system forces unemployed people to accomplish many tasks to meet specified guidelines on "employability" where the measurement of task completion is more important than securing employment. The welfare system therefore reinforces the portrayal of jobless people as being too lazy and unqualified to be employed, and should be

blamed for their situation (Beder, 2000; Foster, 2017). Consequently, unemployment is now no longer framed a structural problem (Foster, 2017), but is considered as a form of personal failure (Foster, 2017; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Unemployed people are typically more stressed and anxious than employed people due to the stigma of unemployment (Paul & Moser, 2009). There is a strong correlation between unemployment and psychological distress (Paul & Moser, 2009). Furthermore, when compared with unemployed adults, there are more negative effects on the mental health of jobless graduates (Paul & Moser, 2009). Those who have achieved relatively higher levels of education but are underemployed often also suffer feelings of frustration and despair (Standing, 2013). Given this situation and from a concern of well-being, finding a placement in labour markets in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is considered to be much more vital than in the past.

### **It is Harder to Get a Job! – Employment Issues**

This section explains the contemporary employment and labour market situation globally, with the focus on the issue in New Zealand and China as these two contexts are relevant to my research.

#### **Employment after globalisation**

In the era of globalised economics, the global market is strongly linked with “capital market liberalization” (Standing, 2012, p. 591), which means that business sectors tend to shift their factories or local branches to wherever costs are lower in order to produce more profits (Morris, 2006; OECD, 2017; Standing, 2012). Meanwhile, neoliberal governments have less power to protect local markets from international market competition (Brown et al., 2010). Many governments make policies to ensure that their nations are appealing to “capital and the rich” (Standing, 2012, p. 591), such as “lower corporation taxes, lower employer contributions for employee social security, and a squeeze on social spending due to a perceived need for balanced public budgets” (Standing, 2012, p. 592). These changes in global and local economies have resulted in downward pressure on wages, increased job insecurity and fewer employee protections for many workers. As a result, employers generally tend to hold more power over employees.

The rapid changes in digital communications technology have further contributed to the different management of organisations and the fast-speed of

knowledge-orientated economic systems (Brown et al., 2010; Piercy & Steele, 2016). For example, machines can now not only produce many products in factories, but also replace jobs in the services sector. Replacing workers with robots and artificial intelligence can both provide a much lower cost for a company (OECD, 2017). Thus, there is an increasing number of tasks traditionally performed by human beings replaced by automated systems (OECD, 2017; Piercy & Steele, 2016; Sutton, 2015). This situation means that many jobs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have changed from labour-based to knowledge-based (Brown et al., 2010). As a result, the labour market has two poles, jobs that involve knowledge-work with high-wages at one end, and physical-work with low-wages at the other (OECD, 2017). Essentially, knowledge and information have become vital elements of success in a neoliberal economy (Brown et al., 2010; Whitham, 2012). Therefore, more employers prefer to hire knowledge-skilled workers so as to make profit efficiently. This economic transformation in the nature of work can be seen within both New Zealand and China.

Neoliberal ideology was introduced to New Zealand/Aōtearōa in 1984, and New Zealand/Aōtearōa underwent major changes in policies, economics, and society after that. The rapid emergence of neoliberal policies led to a growing expectation for New Zealanders to become more self-reliant in the labour market. Providing long-term full-time employment was no longer the goal of the government. Many jobs were exported to other countries (such as manufacturing) or reserved for seasonal foreign workers (such as agriculture) (Nairn et al., 2012). Consequently, there has been a growth and fragmentation of educational programmes and the types of work in labour markets (Higgins & Nairn, 2006). Tertiary education, especially university, has been promoted as the pathway to avoid the lower-paid and insecure jobs (Nairn et al., 2012). Therefore, young people are encouraged to participate in tertiary education as a preparation for a better type of job. However, support from the government decreased in the 1990s and young people are now expected to become “job-ready” through the utilisation of their parents’ and personal resources (such as student loans) (Higgins & Nairn, 2006).

Neoliberal ideology also impacts on China. After 1980, which is considered to be the start of the post-Mao era<sup>1</sup>, the Chinese government significantly reduced social welfare, proposed that salaries are directly reflected by how skilled and productive workers are, and gave freedom to firms to choose the best-qualified employees (Davis, 1992). These economic and policy changes marked the beginning of a new phase of China where business interests dominate over the interests of workers, and this illustrates the impact of neoliberal thinking on the Chinese labour market (World Bank, 2007). Furthermore, China integrated into the global market by adopting many Western theories and rules, which is more noticeable after China gained its accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) membership in 2001. Job-candidates who have experience in Western countries became the preference for employers in big cities. However, more recently there has been a debate on whether a degree from overseas still has its advantages (Hao & Welch, 2012). Nevertheless, as with New Zealand, the contemporary Chinese labour market is much more competitive for workers trying to secure a knowledge-based job in cities and this situation increases social inequality (Morris, 2006).

### **The increased uncertainty in employment**

In a knowledge economy era, people are encouraged to possess a degree, gain soft skills, and have work experience to become appealing job-candidates (Z. Li, 2013; Omar, Manaf, Mohd, Kassim, & Aziz, 2012; Piercy & Steele, 2016; Tymon, 2013). As Table 1 shows, participation in tertiary education has seen noticeable growth in all regions around the world. The rate of tertiary education participation in North America and Western Europe; Central and Eastern Europe; Latin America and the Caribbean; and East Asia and Pacific, has increased at least 30% in the period between 1980 and 2015. However, because of the rapid changes in global job markets, it is a challenge to know what qualifications and skills suit the rapid changing needs of the demand side (OECD, 2017; Piercy & Steele, 2016). Further, there are fewer entry-level jobs available in the job markets (Foster, 2017). Therefore, many graduates have difficulties in gaining employment or utilising their qualifications in their jobs (Z. Li, 2013; OECD, 2015, 2017; OECD, ILO, IBRD, & IMF, 2016; Rae, 2007; Scarpetta et al., 2012). Among all ages, young graduates

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<sup>1</sup> The post-Mao era refers to the time after the communist leader Mao Zedong's death in 1976, which saw a period at Chinese economic reform.

suffer more anger and frustration in relation to employment issues (Standing, 2013). This is because they are much encouraged to pursue more and more education or training to find a decent job so as to live a decent life, and they have to do so in an environment of increasingly high fees and uncertainty (Brown et al., 2010; Standing, 2012).

*Table 1 Gross tertiary participation ratio by world region: 1980, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015*

	1980	2000	2005	2010	2015
	%	%	%	%	%
World	12.4	19.0	24.2	29.3	35.6
North America and Western Europe	38.4	60.1	69.9	77.5	76.4
Central and Eastern Europe	30.4	43.0	58.7	69.1	77.5
Latin America and the Caribbean	13.1	22.3	30.5	40.3	46.3
East Asia and the Pacific	5.3	15.4	23.3	27.7	40.2
Central Asia	24.2	22.3	27.0	24.9	26.0
South and West Asia	4.5	8.8	10.3	17.3	24.9
Arab States	9.9	18.5	22.1	25.3	31.2
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.8	4.3	5.8	7.4	8.5

Source: Table prepared by the author, based on the data from UNESCO (2016)

There are many reasons why graduates can end up being unemployed or underemployed. Firstly, graduates usually have less work experience (Morris, 2006). Secondly, there are fewer decent jobs – jobs that provide living wages and long-term job security – in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than in the past (Foster, 2017; Morris, 2006; Standing, 2012, 2013). Thirdly, some graduates are not prepared to undervalue their qualifications or status by accepting positions that are irrelevant to or beneath their degrees (Morris, 2006; Scarpetta et al., 2012). Long-term unemployment can be particularly difficult and challenging for young job-seekers who have less support from family and society (Morris, 2006). In turn, there are an increasing number of graduates becoming involved in temporary jobs where working conditions are normally unstable and short-term (Morris, 2006; Scarpetta et al., 2012). Many graduates see such jobs as pathways to more established careers, but this does not always occur (I. Campbell & Price, 2016; Morris, 2006; Scarpetta et al., 2012).

In order to reduce the high rate of unemployment or underemployment, a 2016 co-edited report by four organisations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation



Development (OECD), International Labour Organisation (ILO), World Bank (IBRD), & International Monetary Fund (IMF)) claims that there is a need for employers and governments to work together to predict future demands of employability so that job-seekers can understand how to prepare themselves for employment. In addition, the OECD (2015; 2016) reports that it is essential for industrialised countries to put effort into upgrading the potential skills of young people. However, as the skills demand in labour markets changes frequently, it is a challenge to predict precisely what kinds of skills and abilities organisations will be needed in the future (OECD et al., 2016; Sutton, 2015).

The way that organisations respond to the fast-changing economic patterns can be reflected on a new form of employment relationship in 21<sup>st</sup> century – precariousness, which refers to work that lacks predictability or security (I. Campbell & Price, 2016). Contemporary business sectors tend to seek more flexibility and lower risks in management (such as the disagreement with workers) (Morris, 2006; Sutton, 2015). As such, workers' collective bargaining power is undermined. Further, the number of long-term, full-time jobs has gradually replaced by short-term contract jobs. In addition, today's workers are less likely to be paid up members of unions, so are less likely to be able to negotiate the terms of their employment (Morris, 2006; Sutton, 2015).

Precarious employment relationship often has four features: (1) limited social and regulatory protections, (2) low and insecure wages, (3) low workplace commitment by employee, and (4) a high level of employers control over the hours of work, payment, and working conditions (I. Campbell & Price, 2016; Piercy & Steele, 2016). Precariousness in employment relationship occurs in many “casual, short-time or temporary jobs” (Standing, 2012, p. 590), which are common in the service sector (Piercy & Steele, 2016). Students often engage in precarious jobs as a way to gain incomes, experiences, and skills, also, as stepping stones towards proper jobs (Besen-Cassino, 2013; I. Campbell & Price, 2016; Morris, 2006; Scarpetta et al., 2012; Standing, 2013). However, precarious workers normally earn less, and suffer various challenges, resulting in a lower quality of life (I. Campbell & Price, 2016; 2013; Foster, 2017; Standing, 2013). They also have limited occupational identity as both their workplaces and work roles change frequently

(Piercy & Steele, 2016; Standing, 2012, 2013). In short, precarity affects the material and mental welfare of workers.

### **Make Yourself Employable! – Employment and Employability**

Employment essentially has become a journey and process, instead of a destination in the 21st century (Nairn et al., 2012; Sutton, 2015; Wyn, 2007). As part of this journey, individuals are expected to determine what employability is by themselves, and what they need to do to gain more employability in a particular context. According to Kraus and Vonken (2009), “being employable is made a precondition for employment while in turn employment is taken as the indicator for employability and is also often seen as the precondition for its maintenance (p. 148)”. Thus, employment and employability are related to each other in a way that creates a contradiction. This section explains what employability is, why employability is important from different socio-economic viewpoints, how to gain employability through higher education, and the impacts of the one-sided expectations of developing employability on people and society.

#### **What is employability?**

Employability can be defined as the knowledge, skills, abilities (KSAs), and personal attributes that allow an individual to be hired and remain employed (Andrews & Higson, 2008; 2017a; Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Kaiser, 2013; Kraus & Vonken, 2009; Rae, 2007; 2016). The kinds of KSAs and personal attributes involved in employability can vary depending on how it is related to different occupations, cultures, time frames, and stages of job-seeking (OECD, 2015; OECD et al., 2016; Sutton, 2015). This thesis focuses on employability in the context of university graduates as first-time job-seekers.

Scholars have listed a number of desirable skills for general employability: literacy; numeracy; punctuality; the ability to work in teams, problem-solve; and good personality characteristics such as honesty, hard work, discipline, and adaptability (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Dewar, 2013; Haig, 2010; Hogan et al., 2013; Ju, Zhang, & Pacha, 2012; Lakes, 2012; OECD et al., 2016; 2016). Two abilities that have been considered as particularly advantageous in the era of globalisation and internationalisation are: (1) the ability to speak another language (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Shafie & Nayan, 2010) and (2) the ability to work

collectively with people from different nations or cultures (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Nowlan, 2016). Lastly, due to the rapid changes in the global labour market, it is beneficial to develop two areas of capability: (1) combined higher-level cognitive, social, and emotional abilities, such as creativity and critical thinking (OECD, 2015; UNESCO, 2012); and (2) transferable skills, such as personal and social skills (OECD et al., 2016).

### **How important is employability?**

Whether employability matters depends on different perspectives and contexts. In this thesis, the viewpoints of the State, employers, and graduates are presented. From the State's perspective, employability is a key factor that determines whether a person can find a job, adapt to the future needs in labour market (OECD, 2015), contribute to the nation's economic wealth (Beder, 2000; Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006), or benefit to the nation's "economic competitiveness in a global context" (Cranmer, 2006, p. 170).

From the employers' perspective, candidates' presentation of employability tends to be a decisive factor in personnel selection (Hogan et al., 2013). The "right person" in personnel selection needs to fit in a number of ways, for example, the person needs to be right for the job (position-job fit), the organisation (person-organisation fit), and other potential work environment factors (person-environment fit) (Gatewood, Feild, & Barrick, 2011). An ideal candidate is likely to have a higher commitment to the company, perform his or her best on the job, and positively contribute to the organisation (Gatewood et al., 2011; Hogan et al., 2013). Some tools and techniques of personnel selection are designed to reduce interviewers' stereotypes about certain identities (Gatewood et al., 2011). Nonetheless, it is difficult to completely remove bias and employers will usually still have some prejudgments – in terms of race, gender and age, or the level of disability, the rank or reputation of candidates' graduated universities, or the candidates' school grades (Hogan et al., 2013; Morris, 2006; Tymon, 2013).

Many middle-class young people choose to participate in higher education as preparation for their employment (Z. Li, 2013). Due to the emphasis placed on employability, and services offered, university students, particularly graduates, come to understand the importance of employability through the assistance from

on-campus career counsellors or the discussion of potential career pathways by lecturers and university promotional materials (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Tymon, 2013). Students learn to value employability because they assume it will assist them to get a job (Tymon, 2013), which is one of the key expectations of becoming an adult (Wade & Dixon, 2006). Most young graduates see having sufficient employability as evidence of their success in being able to “earn a liveable wage” (Lakes, 2012, p. 14), as well as improve their “quality of employment” to get “better pay” (Tymon, 2013, p. 852). However, students or graduates from different cultural, social, and societal backgrounds may have different understanding of “sufficient” employability for getting a job.

### **How employability can be gained through higher education?**

As mentioned in previous sections, many employers now prefer to hire knowledge-skilled workers. Further, in many cases, possessing a degree or a diploma tends to have a positive relationship with getting a better-paid job (OECD, 2015; Scarpetta et al., 2012). Even though there are many different ways to do so, participating in education or training is the most common method of increasing employability (Lynch, 1993; OECD, 2015; OECD et al., 2016). As a result, tertiary education – especially the programmes provided by universities – tends to play a vital role in neoliberal employment preparation (Lakes, 2012; Lynch, 1993; Scarpetta et al., 2012). Moreover, there is increasing emphasis on students gaining work-related capabilities before stepping into job markets alongside academic knowledge.

Higher educational institutions are now expected to establish employability in the form of soft skills that can be applied to a wide range of possible jobs. These soft skills include presentation skills, written and oral communications skills, ability to teamwork and problem solve, and critical thinking (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Tymon, 2013). Work-based learning programmes can enhance tertiary students’ employability (Andrews & Higson, 2008; OECD, 2015; OECD et al., 2016; Rae, 2007; Scarpetta et al., 2012), by engaging students in workplace practice scenarios, where they are assumed to learn about work ethics, presenting oneself appropriately, and the experience of being under supervision (Andrews & Higson, 2008; OECD, 2015). Although work-based learning programmes are supposed to be organised between educational institutions and employers’ and employees’ organisations (OECD, 2015; OECD et al., 2016), organisations tend to be more reluctant to invest

money in training graduates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (OECD, 2015; Tymon, 2013). Apart from formal learning, participating in “student-driven activities” (Tymon, 2013, p. 851) while studying – such as voluntary work or being part of a sports team – is also encouraged to develop students’ employability. However, the detailed correlation between these activities and employability has not yet been well explored (Tymon, 2013).

As globalisation has increased international travel and trade connections between countries and the migration of workers, people who have cultural competency or are able to speak another language will be seen as having an employability advantage (Brown et al., 2010; Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Haig, 2010; Z. Li, 2013; Nairn et al., 2012; Sutton, 2015). Apart from developing general employability, many universities also provide opportunities to increase students’ cultural competency. There are many ways to gain cultural competency, including traveling abroad, being an international volunteer or intern, and overseas working holidays. Studying in another country is also an important means for people to improve their employability (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Z. Li, 2013; Nowlan, 2016; Shafie & Nayan, 2010). Accordingly, an increased number of students study overseas before stepping into labour markets (Crossman & Clarke, 2010).

To further assist students in securing a job, most universities have career centres, also known as career development centre, career and employability service, career office, and so on. Centres offer a range of service to help student prepare for their employment, such as career exploration, CV and cover letter writing, job interview preparation, or internship and job vacancies applications (McKay, 2016). Centres may also frame students’ perspectives on what they need to develop to be employable. However, there is little research relating to how messages about the services or programmes provided by career centres impact on the ways students may enhance their employability. Nevertheless, research has shown that university students generally feel pressured to participate in activities beyond the scope of their university study during their free-time to gain other valuable skills for future employment, such as voluntary work (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Z. Li, 2013; Tymon, 2013), or engaging in part-time jobs (I. Campbell & Price, 2016). Consequently, students are often balancing many demands on their time between future-employment preparation and personal-interest cultivations.

### **How pursuing employability impacts on society?**

The trend toward gaining qualifications and training for sufficient employability has financial, emotional and social implications for young people, the educational sector, and society. For example, since holding a degree has become necessary before applying for many jobs, younger people now tend to spend more time in the educational system and delay their adulthood (Lynch, 1993; Morris, 2006; Scarpetta et al., 2012). Personal and financial investment in education can therefore be high. As such, people from disadvantaged groups may experience more difficulties gaining the skills and capabilities consistent with employability. Instead, they risk being marginalised in the labour market by being stuck in precarious employment that may result in a lower quality of life. Such disadvantage can also be passed to future generations (Beder, 2000; Haig, 2010; Lakes, 2009; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; OECD et al., 2016).

For those who can afford to pursue tertiary education, many may feel obliged to major in the subject(s) that they believe will be beneficial for future employment (Rae, 2007) rather than the subject(s) that they are passionate about. Further tension may result from dealing with challenges such as the negotiation between their parents' expectations and personal goals. Although some studies show that parental support is helpful for youth to explore their future career (Diemer, 2007; Koumoundourou, Tsaousis, & Kounenou, 2011; C. Li & Kerpelman, 2007), parents often impose employment expectations upon their children (C. Li & Kerpelman, 2007). If parents impose their career expectations, their children may suppress their own ideas and be unable to find their passion to develop their own career paths (Koumoundourou et al., 2011).

As for the impact on the education sector, educational institutions may change their programmes in order to fit the perceived skills demands of the labour market (Lakes, 2009, 2012; OECD et al., 2016; Rae, 2007). For instance, universities may shut down a department that enrolls fewer students, which will, in turn, narrow the diversity of courses provided (Rae, 2007). In other words, it is likely that tertiary institutions will gradually focus more on providing what they think employers want, rather than what communities need (Lucio-Villegas, 2015). When educational institutions are gradually considered as "training organisations" for "job-ready

labours”, they are pushed to change academic programmes and provide more employment information to students.

## **Give Graduates a Chance! – Chapter Summary and Research**

### **Focus**

Under the dominant ideology of neoliberalism and human capital theory, there is an increasing emphasis on individuals’ responsibility for becoming employable, getting a well-paid, stable job, and living a good life. As a result, unemployment is seen as a form of personal failure rather than a structural problem. Today, labour markets have become knowledge-oriented in most industrialised countries due to the globalisation and technological advances. Younger people, especially graduates, face challenges in employment with insufficient support from states and employers. Possessing a degree is now a greater expectation than in the past. However, having a degree is not a guarantee for getting a decent job, only a prerequisite. The changes in contemporary economic systems has led to increased uncertainty, and thus, employment has become a never-ending process of upskilling, rather than a fixed destination. Employers also tend to have greater expectations of their ideal job-applicants – such as the amount and quality of experiences beyond study; the grades in graduates’ subject majors; the reputation of the tertiary institution attended; the ability to speak another language; or preferences based on race, age, and the absence of disability.

To summarise, the issue of employment can be discussed from a range of viewpoints. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this research focus on exploring how graduates and university students understand and respond to the issue of employment and employability. Further, there is a relationship between political and economic structures and individuals’ well-being (Prilleltensky & Stead, 2011). Consequently, this research is shaped by insights from social psychology and sociology, in order to discuss issues of employability from not only an individual level, but also a structural level. The methodological details of my research will be presented in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

There are many angles from which one could explore employment and employability issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this thesis, I focus on (1) exploring how university students and recent graduates experience these issues; as well as (2) the linkage between societal and cultural factors, and the participants' everyday life experiences. This chapter outlines the methodology, methods, analysis process, and my application of reflexivity in this research.

Given my interest in participants' everyday lives, this research is conducted from a qualitative approach with social constructionism as the primary epistemology. The methodological framework is explained in the first and second sections. In the third section, I describe how I achieved the research aims. This includes an outline of the empirical study. Participants' responses were interpreted using case study and narrative approaches in order to generate in-depth understandings and enrich the connections between everyday life practices and academic theories. The chapter ends with a description of my positionality in this research.

### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research provides rich insights into how people experience an issue within an everyday life context, because qualitative research focuses on non-numerical data – such as observation, verbal reports, and description – to attempt to understand the meaning of human experience and actions (2015; Martin & McFerran, 2017). Thus, a qualitative research framework allows a research project to be subject and situation-related. This framework suits my research purpose because employability is a complex issue. As mentioned in Chapter One, the skills that are assumed to contribute to people becoming more 'employable' vary according to different time frames, social contexts and the stage of job-hunting.

Qualitative research is completed through building connections between empirical information and academic theories. The inclusion of social, societal, and cultural factors, which are relevant to the research topic, offers interpretations that may be more practical and closer to everyday life (Flick, 2014). The emphasis on interpretation, rather than hypothesis testing, means that the researcher's knowledge, interests and positionality also influence the findings (Heiner, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2007). In a qualitative research project, reflexivity is a way that researchers



acknowledge how their position in the research influences the research process (Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas, & Caricativo, 2017). Although qualitative researchers may aim to conduct a research from an open-minded and independent stance, it is possible that the researcher's position on their research topic impacts on how a research is designed and how participants' responses are interpreted. This is because researchers also live in a social world like their participants, and researchers have their own standpoints on their topic of research interest (Palaganas et al., 2017). My positionality is presented in the section of *My Positionality Statements*.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In this section, I explain: (1) why I chose social constructionism as my primary epistemology; (2) how social constructionism influences the development of identity; (3) why social psychology and sociology are two key disciplines of relevance to this research; and (4) how narratives offer a way to explore how an issue is experienced by participants.

### **Social constructionism**

Social constructionism provides the epistemological foundation for this research that reflects an emphasis on the different ways in which people perceive and create meaning about the world that surrounds them. This is based on an assumption that rather than there being a single universal truth, people's worldviews are structured by their everyday life experiences (2018; Hepburn, 2003; Hodgetts et al., 2010; 2017; Rohall, Milkie, & Lucas, 2014). When dealing with on-going daily tasks, people try to make sense of the world they live in. People generate the knowledge of how the world operates through their past and present experiences, as well as through social interactions in their primary reference groups, such as family and friends (Hodgetts et al., 2010; Rohall et al., 2014). Once certain actions are agreed on by people in their surrounding environment, social meanings are then established (Rohall et al., 2014). These everyday social meanings are often taken for granted. Therefore, it is assumed that university students or recent graduates develop their understandings of employment and employability through their daily social interactions.

From a social constructionist viewpoint, there is no single social reality attached to a particular notion, such as employability, since everyday life is complex. Everyday life can also be unpredictable because it is experienced differently in different political, cultural, and historical contexts (Flick, 2014; Hodgetts et al., 2010; Rohall et al., 2014). The personal and collective understandings of issues such as employability are interwoven. Hence, social constructionism highlights the negotiations between different views of daily issues (Hepburn, 2003). Therefore, one way of understanding how employability functions in people's lives and in society can be achieved through gathering and comparing various personal and theoretical accounts (Hepburn, 2003).

Some scholars argue that constructionism needs to approach the interpretation of an issue from a critical angle because the taken-for-granted knowledge is typically structured by people who are in positions of social privilege. Privilege that stems from social status, positions, and roles in society also influences how people react to social circumstances (Heiner, 2013). For example, as mentioned in Chapter One, the dominant political-economic ideology is neo-liberalism, which puts emphasis on individual responsibility for living a financially stable life (Jessop, 2002). Furthermore, human capital theory (which is underpinned by neo-liberalism) stresses the importance of education because pursuing qualifications is assumed to contribute to having more "choices" of employment and wealth (Olssen, 2001; Tan, 2014). These dominant messages about individual responsibility obscure inequalities, and the numerous constraints on people's ability to 'choose' their employment. People experiencing social disadvantages are left behind, which means that people who already have less access to daily resources for social support may suffer more pressure from blaming themselves for being a part of socially disadvantaged groups, rather than questioning social structures.

A key way that people construct their taken-for-granted knowledge about the world is through social interactions. Symbolic interactionism is an approach that was developed to understand social interactions. The process of generating social meanings, about issues such as employability, involves receiving and interpreting social messages (Giddens & Sutton, 2013; Heiner, 2013; Hodgetts et al., 2010; Rohall et al., 2014). Communication plays a central role in this process. Both verbal and non-verbal types of communication include symbols that convey meanings.

Symbols can also convey a more directed and deliberate form of communication, such as the messages sent by media (Heiner, 2013).

Media includes posters, radio, television programmes, newspapers, Internet, and online social networks (such as Facebook and Twitter) (Giddens & Sutton, 2013; Hodgetts et al., 2010). Furthermore, media is one of the primary sources to spread information about ongoing daily issues (Hodgetts et al., 2010). Consequently, young adults can construct their employability concepts through a variety of symbols in everyday life drawn from their engagement with other people and with media in both online and offline settings.

An example of employability related symbols encountered by university students are the posters designed by on-campus career centres. As mentioned in Chapter One, on-campus career centres provide assistance for students to become job-ready by organising employment related activities. The promotional materials from the career centres, such as posters, typically present the message that a degree is not enough for securing a job, and that gaining other experience is necessary. The three figures below are examples of such posters from the University of Waikato and Victoria University of Wellington. Significant messages are highlighted with green boxes.

TE WHARE WĀNANGA O TE EPORO O TE IKA A MĀUI  
VICTORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

ABOUT VICTORIA STAFF LIBRARY MYVICTORIA BLACKBOARD MAPS

Future students | International students | Current students | Research | Learning & teaching

**CURRENT STUDENTS**

- Manage your studies
- Student services and support
- Manage your money
- On campus
- New students
- Get involved
  - Clubs and societies
  - Recreation and fitness services
  - Leadership and mentoring
  - Make international connections
  - Representation
  - Study support

## Victoria Plus Programme

Victoria Plus is the University's service and leadership development programme. Give back to your community and gain skills that will impress employers.

**Register now**

Register through [CareerHub](#). Log in using your usual Victoria username and password. We'll be in touch after you register to help you get started.

For advice at any time, email [victoriaplus@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:victoriaplus@vuw.ac.nz).

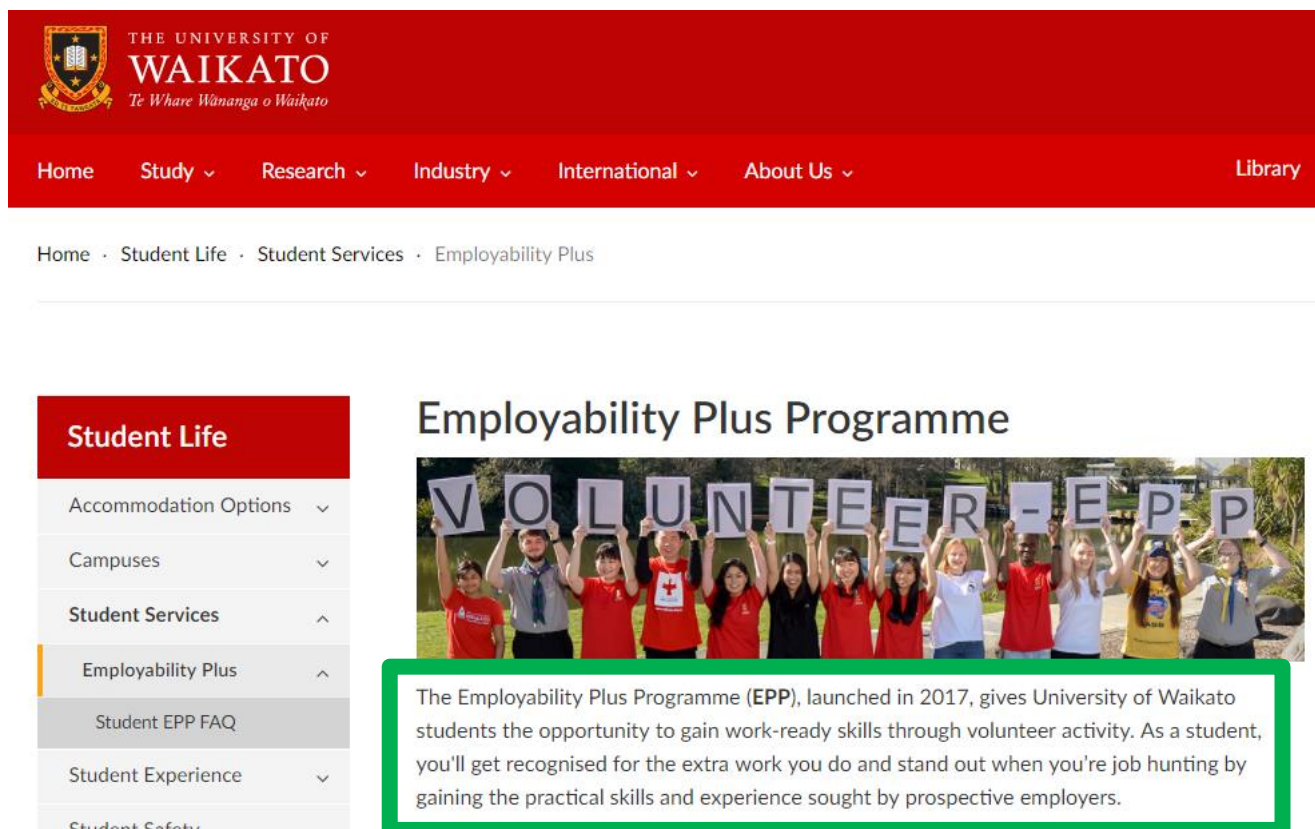
**Eligibility**

This free programme is open to all current students enrolled in a degree or postgraduate qualification at Victoria University of Wellington.

**“Students willing to put the time and effort in to gain exposure, knowledge and insight in addition to their university studies are clearly at an advantage when it comes to looking at the next steps in their career.”**

—Pete Robson  
Digital Marketing Manager, Z Energy  
[Read about activities](#)

Figure 1 Victoria Plus Programme



The screenshot shows the University of Waikato website. The header is red with the university's logo and name. A navigation bar contains links: Home, Study, Research, Industry, International, About Us, and Library. Below the navigation bar, a breadcrumb trail reads: Home > Student Life > Student Services > Employability Plus.

The main content area features a red sidebar on the left titled "Student Life" with a list of links: Accommodation Options, Campuses, Student Services, Employability Plus (highlighted), Student EPP FAQ, Student Experience, and Student Safety. The main content area has a title "Employability Plus Programme" above a photograph of a group of students holding up letters that spell "VOLUNTEER-EPP". Below the photo is a green-bordered text box containing the following text:

The Employability Plus Programme (EPP), launched in 2017, gives University of Waikato students the opportunity to gain work-ready skills through volunteer activity. As a student, you'll get recognised for the extra work you do and stand out when you're job hunting by gaining the practical skills and experience sought by prospective employers.

Figure 2 Employability Plus Programme



Figure 3 Student Job-ready Day Poster

The employability posters in Figures 1 to 3 may look slightly different, but they all draw on corresponding narratives and symbols that communicate a similar message to university students. The central message communicated throughout is that students are urged to do activities beyond their study. These activities are considered as a requirement for students to become job-ready before stepping into labour markets.

Everyday life knowledge is structured through multiple social symbols and interactions, which helps people understand how to act appropriately in certain

social contexts (Rohall et al., 2014). This is considered as the process of socialisation. Socialisation refers to the process whereby people acquire daily experiences and build an understanding of how to be and conduct themselves in a range of social settings. This is an on-going and bidirectional process (Hodgetts et al., 2010; Rohall et al., 2014). People adapt themselves into different social contexts and generate different social roles as a response to social settings (Rohall et al., 2014). While people are learning through socialisation, their actions also affect surrounding people and environments (Hodgetts et al., 2010; Rohall et al., 2014). In turn, these actions reshape the expectations of a social context. As a result, the expectations associated with certain social groups, statuses, positions, and roles are dynamic.

Social expectations may lead people to reconstruct their previous everyday-knowledge and have different actions toward similar social circumstances. Thus, people regularly drop and re-build social roles (Rohall et al., 2014), and can have multiple identities which change in relation to different social contexts (Halberstadt et al., 2013; Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006). Hence, people's actions can be different within and across groups and settings (Rohall et al., 2014). Vaughan and colleagues (2006) argue that identity is an crucial factor when trying to understand how young people develop their career paths. Therefore, having knowledge about identity and sense of self is important to this research.

### **The self**

From a social constructionist perspective, the self is not a fixed phenomenon, but a process of how we discover, develop, and define who we are through social interactions with others (Hodgetts et al., 2010; Rohall et al., 2014). We are the active participants in our own daily lives, and our daily practices are a platform to construct who we are and who we want to become (Hodgetts et al., 2010). The process of shaping "the self" is intricate because "the self" is interconnected with other people and with our material and socio-cultural environments, also, the interactions and relationships with others are complex. Essentially, people's actions and reactions can be both continuous and discontinuous because there are different social expectations in different social settings and social groups. For example, people can reshape or even give up their initial developed "self" in order to fit in another community or culture (Hodgetts et al., 2010). Different actions that people

may take in different social situations can be considered as alternative expressed selves.

The expressed selves that people present are generated through the dialogue between the “I” and the “Me”. The “I” refers to the stable-personal self, which actively experiences personal feelings and facilitates actions (Hodgetts et al., 2010; Rohall et al., 2014). The “Me” refers to how people shape their sense of self in different social environments and in relation to different social roles (Hodgetts et al., 2010; Rohall et al., 2014). People can have a core sense of an “I”, but many “Mes” that respond to different social settings and social roles. Developing a sense of self is a process of negotiation between the “I” and “Mes” to generate a “Me” to respond in a way that is socially acceptable (Rohall et al., 2014). Further, the self can be seen as being in an interobjective relationship with groups and environments rather than a pure subject-objective relationship, meaning that people’s actions are not merely based on cognitive processes (Halberstadt et al., 2013; Hodgetts et al., 2010).

Since the self is socially constituted (producing multiple “Mes” to different audiences), balancing many “Mes” is not easy and people require courage to generate “true-self”. “True-self” is considered as an important element for building a careful employment plan (Vannini & Franzese, 2008). True-self refers to the “I” that has found a balance among many “Mes”. It is a type of “Me” that takes internal voices into account, so as to coordinate external influences. Discovering one’s own voice and generating actions that match with the voice, requires the ability to distinguish between oneself and others and generate a sense of belonging. When a person develops a true-self, the person often experiences admirable emotions in both public and private “Mes”. As such, the person gradually clarifies and builds his or her self-beliefs, identity and social relations (Baxter Magolda, 2014; Vannini & Franzese, 2008).

The tension in the process of building “true-self” is usually between self-view, social norms, and the need for social approval. Social interactions play a role in the process because the true-self has been seen to emerge through the dialogue with others. A person’s social, cultural and material living environments can be a source of both constraints and supports to a person (Vannini & Franzese, 2008). Society

provides major contexts – such as social structures, cultures, statuses, roles, class and so on – to shape our “Mes”. Social class affects our values and the belief of who we are since our social class is the group we spend the most time with and share relatively the same resources and status with (Rohall et al., 2014). Culture is another element that people construct actions and meanings from (Hodgetts et al., 2010). Culture and class status influence what activities we engage in and how we see ourselves. As such, people may have different understandings of what they need to do to prepare for employment, gain employability and define how employable they are. Further, in the journey of organising an employment plan, parental closeness and support are important to a person, especially teenagers (C. Li & Kerpelman, 2007). However, as mentioned in Chapter One, many parents often unconsciously or consciously convey their employment expectations to their children (Conger, 2005; C. Li & Kerpelman, 2007). If parents tend to provide limited space for their children to express their ideas, children lose opportunities to discover their own viewpoints. In contrast, if children understand it is safe to disagree with the parents, they gain the ability to separate their feelings from those of parents, and, in turn, generates personal values and identity (C. Li & Kerpelman, 2007). For a long-term view, this child may have more confidence to navigate solutions to life challenges. Eventually, the person who develops a stronger sense of a true-self is perhaps more likely to find a job that matches with his or her personal values and interests (Baxter Magolda, 2014).

To summarise, the development of the “I” and “Mes” reflect the social conditions around people. The social surroundings influence how people structure the social world, and, in turn, how people interpret the social world and how it functions. It can be seen that “the self” lives within the social world and the social world also lives within “the self” (Halberstadt et al., 2013; Hodgetts et al., 2010). By identifying the “I” and “Mes”, and the connections with the “true-self” is a way to understand how people from different cultures and social classes perceive the issues of contemporary employment and employability. This approach means that the concept of self and its relationship to people’s reactions to the social world can be more deeply understood. In addition, people are often not aware of the extent to which larger social conditions – such as dominant neoliberal ideology, global culture, and individualism, as well as other aspects of current historical and socio-

political contexts – affect their process of building knowledge and taking actions. It is typically a challenge for people to understand the link between macro- and micro-level factors in their everyday lives (Rohall et al., 2014). Therefore, it is valuable for psychological research to consider structural factors, such as social roles, socio-economic classes, and socio-cultural backgrounds (Rohall et al., 2014).

### **Theoretical disciplines**

In addition to adopting a social constructionism lens, it is crucial to have compatible techniques and knowledge with which to view the issues of employment and employability. In order to include both macro and micro-level factors, I have designed this research from a psycho-societal approach (Olesen & Weber, 2001; Weber, 1998), which draws on both social psychology and sociology.

Social psychology is a broad field of psychology that seeks to understand how people think, feel, and act in the social world (Hodgetts et al., 2010). At present, mainstream social psychology in North America tends to use a cognitive approach to develop theories (Hepburn, 2003), which puts the individual in the centre and focuses on his or her “internal information processing system” (Hepburn, 2003, p. 25). This dominant approach seeks to develop universalized theories of thought and behaviour, and is based on the assumption that the individual is self-contained and separated from social practices. The individualism perspective in social psychology is reinforced by the dominant political-economic ideology – neo-liberalism. Hence, the viewpoint of mainstream social psychology often lacks the considerations of broader social factors. However, scholars less wedded to this dominant version of psychology, which I agree with, argue that people can act or react differently in different social, cultural and historical contexts. (Hepburn, 2003; Hodgetts et al., 2010). When reflecting a social constructionist perspective in social psychology, human beings are not framed as isolated units who think and act alone. Instead, our relationships with others and with society shape how we view the world and ourselves. The selves we create are not solely individual projects, since they are constructed by collectively held ideas. People create and share a sense of self and belonging through stories which are often based on collective tales. (Heiner, 2013; Hodgetts et al., 2010; Rohall et al., 2014).



Sociology is a systematic study of how a society works, which simultaneously seeks connections between a collective and personal level. The sociological perspective provides a way to investigate the connections between societal factors and people's thoughts, feelings, and actions. (Giddens & Sutton, 2013; Rohall et al., 2014). People's responses to social settings and their participation in turn shape and maintain that society (Rohall et al., 2014). To understand human actions in social contexts, we need to know how "the influence of society plays out in social structures, as well as in interactions among individuals" (Rohall et al., 2014, p. 16). Furthermore, the ability to see personal lives in the context of the larger society – such as history, culture, and social status – is a foundation for how a person interprets a social situation and interacts with the situation. This foundation, then, develops a social norm for certain social settings and groups. Thus, people from different social status, roles, and cultures act differently because their social norms are structured differently (Giddens & Sutton, 2013; Rohall et al., 2014).

In summary, the relationships between the self and society reflect the bi-directional process by which people shape and react to the social world, and how the social world is structured. To understand how people from different cultures and social classes perceive the issues of contemporary employment and employability, social psychology and sociology provide a knowledge framework from which to interpret participants' responses by connecting their stories with social and societal factors.

### **Narrative – A tool for understanding how people perceive the world**

Narrative, a term that is used in everyday life, refers to spoken and written stories. When narrative is applied in academic research, it serves as a tool for researchers to interpret the meanings in participants' everyday lives and to gain an in-depth understanding of their experience (Joyce, 2015). People make sense of society in a multitude of ways that are related to beliefs, values and shared norms. Consequently, narrative theory provides a way to understand how the world is understood by different people through telling personal stories (Flick, 2014; Hodgetts et al., 2010). By telling stories, people are able to connect their personal life experiences to the past, present, and future, in making sense of their life (Murray, 2000). As such, the collection of narratives allows a researcher to explore personal stories of "belonging,

matter to others, sharing, togetherness, cooperation, support, reciprocity and inclusion” (Hodgetts et al., 2010, p. 107).

When applying narrative in research, there are no strict limitations to which stories are shared, and no standard rules for how the stories are expressed and interpreted. Storytellers often structure their stories in the way that is logical and meaningful to them and assume listeners can understand. Listeners try to understand the meanings of told-stories based on their knowledge and personal experience. Therefore, narrative in research is a co-constructive process, since the meanings of the stories are open to interpretation collectively between researchers (listeners) and participants (storytellers) (Joyce, 2015; Polkinghorne, 2007). Accordingly, narrative research allows a researcher to access the participants’ world and try to understand their experience of a contemporary social issue. Thus, I have drawn on the narrative approach for my research methods to explore and understand how the issues of employment and employability are experienced by university students or recent graduates. The details of my research methods and procedure are presented in the next section.

## **Research Approach and Methods**

### **Participants’ recruitment and research procedure**

I used two methods to collect narratives from the participants, namely, a structured photo-elicitation exercise and semi-structured interviews. To recruit the participants, I posted recruitment posters on the notice-boards around the University of Waikato. Furthermore, I sought permission to post a recruitment message on the Facebook page of the Career Development Services, and on the psychology students’ virtual-discussion platform. Thirdly, I promoted the information on my personal Facebook page. In the end, only one person showed interest in participating in my research through those recruitment messages, but that person withdrew her participation. As a result, I used word of mouth methods of recruitment through my social networks and this method was much more effective (Flick, 2014), and there were four people who ended up participating in my research. A description of each of the four participants is presented in the section of *Participants*.

The research procedure included three stages, which were (1) an initial interview (Interview One), (2) photo-elicitation, and (3) a second interview (Interview Two). Both interviews are semi-structured. Interview One ran for 20 to 30 minutes and the main purpose was to build rapport with participants, explain their ethical rights in the research, provide an outline of the participation in this research, including the topic and the purpose of this research, and what participants would be expected to do, and offer a space for questions or concerns. To ensure participants understood my research, I briefly discussed the topic of employment and employability with them. The discussion was for participants to gain some general idea of what employability is as a preparation for the following research activities (photo-elicitation and Interview Two). After the discussion, I explained how to do photo-elicitation. The participants were asked to provide at least two images on a designed template (Appendix 1). The images need to be relevant to the activities they had participated in to improve their employability. The participants were also asked to write a description of their reflections about each image, in terms of (a) the reasons why they chose the photo; (b) the reasons for participating in the activity; (c) what skills or abilities were related to employment that he or she had learned; and (d) whether he or she felt obliged to participate in such activities. I suggested that participants could send the images to me before the scheduled Interview Two.

In order to collect in-depth stories from participants, I conducted Interview Two as a one-on-one interview for approximately 50 minutes. The advantage of the one-on-one interview is that it provides an opportunity for participants to freely share their stories, experiences, and feelings as much as possible without being interrupted, which is considered as a collaborative process. Interview Two contained three parts. Firstly, I discussed photo-elicitation with my participants, especially the parts where I was confused or needed clarifying. Secondly, I used the photos as a cue to guide my participants to explore what “employability” might mean to them, what kind of skills and abilities they considered were important for employment, and how their ideas were developed. Lastly, I encouraged my participants to: (1) share what kinds of challenges they faced in the process of pursuing employability; (2) reflect on why there was a high emphasis on employability in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and (3) consider what can be done by

governments or employer-employee organisations to assist university graduates to become employable.

### **Ethical considerations**

The ethical approval for this research was given by the School of Psychology Ethics Committee at the University of Waikato. In addition, I also drew on the code of ethics for practicing psychologists as an additional guide – *Code of ethics for psychologists working in Aotearoa/New Zealand* (Code of Ethics Review Group, 2002). The relevant points of the *Code* in relation to my research project were obtaining informed consent, ensuring that the participants' identities and responses were kept confidential, and also considering and respecting the participants' well-being. The following paragraphs provide the details of each point.

To obtain informed consent, a research information sheet (Appendix 2) was provided via email before Interview One. The information sheet informed participants of four major ideas: (1) the voluntary nature of participation in the research, (2) the purpose of my research, (3) the procedures of the research, and (4) the rights of being a participant – including being able to (a) refuse to answer any question, (b) request any information to be withheld from my thesis, (c) express any concern, (d) ask any question without judgement, and (e) withdraw from this research at any stage. The four major ethical considerations listed above were verbally explained again during the beginning of Interview One, and participants were welcomed and encouraged to ask any questions at this stage. At this stage, I sought permission to audio-record both Interview One and Two from participants for the purpose of data analysis. After both the participant and I, the researcher, agreed with what had been discussed, we signed the consent forms.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed soon after each interview. The transcriptions were viewed and checked by participants before being analysed. All of the information I collected (the recordings, images and transcripts) were stored in a password-protected folder. I am the only person with the access to this information. After analysing participants' responses, I wrote a biography for each participant that included material relevant to my research topic. The biographies and selected quotes, which could be included in my thesis, were sent to my participants to gain their approval and make changes by themselves.

Finally, a key ethical priority in the research process was considering participants' well-being. Firstly, I prepared the contact details of the on-campus Career Development Services and Counselling Services, even though I did not expect that my research would evoke negative emotions. Secondly, I discussed possible cultural concerns with my supervisors and a Māori senior lecturer in the School of Psychology. Their advice helped me to consider issues of power in the research-participant relationship and increased my awareness of cultural considerations. Thirdly, I strove to be as open-minded as possible. For example, I placed myself at a "not-knowing" position during the interviews, which means I made a conscious effort to avoid judgment or criticism towards participants' responses (Monk, Drewery, & Winslade, 2005). I sought to be an active listener by taking the position of having an open interest in their stories. This meant I invited them to share more of their life or personal experiences and feelings, and I encouraged them to link these experiences with their social roles, socio-economic class or socio-cultural backgrounds. Fourthly, both Interview One and Two were held at locations agreed between the participants and myself, and I prepared food as a gesture of hospitality. Lastly, I organised a section of mihi (a brief self-introduction) at the start of Interview One. A mihi is a way to start building rapport with participants. In the mihi section, participants were welcomed to bring their culture into their self-introduction, such as using their native language to say greetings. At the end of Interview Two, I gave a thank-you card to each of my participants as a way of showing appreciation for their contributions to my research.

### **Participants**

There were four participants in my research. Each participant chose their own pseudonym: David, Diana, Sarah, and Shirley. Below, I provide brief descriptions of each participant's background with a focus on the information that is most relevant to the issue of employability and in order to limit identifying information.

David is an international student from China and is aged between 20 to 24. He is studying for an undergraduate degree in the Management School at the University of Waikato. David is completing his final year of study, and he has not yet decided whether to stay in New Zealand for work after he graduates. Diana is also an international student from China and is aged between 25 to 30. She is doing her final year of postgraduate level study in the Management School at Victoria

University of Wellington. Diana would like to try working in New Zealand after finishing her study. Sarah is a domestic student who was originally from South Asia and is aged between 25 to 30. Sarah finished her postgraduate level degree from the Faculty of Art and Social Sciences at the University of Waikato and graduated in December 2017. She has been working in a fixed-term job since then. Lastly, Shirley is a European New Zealander who is aged between 20 to 24. She graduated from the University of Waikato in December 2017 with an undergraduate-level degree from the Faculty of Art and Social Sciences. Shirley was successful in securing a job and has been working since February 2018. The table below provides organised information for my participants.

*Table 2 Participants' background information*

Participant	Age	Ethnicity <sup>2</sup>	Degree Level	Status
David	20-24	Chinese	Undergraduate	Final-year Student
Diana	25-30	Chinese	Postgraduate	Final-year Student
Sarah	25-30	South Asian	Postgraduate	Recent Graduate
Shirley	20-24	European	Undergraduate	Recent Graduate

## Analysis Process

To make sense of my participants' responses in the interviews and photo-elicitation exercises, and to link their responses with psychological and societal factors, case-based and sequential analysis were two key methods used to analyse and construct findings of this research. This means that I treated each participant as a unique case and delved into the details of their stories (Flick, 2014). I carefully read each transcript from the beginning to the end so as to make sense of the latter responses based on the earlier ones (Flick, 2014).

The case-based analysis approach provides detailed and insightful information and may generate unanticipated findings regarding contemporary employment and employability issues (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012; Thomas, 2011). This is because

<sup>2</sup> The category of Ethnicity is based on the response of how my participants identify themselves.

each case study represents a participant himself or herself, and each person has different subjective opinions, attitudes, and viewpoints on the issues covered in the research (Flick, 2014). Furthermore, case-study research is a way to explore how understandings and widely held views relating to a specific social issue are formed, and how these affect people's everyday life. The contributions of case-study research can also highlight the connections between the participants' experiences, the findings of previous researchers, and the collective meanings of the employment and employability issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012).

To begin my analysis process, I read through the transcripts and photo-elicitation exercises case by case, and I read this material twice. Each case, and the four cases as a whole, were analysed regarding literature related to cultural and societal practices. During the first reading, I made notes in the margins. During the second reading, I paid more attention to interpreting the participants' accounts and tried to build connections between their accounts and my notes. I then wrote a biography for each participant.

Secondly, I re-read the academic articles that I had encountered in my literature review, and made connections between this academic literature and my participants' biographies and narratives. While doing this part of the analysis, I particularly paid attention to: (1) contemporary social factors relevant to employment and employability that were described in articles (such as the types of work, the issue of globalisation, and general expectations of employers), and (2) psychological aspects that contribute to the way people make sense of and react to their every life (such as social identity, personality, and the surrounding support system). As such, I extended each participant's biography into the case-study chapter of each participant. Each chapter revealed how my participants perceived and reacted to the issue of employability and employment.

Lastly, I compared participants' case-studies to find the similarities and differences in their experiences. I used my research questions as the focus, and the notes I made previously were aids to clarify meanings and group meanings together. The findings of the comparative case analysis are presented in *Chapter Seven – Discussion and Conclusion*.

## **My Positionality Statements**

In this section, I explain my journey that led to me conducting this research, as well as the influences of my subjective viewpoints on the topics of employability and employment.

Originally from Taiwan and growing up in a middle-class family, I came to New Zealand to pursue a further degree at the age of 24. The decision to complete further study beyond an undergraduate degree was not fully my own idea, but was partly pushed by my father. My father has repeatedly expressed his desire that his children gain overseas experience before having families. Furthermore, he impressed on me that pursuing a Master's degree can increase the possibility of securing a good-paid job, and being promoted to a higher position in the future. My father's views reflect wider societal trends and expectations given that Taiwan and other countries in East Asia have a high participation rate in higher education. For example, South Korean participation in higher education is close to 100 percent since 2004, which is the highest in East Asia, and the percentage in Taiwan is only slightly lower (Marginson, 2017). Furthermore, due to the authoritarian parenting style practiced by my parents, I was not brave enough to propose other options for my future (Koumoundourou et al., 2011). As a result, I did not question the directive to undertake postgraduate study overseas after I finished undergraduate study.

Such parental direction reflects that many young people in East Asia are pressured to gain exceptional skills and attributes that will set them apart from the crowd (UNESCO, 2012). These include the ability to think "out of the box", to work both independently and with groups, and to communicate well with others. (UNESCO, 2012). Growing up under such wide spread messages have made me acutely aware of the high levels of competition involved in securing a knowledge-based job in East Asia. Gaining exceptional employment skills is expensive. Usually only those who come from the middle-class backgrounds have the privilege to pursue degrees and exceptional skills, such as being able to afford to study overseas and to communicate well by using a second language (Morris, 2006). Therefore, I am aware that my middle-class position has provide me financial and social support advantages.



While obtaining further employability factors in New Zealand, I have faced and overcome many difficulties such as cultural differences, language barriers, and dealing with the pressure of schoolwork. Those difficulties led me to consider stopping studying, and I did. During my second year in New Zealand, I was in a car accident, which forced me to put study on hold for half a year. During the recovery period, I rethought my future and a strong idea developed in my mind – I decided to actively listen to my own voice, distinguish it from external constraints, and make balanced actions that reflecting for both personal interest and social expectations.

When I continued my postgraduate study, I completed a critical literature review for a Labour Studies paper. While working on this assignment, I learnt how to question and be critical of societal structures in relation to issue of employment. The lecturer of paper, who became one of my thesis supervisors, encouraged me to continue working on this topic for my Master's research. As such, I became interested not just in my experience but how other university students experience contemporary employment issues; how they gain employability; what challenges and pressures they face and suffer while obtaining sufficient employability; and how they overcome these difficulties.

## **Chapter Summary**

Much of the literature on employability, especially in psychology, tends to focus at the individual level. Consequently, I have adopted an interdisciplinary approach, which draws on social psychology and sociology in my research in order to draw connections between personal experiences and societal dimensions when attempting to analyse and explain people's thoughts, feelings, and actions regarding employment and employability. To reach my research aims, I designed this qualitative research. This study is completed through collecting narrative responses from four participants and developing four case studies where I focused on macro and micro-level interpretations of the accounts and images. These case studies are presented in the following chapters.

### **Chapter 3: First Case Study – David**

David is an international student in New Zealand. At the time he was interviewed, David was studying for his undergraduate degree majoring in Human Resources and Economics at the University of Waikato. He is originally from a large city in China, and, consistent with the one-child policy, David is the only child in a middle-class family. His parents are both lecturers at one of the top universities in China. His parents' occupations and the vocational nature of his majors, indicate that David has been socialised to understand how higher education institutions work, and how tertiary study can contribute to employability. As such, David is under pressure to be a “success”.

David has been trying very hard to become “employable” due to his awareness of how competitive labour markets are now. For example, David chose to complete his degree overseas to increase his competency for employment in the Chinese labour market. Although it seems that he wants to become employable for the Chinese labour market, David is considering finding a job in New Zealand after finishing his degree. This is because he perceives some cultural aspects of Chinese organisations and employment practices contrast to the value of meritocracy that he learns from study. However, as an international student who is allowed to job-hunt in New Zealand after study, David is fearful that his experiences in everyday life from the Chinese context will impact negatively on his employability for New Zealand labour market. In this chapter, I explain David's experiences and how these shapes his perspectives on employability. David's quotations in this chapter were translated into English. The original quotations, which are in Mandarin, are presented in Appendix 3.

#### **David's Everyday Life: The Pressure to Thrive**

Confucian philosophy has influenced Chinese cultural practices for centuries, but was swept away from Chinese society between the early 1900s to late 1970s under Mao's regime. Confucian philosophy, however, returned to influence Chinese culture in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The contemporary state of China has re-asserted the importance of Confucianism and cultivates it as the foundation of national identity (Yang & Tamney, 2011). Confucianism emphasises respect for authority and seniors and offers a framework that prescribes a hierarchal relationship within

groups, generations, and families. One example is that within a family context, younger generations usually carry the responsibility for taking care of older generations in both material and emotional aspects. (W. W. Li, Hodgetts, Ho, & Stolte, 2010).

As an only child, David views employment as necessary to fulfil personal goals and his social roles. Further, David considers that his gender (male) means he has to take more responsibilities for financial provision to his families (current and future). In the Chinese context, family refers to both the nuclear family and extended family (parents). Accordingly, David perceives employment as the primary way he will financially support himself and his family.

Because if you want to get married and have children, this (*working*) is definitely your duty. And then, in terms of taking care of the parents... it depends on the situation of different countries, like those developed countries, [...] their old-age pension policy is very good, which means that children do not need to worry too much about their parents (*having no income to live*) when their parents decide to retire (*from their job*), ... this ... probably .... will not .... become a motivation for getting a job. But, in the country like China, I mean..., the country where the old-age pension is not well established, the children will have this kind of pressure (*taking care of parents*) and it becomes one of the motivation for employment.

David's expectation of himself to financially support his parents reflects the Confucian notion of filial piety. Filial piety in a Confucian culture suggests that children have an obligation to respect their parents' authority and power and take care of their aged parents primarily by providing material and financial support (W. W. Li et al., 2010). The absence of a state pension system for elderly people in China is also dependent on the social practice of filial piety. In contrast, the concept of filial piety is not evident in many Western contexts, and instead, the state provides some level of monetary provision for older citizens (W. W. Li et al., 2010).

Given these pressures there appear to be few alternative life pathways open to David. For example, he expressed the view that society does not accept that an adult man can become a stay-at-home husband or father. Instead, a man should be the primary provider of a family:

It is for sure that men carry more pressure than the women to get a job, plus, men have more choices in occupations than women,

and then, add on to some traditional ideas... I mean...take a married couple as an example, there is not a problem if the husband has a job out there and the wife is a housewife. But if it is the husband who stays at home and does the housework ... it would be seen as a joke.

David's account reflects the significance of gender roles within the traditional nuclear family format of breadwinners and homemakers. According to Shirani and colleagues (2012), the traditional work-focused male role emphasises a man's responsibility to ensure the financial stability of their spouse and children through stable employment. In contexts where the nuclear family is valued, there is a lack of support for stay-at-home fathers, and there can be negative public reactions to men who do not take the provider role (Shirani, Henwood, & Coltart, 2012). While Shirani and colleagues conducted their research within a Western context, their findings relating to gender expectations are also applicable to people living in modern China as is reflected in David's responses.

When discussing the topic of securing a job, David perceives the labour market in China as very competitive. As mentioned in Chapter One, after the 1980s (post-Mao era), neoliberal ideas and globalisation have influenced China and contributed to China's rapid-growing economy. As a Chinese who grew up in the post-Mao era in a middle-class urban family, David believes people are required to keep upskilling themselves in order to be and stay employed and claims that people living in China should no longer only aim to pursue a stable life, but to live prosperous lives by continually learning new skills, looking for better-paid jobs, and have a better lifestyle. This belief illustrates an acceptance of Human capital theory (HCT):

Because people will grow old, and, so, there will be people who are younger than you that step in (*to the workplaces*). If you just say ... being satisfied with the position you are currently now in, which meets the current entry level of employment, this means that... when younger people step in (*to the workplace*) ... Younger people, who are cleverer than you, who are more flexible in jobs, and understand better how to utilise their knowledge in jobs... and if they secure a job like yours... you say... If the company encounters a financial difficulty, the boss will cut you or slash him/her. [...] Because...the competition in the labour market is intense after all, in order to live...you cannot be satisfied with an ordinary life, and not pursuing becoming outstanding...if you do that..., eventually, you are very likely be eliminated (by the labour market)

David's understanding of employability reflects the views of Kraus and Vonken (2009) on employability as a constant lifelong activity. According to Kraus and Vonken (2009), employability generally refers to a set of competencies that enhance the possibility of securing a job, being productive, and staying ahead of the field. David has internalised the need for an individual to be constantly aware of, and react to, the changing requirements in labour markets.

David's worries about his employability are also linked to the increased uncertainty in employment that stems from the increase in precarious employment defined in Chapter One. For example, China currently has an unbalanced match between supply and demand for skills in cities (World Bank, 2007; Xie et al., 2017). The increasing number of trained people in knowledge-based work (such as accountants, information technology engineers, and lawyers) are left to struggle to find a job, whereas employers in more labour-skilled jobs (such as builders, farmers, and mechanics) face the challenges of finding workers (OECD, 2012; World Bank, 2007). As a result, people who have trained to become a knowledge-skilled worker, like David, are now dealing with uncertain career paths.

Despite the associated labour market uncertainties, David is still striving for a knowledge-skilled job. David's desire for a knowledge-based job in China reflects his social-economic class – growing up in one of the big cities in China with both parents working in an elite university (Lakes, 2009). As such, David has been socialised towards a belief in the higher status associated with knowledge-skilled jobs. He said, *“there is no other way...completing a degree in a university is a must.”*

David's social-economic network also contributes to comparing with peers as another source of employment pressure. David mentioned that the comparison with peers in his social world were mostly about who gets a better-paid job, whose job has a better title, and who lives a better life. Thus, securing a higher-skilled and higher-status job is an unquestioned norm for David. Interestingly, David would not take a labour-skilled job in China, whereas he mentioned that, in New Zealand, he is prepared to work in a non-knowledge-based employment. This idea reflects David's acceptance of having to start with a lower position in the New Zealand labour market, although presumably he would hope this would provide a stepping stone to a more prestigious job in the future.

## **David's Efforts in Becoming Employable in the Chinese Labour Market**

To become employable and competitive in China, David considers three elements are essential for a knowledge-based job: (1) a degree from a high ranking university, (2) practical experiences, and (3) GuanXi (關係), which refers to “a practice of social exchange, expressed through reciprocal favour seeking and provision of benefits” (Chua, Wellman, & Barbalet, 2015, p. 1040). David believes obtaining a degree from a high-ranking university is the most fundamental employment factor. According to Hao and Welch (2012), since China's economic situation is much more dynamic in urban areas now, employers tend to define graduates by their education qualifications as a proxy for a person's ability. David understands such employers' viewpoints and agrees that the educational level represents how much professional knowledge a person has obtained, and the know-how in a particular field.

However, people in China are not free to apply for any university they want to enrol in; they first need to be in a selecting process of Gaokao (高考). Gaokao refers to the university entrance examination in China. The results of Gaokao decide the ranking of a university that a high school student can apply to. Therefore, the results of Gaokao in China are crucial determinants of a person's future (Davey, De Lian, & Higgins, 2007), and have been seen as a decisive factor in becoming part of an elite group. David's Gaokao results could not get him into a world-leading university in China. Instead, he chose to complete his degree at the University of Waikato through an entry-programme in China. This programme allows students to apply for an overseas world-leading university with a lower Gaokao result, but students are required to complete foundation studies for 2 years in China before completing another two years of study overseas. As a result, young Chinese students, like David, who have lower scores in Gaokao but adequate financial support still have a chance to gain a degree from a world-leading university.

Aside from university rankings, David perceives employers prefer job-candidates who have practical or work experience. David supports this idea as he argues if a person only acquires professional knowledge, but lacks practical experience, this person is likely to struggle with fitting into workplaces. David

believes that people in the workplace need to know how to react to different social situations and utilise knowledge to solve problems or complete tasks. David's view is consistent with the arguments of Andrews and Higson (2008) and the OECD (2015), which are presented in Chapter One. Graduates who can demonstrate work-readiness by having practical experiences, are more likely to be employed. Therefore, David has actively engaged in university-based practical activities, such as case-study competitions.

Thirdly, GuanXi (關係) plays a significant role in almost every aspect of Chinese society, especially the job-searching process. GuanXi refers to interdependent social and work relationships with others that often involves the benefits of exchanging favour between people (Hao & Welch, 2012; Jiwen Song & Werbel, 2007). The benefits and exchanges can be in any form, including material gifts, instrumental advantages in every life context, official preferment, or social reputation. GuanXi can be formed through friendships or family relationships. Cultivating GuanXi networks through giving and receiving favour is a way to achieve a higher reputational profile, and in turn, earn more respect from society in China (Chua et al., 2015). One aspect of GuanXi involves reciprocal obligations, which means that people are obliged to help people who they know in their GuanXi network. As such, if a graduate has a strong GuanXi in the workplace, the graduate is much more likely to secure a job through people who they know personally in workplaces (Jiwen Song & Werbel, 2007). The idea of utilising social networks to secure a job can also be seen in many countries, including New Zealand, which is seen as an example of social capital (Joseph, 2016; Villar, Juan, Corominas, & Capell, 2000).

However, David strongly disagrees with the Chinese practice of GuanXi to get a job. David rejects GuanXi because he considers it to be against the value of meritocracy, and to be unfair to people who really are capable in jobs but have weak workplace GuanXi, and it makes the recruitment process much more complicated. As a result, even though David knows that his parents are willing to assist him to find a job through their workplace GuanXi, he refuses to use GuanXi as his pathway to be employed. David wants to be far away from the culture of using GuanXi to get a job, which is the primary reason why David intends to find a job in New

Zealand (Dyer & Lu, 2010). At present, David may have an idealised belief that the labour selection process in New Zealand is purely based on meritocracy.

### **David's Frustration in Defining Whether He is Employable**

David seems to have some advantages to understand the concept of employability for knowledge-skilled jobs from his social background in China. However, as an international student who intends to work in New Zealand, David revealed that he has struggled to know how employable he was. His primary knowledge of the labour market and employability is constructed through his social practices in China, and he considers that his employment strengths in China do not fit in New Zealand. This means he does not know how to get advantages for employment:

I just don't know what I'm really capable... like... when I'm studying a foundation programme in China, I used to feel like public speaking is my strength... But, not anymore after coming over to New Zealand..., and I found that I have no employment advantage... I mean, the advantages I have are only suited in Shanghai... I know I have...but, in New Zealand... I can significantly feel that I no longer own the advantages that I used to have.

Although David has ways to understand the New Zealand labour market (by attending university's seminars and training sessions, and paying more attention to relevant policies), David's key challenge is the lack of first-hand experience in the New Zealand labour market (Xie et al., 2017). David mentioned that he had limited access to be exposed to New Zealand culture – he did not have a part-time job and he flatted with other Chinese. Further, David was concerned that New Zealand employers may discriminate against foreigners. Lastly, he did not have a clear occupation that he aimed to apply for in New Zealand – not even in the human resource sector, which he was studying. Consequently, David was not clear how exactly to secure a job in New Zealand, and struggled to define how employable he was or what he supposed to do to become employable.

David's account indicates that he had little confidence and was frustrated regarding future employment in New Zealand. David's reactions can be seen as a retreat-oriented employment approach. Retreatism refers to people who “abandon labour market goals and became passive in their approaches” (Huang et al., 2014, p. 179). This can have a negative influence on David's job-search intentions (Xie



et al., 2017), and can be the reason why he desires, but in practice is hesitant, to find a job in New Zealand.

### **David's Perspectives on Employability**

David believes recruitment standards should be objectively grounded in the skills and abilities a person has, and that employers should hire someone who is the best match for the job position and company. David's view matches the concept of meritocracy under human capital theory (see Chapter One), and with literature that is relevant to human resource management (Gatewood et al., 2011) – indicating that one of David's primary ways to understand employability is through his study. As such, David listed three essential aspects of employability: (1) professional knowledge, (2) practical workplace experience, (3) getting along with people. David also mentioned an additional factor – interview and CV-writing skills because he thinks job-interviews and CVs are platforms to demonstrate a person's quality factors of employment.

In terms of how to gain sufficient employability, David has no clear suggestions for what role employers should play because he accepts that employers put profit-making as their primary goal, and in turn, want to reduce the money being invested in building people's employability. David does not mention what support can be provided by the states either, instead he expresses the belief that the Chinese government will not do anything to assist people with employment. Rather, David proposes some ideas for education institutions to take more responsibility for employment preparation. David suggests that educational institutions can provide practical experience to help ensure employability for their students. For example, organising more programmes that allow students to connect theories to real workplaces; or doing things in class that are more practical, such as case-competitions or trade shows. These suggestions are supported by literature (OECD, 2015; OECD et al., 2016; Rae, 2007).

David's account reflects his belief – that people need to thrive constantly in employment so as to survive in the boom and bust economic cycle. David's lack of firm plans for future employment has also caused frustration. Further, the lack of support and high expectations from his social network leave David to figure out how to deal with his employment issues alone. In contrast, the next case – Diana –

seems to be more adapt into living in neoliberal world. Her story and perspectives on the issue of employment and employability are presented in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4: Second Case Study – Diana**

Diana, also an international student from China, is the only child in her family, but she grew up in a town, not a city. She has been in New Zealand for three years. Her journey started with studying English courses at the University of Waikato for a year, then, pursuing a Master's degree at the University of Victoria, Wellington (majoring in Accounting). At the time I interviewed her, she was in her final year. Diana has a part-time job in Wellington and intends to find a full-time job in New Zealand after finishing her degree. However, Diana does not have firm plans for a long-term stay in New Zealand.

Diana has a strong sense of her own identity. Diana can be considered as a confident explorer while discovering her career pathway. This characterisation is based on her willingness to participate in activities that she has not done before, and her motivation is mostly driven by her desire for self-development. In addition, Diana views life as unpredictable and full of different possibilities in a positive way. For example, she trusts that the unanticipated events in her life will somehow contribute to developing her career identity and pathways. As such, she does not have a fixed plan for her future. Instead, she goes with the flow, although long term she wants a career in the finance field. This chapter introduces Diana's background and its influence on her personal development, and her view of employability.

### **Diana's Everyday Life: Trying Best to Find a Place in the World**

As mentioned in David's case study, Confucianism is one of the key cultural factors in China, where respect for authority and older generations are emphasised. Further, people in a Confucian society are taught to cultivate themselves by obeying collective disciplines, which means to follow the moral rules, and work hard to achieve socially approved goals. Accordingly, Confucianism shapes China into a group-oriented society (Hwang & Chang, 2009). This can be reflected in workplace culture and practices. Diana found it challenging to work in a Confucian society. Diana had a full-time job in China after she finished undergraduate degree, but she left the job after two months. Within these two months, she discovered that respecting authorities (such as bosses, supervisors, and senior colleagues) that is highly emphasised in Chinese workplaces. Diana said she was constrained from doing her best in her job because of the hierarchy she perceived. She often felt

obliged to please senior colleagues by giving them the answers they expected. For example, she was told that to show respect to authorities by toning down her own personality. Further, Diana felt that most of her acquaintances and friends did not express their own thoughts. They mostly conformed to Chinese social norms. Eventually, she left her job and started planning to explore other options in her life by having an adventure overseas. Diana's account shows that she is less bound with Confucianism and relates more to the Western-style culture of individualism, which emphasises that individuals should have the freedom to express themselves and self-develop (Hwang & Chang, 2009).

Diana's decision to have overseas experiences was inspired by a conversation with her mother's friend, and is supported by her mother. Choosing to study overseas was Diana's way of exploring the world. Despite this sense of adventure, Diana still mentioned that she wants to secure a job relevant to her field of study as a pay-off for her investment in tertiary education. She posted a rhetorical question: *"Eventually, you would like to secure a good job because you've been studying for so long, right?"* which indicates that Diana's motivations to study abroad is also driven by human capital theory. Human capital theory suggests that people need to accumulate their capacities – knowledge, skills, and abilities – to become productive workers through investment in education or training (see Chapter One).

The decision to study overseas can be seen as a both "fun and serious" involvement for Diana's future (Krzaklewska, 2009). Krzaklewska (2009) argues that in this era of globalisation, young people are expected to gain more necessary skills for jobs than in the past, thus, it takes longer for young people to be ready for employment. Meanwhile, young people are at the age of having fun in life, such as having parties, being irresponsible, and investing energies in their leisure time. As a result, studying overseas can be both fun and serious, because it can add to language and cultural competencies, and provide the novelty of experiencing different life styles and cultures.

Diana does not have a firm plan for her overseas experiences apart from experiencing another culture and exploring her potential life paths. She develops a plan along the way. So far, she has been preparing for employment in New Zealand by upskilling her English ability and trying to understand New Zealand culture.

Having a part-time job is one of her ways, and this means Diana has been getting to know the culture of both Wellington and New Zealand by making friends and building connections. Nevertheless, Diana finds it challenging to balance her part-time jobs, studying, improving her English skills, and integrating into a different culture:

I just think it's hard (*to balance between study and prepare for employment*), because I've also set myself a lot of small goals, like... practicing my typing speed and other stuff. It's pretty exhausting after work and study. Even if you have the time, you don't have that mind to do these things (*the goals she set for herself*), so I'll go and find some things that are more enjoyable to do or don't need to use too much brainpower, and then I'm still able to learn. [...] I have to balance my life, [...] If you're not happy (*about life*), you can't do well on jobs (*that you commit to*)

### **Diana Has Her Own Thought about Her Career**

Diana seems to have the ability to develop her own thinking regarding to career and life, which is different from the norms within Chinese society. This may be due to her parents' parenting style. Diana is close to her parents. She listens to their advice but also dares to negotiate her ideas with them. This is not typical under a Confucian culture, indicating that Diana's parents may less bound by Confucianism and authoritative parenting (Koumoundourou et al., 2011). Koumoundourou and colleagues (2011) suggest that parents who are less authoritarian have a more positive influence on their daughter's self-development. Furthermore, C. Li and Kerpelman (2007) state that girls generally need to experience closeness with their parents to gain emotional support, but also need permission from their parents to develop their own career thinking, rather than just fulfilling parental expectations. Therefore, a demonstration of healthy individual development is reflected in the ability to separate their feelings from that of their parents and to express their disagreement with parents' suggestions.

Diana said considering her own voice while making decisions was less stressful, as she could follow personal values and know what she was doing. This does not mean that she is acting against all external influences. She also takes social expectations and social norms into account when decision-making. In short, Diana's intention to be true to herself motivates her to find a balance between personal and collective voices:

When you are faithful to yourself, the matter of being happy or not is not that important. What really matter is that you are not under pressure. Being faithful to yourself does not mean that doing nothing at all but just being yourself and doing whatever you want or like. No, is not like that. [...] My thoughts may not be consistent with the demand of the masses, but I will somewhat try to consider their ideas. But, I will not totally leave myself behind. [...] (*If I would adjust myself to living under social expectations*) I would feel a huge pressure, the psychological pressure.

Diana's response shows that she has an awareness and the capacity to regulate her beliefs, identities, and social relations. Diana's ability to develop her own ideas can be explained from the perspective of Taoism. Taoism has influenced Chinese culture as long as Confucianism but not as deeply. In contrast to Confucianism, Taoism seeks the liberation of a person's self from the ethical bounds of this world, and advocates that self-cultivation is a way of healing. Taoism also proposes that people should pursue harmonious balance between humans and nature, humans and society, and within each human being; rather than constraining their personal desires. To achieve this, people need to follow the principle of nature and returning to a state of authentic self. (Hwang & Chang, 2009). Consequently, I suggest that Diana's parents may identify more with Taoism than Confucianism, and this is reflected in their parenting style. Accordingly, Diana is able to experience a degree of freedom in her self-development. By receiving the emotional support from her parents, Diana is able to bring internal voices to coordinate external influences. This process of developing a sense of true-self, as discussed in Chapter Two, reflects a type of Me that is able to balance self-view with social norms. Having a sense of true-self usually starts emerging in adulthood, and can assist a person to develop a career plan (Baxter Magolda, 2014), which can be the reason why Diana has her own career thinking.

With a sense of true-self and the understanding that life is unpredictable, Diana accepts and embraces the changes in her life. For Diana, life is full of different possibilities and she stays open-minded about her future plans. Diana suggests that people should take as many opportunities as they can, because life events may lead people to reach life goals that they have not planned for, and may ultimately contribute to discovering the unknown self, as well as, generating different options for future careers. For example, Diana perceives that participating in an internship

programme is not only as a way to become more employable, but also a way to learn more about yourself:

I think being an intern is not based on our choices, but an opportunity. I mean...it is an opportunity for you to try things out. Many people may want to do an internship, but they couldn't find a right one. [...] Anyways, I think that what you have done will somehow contribute to your future occupation(s). Things will not work out exactly how you've planned after an internship. People have different ways (*to figure what they want to do in the future*). What they end up doing (*for a job*) may not be really relevant to what they did on their internship. This thing (*internship*) is... to let you... have some ideas, to know what you like, what you are good at, and..., what you want to do in the future, what kind of person you would like to become...

A confident explorer, like Diana, is someone who is normally openminded about different possibilities in their career path (Vaughan et al., 2006). Even though Diana has ideas for her long-term future, her career plan is not firmly attached to a certain occupation or profession. Instead, she aims to be more adaptable. Confident explorers usually put effort into cultivating transferable skills and, as such, have a stronger sense of self-development. They are willing to develop various skills for adjusting to different occupational opportunities and see every opportunity as a way to self-explore. The desire for self-development motivates them to choose which activities to participate in. Furthermore, people like Diana are able to establish a career plan by linking different life experiences with their qualifications, interest, talents, personal values, and the labour market. They accept and find enjoyment in managing their career as a lived process instead of a fixed structure (Vaughan et al., 2006).

The way Diana navigates her career path is driven by the neoliberal ideology. The labour market has been reshaped by this ideology and become more competitive. Thus, the certainty of jobs-security has decreased, and individuals need to be more self-reliant in terms of gaining employment (see Chapter One). When long-term and stable employment is no longer the trend, people who have a self-directed and flexible mindset, like Diana, are likely to be able to develop self-awareness in their chosen career path, seek external support when job-searching, and cope well with an uncertain career environment (Briscoe, Henagan, Burton, & Murphy, 2012).

## **Diana's Perspectives on Employability**

In connection to Taoism and neoliberal individualism, Diana believes that people are special in their own way. Thus, she considers that judging whether a person is employable simply by a definition would underestimate a person's ability. This means that she does not have a firm statement for "employability":

There is no fixed answer. [...] Everyone is different. The world is diverse. As long as you do well in one place, and others also feel that you are doing well, then...I think you are fine, that is the spot you belong. No need to keep ... pushing yourself [...] like you have to become a certain type of person...I think that would wear you out. I still don't have a very rigorous thought on...how job seekers should be like, what kind of skills they should have. Instead, I think everyone has their own role, just like a brick in a building. The meanings and values of a brick in a building are different from person to person, which is why I have been unable to answer your question.

Diana also does not think that job seekers are solely in the passive role during the recruitment process. Diana believes that job seekers can be active in selecting jobs, companies, and employers that they would like to work for. Although Diana thinks that what employability entails varies from person to person, she manages to list six priorities: (1) gaining appropriate skills for the job you apply for (such as gaining fundamental accounting skills for an accounting position), (2) having a future plan or goals, (3) being modest, (4) being able to communicate well, (5) being able to do teamwork, and (6) developing effective interview skills. Further, Diana also suggests that the capacity for independent thought is important. This allows a person to self-learn, solve practical problems in changeable workplace circumstances without assistance, and, identify ethically appropriate actions and advice in workplaces. These seven traits of employability are constructed from Diana's work experiences; conversations with her parents, mentors, peers who have jobs; movies; and the job descriptions on job-search websites. In summary, Diana thinks employability contains both soft and hard skills.

Diana believes she is employable. Her positive attitude towards her employability motivates her to be active in job-searching (Xie et al., 2017). Diana does not perceive limitations in New Zealand's labour market due to her social role as a recent graduate. However, she does see boundaries as a foreigner because she notices that many job-advisements state, "hiring only New Zealand citizens or



residents”. The lack of belonging and the fear of being excluded are the only two barriers that Diana mentions. Apart from the recruitment conditions, Diana also believes that employers generally prefer job candidates who are already “job-ready”, such as candidates who have the know-how on jobs. This belief is contradictory to her personal perspective on the fluidity of individual employability, but this contradiction has not undermined her belief.

In terms of assisting graduates, Diana proposes ideas for universities, governments, and employer-employee organisations; but she does not clarify whether these relate to China or New Zealand. Diana suggests it would be helpful if universities designed industry-university collaboration programmes. These programmes may help students to put theory into practice and become familiar with workplace culture. For the employer-employee organisations, she hopes that organisations are more willing to believe in graduates’ capability. Even though she understands why employers consider graduates are less efficient than experienced workers, she proposes that graduates need a chance to gain experience and prove their capability. Diana argues that governments can provide compensation to unemployed graduates, as well as organise counselling sessions for them to cope with the stress of unemployment. Diana’s proposals reveal a belief that there should be a shared responsibility for graduates’ employment on three parties (universities, governments, and employer-employee organisations). As stated in Chapter One, taking shared responsibility for youth employment has been proposed by OECD (2015), which also urges the importance of work-based learning. However, there is acknowledgement of the challenges of matching skills with demand given rapid changes in contemporary labour markets.

Diana’s narratives present the notion that employment is a journey (see Chapter One), and that employability is a flexible concept, which varies depending on people’s talents. If employability is viewed as a fixed construct, then Diana worries that people’s capability on jobs will be underestimated. Since one’s career path is unknown, Diana encourages people to embrace the uncertainty and take as many opportunities in life as they can. Therefore, the life journey can lead the way to personal career paths. Similar viewpoints can also be seen in my third case study – Sarah, discussed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Third Case Study – Sarah**

Sarah grew up in South Asia and is now a permanent resident in New Zealand. At the time Sarah was interviewed, she had finished her PhD in Social Sciences at the University of Waikato. Sarah is an only child, and her middle-class family background provides her with material resources. However, the social support from her family members can sometimes turn into emotional pressure due to tensions between Sarah's goals and cultural traditions.

Sarah tends to go with the flow of life, planning only for the short-term future. From a young age, she always wanted to have a job where she could work with and help people, but she did not have a clear idea of the specific occupation. Sarah faces some challenges in the journey of finding her place in the labour market. Fortunately, resources provided by her PhD supervisors aided her into a employment in 2017. In this chapter, I describe Sarah's family, cultural, and social background; her journey to secure her current job position; and her perspectives of employability. In order to maintain confidentiality, I have not specifically mentioned Sarah's home country, her major, and the names of her PhD supervisors. Instead, I present those items as "my/her country", "major, subject, or "discipline", and "supervisors" respectively.

### **Sarah's Everyday Life: Balancing Different "Mes"**

A person's educational level has an important relationship with social mobility in South Asia, for example, parents' social class has a significant impact on children's (especially daughters) education decisions (Bagguley & Hussain, 2016). Sarah's middle-class parents and grandparents all have knowledge-based jobs, and English is her first language, instead of a local language. Speaking English is associated with elite classes in many South Asian countries due to the legacy of British colonisation, and globalisation (Rumnaz Imam, 2005). Within the context of Southern Asian culture, parents play an important role in socialising their children. They influence them to make the "right" educational choices, ensuring their children act in a way consistent with their cultural beliefs (Bagguley & Hussain, 2016). Sarah shared that getting degrees and having a professional job are two fundamentally normal expectations in relation to her family background and culture (Bagguley & Hussain, 2016):

After high school, [...] it didn't even occur me to ...not to go to uni. Does that make sense? Yeah...I had lots of friends who had finished high school and then started working, but, for me [...] it didn't occur me. Like, my parents never forced me to go to uni but it was something that I wanted to do, it is just... something I did

Sarah completed her tertiary qualifications overseas – pursuing her undergraduate degree in Australia, and then a Master's degree and a PhD in New Zealand. Sarah's family was willing to support her financially to fulfil her career and personal goals and the decision to study overseas was agreed by both herself and her family. She said, *“As long as I studied, and got qualifications, and got a job, they (my parents) would be happy. It didn't matter what it was”*.

Although Sarah seems to have had sufficient resources to pursue her dream, the support from her parents is also a source of pressure. For example, her parents contacted her almost every day while she was doing her PhD and checked on her progress of study and her future plans after her PhD degree. Sarah thinks that her parents, who are still living in South Asia, sometimes worry too much about her future in terms of whether she can get properly married and live a decent life by engaging in well-paid work. Their worries often transfer into them offering information and resources that do not match Sarah's emotional needs. Their expectations were a type of encouragement and motivation for self-development when she still needed guidelines to make life decisions, but have now become a source of stress:

*I: Have you tried negotiating your thoughts with your parents?*

Oh, I've tried, and they get offended, [...]. Because I've tried everything else, it ...just blows up eh! [...] Look, I think, reflecting, putting myself in their shoes, I feel like, they feel they are so far away [...] Culturally, part of their role, is to [...] help me (*grow*) as an adult, [...] getting to have my own two feet, [...] to get me married properly, [...] make sure I have a good job, education, and all of that. So...that's part of their parenting role, I think is a more cultural thing. Whereas here in New Zealand, [...] that (*parenting*) doesn't go that far whereas in our culture it does. So, I think, for them, they're feeling quite pressured as well, because, I'm so far away, they can't be there in person to help me out, [...] I feel like this is their way of...trying to help. They don't obviously realise that they are bothering me, and doing way too much and I like to do it on my own.

As the South Asian culture emphasises the importance of the collective welfare of family, individuals are expected to sacrifice their personal desires to fulfil their family role (Shariff, 2009). Hence, parents and grandparents influence children's important life decisions, especially their marriage, career, and education (Shariff, 2009). Sarah's response reveals that she faces some challenges in balancing different social roles in parent-child interactions. Shariff (2009) explains that South Asian parents often evaluate their efficiency in parenting by the degree in which they believe that they have guided their children to make sensible life decisions. Parents may consider themselves as parenting failures if their children go against tradition by displaying a desire for independence. They may react by increasing their level of monitoring, or psychological control. These are the potential stressors for Sarah when finding a balance between her "I" and the "Me" of being a good daughter.

In South Asian culture, fathers usually have more influence than mothers in deciding children's educational and career pathways (Bagguley & Hussain, 2016). This can also be seen in Sarah's story:

*I: Do you think that your family's support influence you choose the pathway of your life?*

As much as I have admitted it! YES! I think it did! [...] As I have mentioned, I would never do a PhD, right, but my dad, from the time I was little, kept saying I think you should do a PhD, because he has done his Master's, and he never did a PhD. So for him, it's one of those things that I never got an opportunity to do so I want you to do it, you know. That cultural way [...] your life is represented through your children. So, for him, it was like, I couldn't do it, so my daughter doing it will be the same as me doing it, so, that would be like I've achieved it through her. [...] But I was just like, Nuh! Something I was never gonna to do (*pursuing PhD*). Never, never, never, going to do it, but somehow, I did it, you know, I kept blaming my supervisors for it, but of course, I think at the end it is the fact that, look, my dad wanted me to do it, also, helped me to make that decision. Yeah! So...I think they did indirectly affect my life choices.

As a South Asian woman, Sarah may feel obliged to complete a PhD because of the expectations from her father, even if it was just sub-consciously. However, the subject she majored in was her own choice, which suggests a level of independence and that she was not fully bound by tradition.

A further source of support that Sarah revealed was mentorship. While she was dealing with the challenges of studying, job-hunting and juggling different tasks in her final year of PhD, Sarah received the support from one of her PhD supervisors and she became her mentor. The social support from a local New Zealander provided Sarah with insider knowledge and skills to cope with the hardship of studying and the uncertainty of job-hunting in New Zealand. The fact that Sarah left home to finish all her degrees successfully, became a resident in New Zealand, and was able to secure a job in New Zealand indicate that Sarah has enough social capital to fulfil societal expectations of employability (Joseph, 2016; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009).

Sarah's in-depth reflections on her own and her family's positions also shows that Sarah seems to be able to assert some degree of control over her circumstances and critically question herself and the situation around her. Accordingly, she is able to pursue her personal values and passion (Bagguley & Hussain, 2016). The process of negotiating personal ideas with social constraints can be considered as generating a new "Me" that is close to who she wants to become by having a dialogue between "I" and "Me". Managing the expectations of independent and a good daughter within the South Asian culture, Sarah is willing to consider her internal voice and find a balance between personal and collective ideas. Sarah's capacity to negotiate different ways of dealing with her parents internally shows that Sarah has the ability to balance "I" and "Me" in the social world.

### **Sarah's Journey to Secure a Job in an Academic Area**

Sarah's employment journey was shaped by her personal values, in conjunction with, the nature of academic based jobs available in New Zealand. Sarah has a flexible and pragmatic mindset to her career. Rather than having a firm plan for her long-term future, she has a plan for the near future. Thus, Sarah's journey to secure her current job was established by achieving a set of unplanned goals. Firstly, Sarah did not intend to pursue a doctoral degree, which she knew was less attractive for many jobs. Secondly, she completed unanticipated activities beyond studying during her PhD years, including being a lecturer, coordinating a paper, marking assignments, publishing publications, and attending conferences. This led Sarah to realise that her job-hunting strategies needed to be different after she had a PhD:

Now..., that I have a PhD, so there are limited avenues that you can go in. So, you can apply for academia which is what my strength is for. Throughout my PhD [...] I've been given lots of opportunities. So I've been teaching, coordinating papers, [...] the opportunity to do lectures, [...] They (*my supervisors*) gave me a lecture at Massey University this year, and I got a lecture at Auckland Uni this year. So, I've done a few lectures, and a few publications, and [...] everything I've done, makes my CV stronger for a career in academia, which is quite funny...so..., I didn't think of it that way, but it is just how it worked out. And the job that I've got now is a research fellow position, [...] I didn't plan to be an academic, it is just how it ended up.

Although Sarah was aware that she needed to have different strategies in job-search, the uncertain nature of her career pathway and the loss of purpose in life after completing her PhD made her nervous and stressed:

I try to be optimistic but at the same time I do get anxious [...] What if nothing works out? You know what I mean? A good example is [...] like my PhD is 3 years, and during these 3 years, I don't have to worry about anything. But, when I'm finishing my PhD, [...] the moment I submitted my PhD, [...] I got really sick for a whole month, because [...] three years of my life, I was focusing on this (*Doing PhD*), and now, there is nothing, you know. And I've just submitted it so...technically, I couldn't apply for a job because I didn't have the PhD yet, [...] so... I got really sick, I was stressed that makes me sick, physically sick. I was really stressed out, because there's nothing (*in my life*) I've done my PhD, [...] I had no job, I had nothing

Apart from the pressure of having no purpose in life, Sarah also mentioned that she felt less employable as a migrant in New Zealand compared to locals. This uncertainty impacted upon her physical health, which was a result from mental stress. Sarah's comment shows two important messages: she perceives that (1) looking for jobs is an individual responsibility, and (2) there are inadequate resources available to PhD students to assist them in the transition period.

The internalised guilt of having no focus in life also reflects the work ethic and the neoliberal argument that people need to be mostly self-reliant (discussed in Chapter One). Furthermore, although Sarah is aware of the difficulties of job-hunting in the contemporary labour market, she does not question why individuals carry the most pressure of securing a job. She said: "*Just how the job market is at this point, eh! Like, very few jobs for so many people. So, what can be done for that necessarily? Just what it is, I guess.*" As a result, the reason why Sarah saw her lack

of employment as her personal problem is based on her integration of the neoliberal view of individual responsibility. When being asked what the potential solutions to the unfair situation in the labour market are today, Sarah does not know what can be done by governments and employer-employees organisations, even though she would like them to take some responsibility for this situation.

Many PhD students face challenges in job-hunting, such as the shortage of academic positions, lacking opportunities to be exposed in an environment that is beyond research, and having few ideas of what jobs to look for (S. P. Campbell et al., 2005; McAlpine et al., 2013). Campbell and colleagues (2005) state that employers normally perceive that PhD graduates have less variety of skills and abilities as compared to non-PhD job-candidates. Relatedly, Campbell and colleagues (2005) suggest that universities need to provide PhD students with academic opportunities, such as teaching courses, being a tutor, or managing projects. Fortunately, one of Sarah's PhD supervisors offered her a short-term job as an alternative focus in her life after her PhD submission, and she was able to rebuild her confidence. Eventually, Sarah was able to secure a fixed-term academic research position. Therefore, when asked to give advice for job-hunters, she echoes Diana's ethos of making the most of opportunities: *"Just take the opportunity that is given to you, and then complete that, and see what's opened up, because you can't predict what is going to happen"*. Sarah's perspective on unstable careers reflects the idea that gaining employment has become a dynamic process in modern life, instead of a fixed destination (Sutton, 2015; Vaughan et al., 2006; Wyn, 2007).

### **Sarah's Perspective on Employability**

Apart from job-hunting for a full-time position, Sarah also worked in part-time positions during her undergraduate study. When job-seeking, Sarah gathered ideas on what abilities and skills employers wanted by reading job descriptions and job advertisements. She discovered that the skills and abilities required for employment vary from job to job, showing that recruitment related information has been Sarah's primary way in developing her understanding of employability. As such, she knows how to modify her CV to match the requirements of different jobs. For example, while applying for jobs in the academic sector, she highlighted her experiences in writing publications and coordinating papers.

Although Sarah reshaped her the understanding of employability over time, she lists three fundamental factors of employability: (1) the willingness to learn, (2) the ability to time-manage, and (3) the ability to say the right things during job-interviews. Firstly, Sarah said people cannot be expected to know everything; however, showing the willingness to learn and try during a job interview is a way to prove that you are the person for the job:

The fact that, you're applying for a new job, especially after you just finish Uni, right, you're starting a new job so, obviously, you shouldn't be expected to know everything about the job, right? That's the point, you're starting new, I think that, stating and showing your employers that you are willing to learn, will help, because, then, you don't... expect to know everything, or you don't claim to know everything, because, obviously, you don't, yeah?

Secondly, Sarah thinks that if a person can organise tasks well and has the ability to time-manage, the person will be able to manage well in his or her job. This idea is generated from her personal experiences. For example, Sarah was successfully able to manage on different roles during her final year of PhD, as she was constantly juggling being a lecturer, a tutor, a maker of assignments, and a researcher. Different roles have different responsibilities and multiple tasks to complete. To do well in each role, she had to make plans and ensure that she was on schedule.

Lastly, Sarah considers that interview skills are important, as job-interviews seem to be a decisive stage in the recruitment process. Thus, she believes the ability to say the “right things” is crucial. The “right things” refers to selling personal strengths in a way that employers may regard as desirable. Sarah thinks that being confident during job-interviews is important because the job applicants can describe how employable they are to employers in person. In order to do so, Sarah did some research about questions used in job-interviews online and put herself into the employers' shoes to imagine what types of people that employers seek. Then, she prepared her answers for potential interview questions, and she practiced answering these interview questions repeatedly. Practicing meant she was able to manage her stress before and during the job-interviews. Some of the interview questions she practiced were asked by interviewers, validating her strategies.



Even though Sarah is willing to learn, able to time-manage, and has the ability to present herself professionally during job-interviews, Sarah does not consider that the contemporary labour market is fair to graduates:

I think there's lot more unfairness now because lots of people are graduating. At the same time, there's fewer jobs, especially...yeah...especially when employers are increasingly asking you to have these many years of experience. When you are a new graduate, you obviously don't have that, so...yeah...I think...it...obviously makes things harder for a new graduate to get a job related to their fields of study as well, so I think that's quite unfair

Sarah's response can reflect two significant phenomena in the contemporary job markets: (1) work experience as a pre-requisite; and (2) there is a gap between supply and demand in knowledge-based job markets. Currently, there are often more trained knowledge-based workers but fewer jobs available, in many industrialised countries. When the number of people who have a degree in the labour market increases, obtaining a degree becomes a basic requirement even for the jobs which did not previously require it (see Chapter One). Thus, having some type of work experience seems to be an extra condition for job-applicants. Accordingly, when there are repeated messages about degrees being a pre-requisite for employment, more people are encouraged to pursue a degree. Subsequently, the number of job-seekers who have a degree increases. Sarah's response also shows that there is less responsibility for employment placed on employers. This is consistent with neoliberal ideology, which emphasises the individuals' responsibility for their own employment. As such, graduates are likely to be left to deal with the difficulties and challenges in securing a job by themselves. My final case-study – Shirley – demonstrates another way to cope with the pressure of gaining employment is through receiving family support and developing a short-term goal for future occupation. Her story is presented in the following chapter.

## Chapter 6: Final Case Study – Shirley

Shirley is a European New Zealander who grew up in a middle-class family with two older brothers. She completed a Bachelor's degree in Industrial Relations and Human Resource Management (IR&HRM) at the University of Waikato in 2017. Both Shirley's parents have professional jobs, and her older brothers have degrees. Therefore, Shirley's family background ensured a greater understanding of higher education and its relationship to contemporary labour markets. Shirley also actively participated in a range of activities as a preparation for full-time employment, such as joining a student club, being an intern in a firm, and participating in employer-network programmes. With these experiences and high grades in her studies, Shirley is confident in her employability, but she still had concerns when job-hunting. Nevertheless, she was able to secure a HR position at the beginning of 2018. In this chapter, I introduce Shirley's social background, her experience of seeking help from on-campus career centres, and her viewpoints on employability.

### **Shirley's Everyday Life: She is Born to be Ready for Jobs. Is She?**

As discussed in Chapter One, neoliberal ideology became widespread in New Zealand after the late 1980s. Wyn (2007) argues that after neoliberal ideology was introduced to both Australia and New Zealand, young people have been strongly encouraged to become "successful" through personal achievements and education with the financial support from their parents and themselves. Shirley has also had such messages reinforced through her social network. Her parents' both have professional jobs and have sufficient resources to support their children to receive good quality education. This is important given Shirley and her brothers view participating in higher education and moving on to a professional job as an expected norm:

*I: May I ask why you chose (to study at) the uni instead of Wintec?*

Hum...I don't know...probably because ...I always though ...oh! I'm going to the university...because I thought I would be always going to the uni...hum...both my siblings went to the universities.

Yeah...my family don't really put pressure on me. Friends...I guess, the people that you hang out with...A lot of my friends, who've gone on to the universities, studying, and wanting to get good jobs. But, I guess, you can say that in order to fit in....'m doing that too (? Assuming tone).

(Also), there was quite a lot of pressure from my high school, because, we're all high achieving. So...there is a great pressure to get a good job to strive. And, I probably put pressure on myself, because you need a job, to get money, to support yourself, and I don't want just to get a job working at something that is not related with my degree, I think that would be a waste of three years of my life, and all that money.

The conversation above shows that her middle-class position and peer pressure drove Shirley to pursue a degree. Accordingly, social-economic class plays a role in what kinds of information and resources that a person receives, and the connection in a person's long-lasting networks (such as family and friends) can drive him or her to accomplish life goals (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). The conversation above also shows that Shirley desires her investment in education to have the return of securing a stable job relevant to her field of study. Shirley's beliefs and actions reflect human capital theory (HCT). Most people in middle classes have accepted the assumptions of human capital theory (Z. Li, 2013). This means that they are willing to invest large amounts of money in education to gain valuable factors for employment that will ensure a return on that investment (see Chapter One). HCT promotes the belief that while degrees are not an assured way to secure a job, degrees generally can provide power and competencies for job-seekers in the labour market (Woodman & Wyn, 2013; Wyn, 2007). In addition, degree-holders are often viewed as social elites because they obtain academic and cultural knowledge consistent with middle class and elite values (Woodman & Wyn, 2013). As a result, Shirley's ambition to become a knowledge-skilled worker is also a way to remain in her social class and fit in with her friends.

Like Diana and many other young people (Wyn, 2007), Shirley has been challenged to balance her life and extracurricular activities along with the pressure of pursuing a degree. For example, Shirley participated in a student club in order to cultivate her personal interests by engaging with people and to build a sense of belonging. This became a highlight in her university life, even though she did not get paid for being actively involved and was stressed at times. The efforts she put into the student club contributed to her employment competencies. In order to gain work experience, Shirley also felt obliged to take on a part-time job and an internship programme after listening to advice from a career counsellor. Although her part-time job did help with paying off her student loan and gave her extra money

for social activities with friends, Shirley needed to be very organised with her time and tasks. By having a variety of experiences that were not part of her formal university study, Shirley said that she felt confident in her employability, compared to other recent graduates. Shirley's account shows that she cultivated her career pathways carefully while pursuing her degree.

While Shirley planned her employment path carefully, she also had advantages in terms of social and cultural capital. Although New Zealand consists of more than one culture, the legacies of colonialism mean that a European perspective is dominant, even though other cultures have also been acknowledged and empowered (Cosgriff et al., 2012). While a competitive labour market context can be challenging for all graduates, those who have greater cultural capital to fit within the dominant European and middle-class norms that have shaped New Zealand society are more likely to succeed in securing employment. As argued in Chapter One, taken-for-granted knowledge, such as the topic of employability, in our everyday life is mostly established from the social context of privilege. As a European New Zealander with cultural capital and good quality support from her family, Shirley is likely to have sufficient resources to make a smoother transition to employment. However, despite advantages in terms of ethnicity and class, like David and Sarah, Shirley still has concerns about the uncertain process in job-hunting, and thus she has sought out career advice.

### **Shirley's Experiences in Seeking Help from an On-campus Career Centre**

As mentioned in Chapter One, on-campus career centres provide support to prepare students for employment. Given her field of study and support from her family, Shirley already knew how to write a CV and to present herself properly in job-interviews. As such, Shirley did not feel the career consultants from high school and university could offer her much more:

*I: Does the career counsellor helpful?*

Erm....no...haha... I went to see the one prior to the university, hum...He wasn't very helpful, he kind of put me in the path that I didn't really wanna go, and then I went to see the career counsellor in the university, and I didn't found it too helpful either.

*I: In terms of...*

I don't know how to say it, but she was a bit... waffly, she didn't really provide me with guidance, [...], she just told me what I already knew. Yup

*I: So... why you go to the counsellor?*

Hum.... just for guidance and direction, because I wasn't really sure where I was going with my degree, just kinda needed a third person who works in the uni and really familiar with helping people's career and kinda give me some input.

Shirley's experiences reflect the uncertainty in the process of job-searching associated with the growth of precarious work and downsizing of permanent work. Securing a job usually requires considering personal interest, qualifications, and the current job-opportunities, but the mix of these factors are likely to change overtime (McAlpine & Emmioglou, 2015). Shirley's account also highlights the limits of a solely supply-sided approach to the labour market. Shirley may anticipate her career counsellor might provide some direct information about how to reach her career destination, but this is not the kind of advice that is given because career trajectories are now viewed as an unpredictable process instead of a fixed objective. As Villar and colleagues (2000) argue, neither graduates nor their parents or teachers can really direct students to their career destination since occupation destinations are uncertain. What career counsellors can offer is to assist some students to feel more positive and confident about their employability (see Chapter One). Even though graduates normally have more positive intentions and attitudes in their job search compared to non-graduates (because of the perceived advantages in knowledge, skills, and abilities), the unknown paths in job-search can challenge graduates and, in turn, reduce their confidence and job-search motivation (Xie et al., 2017). The uncertainty in job-search can mean that even students, such as Shirley who has many advantages regarding employability, can still feel the weight of uncertainty while job-hunting.

To improve the success in the job market for students, Shirley suggested universities could co-operate with business sectors to match students with job positions. Universities can also work with businesses to organise industry-university cooperative projects. This suggestion is the same as David (who also studies Human Resource Management) and is consistent with literatures' (OECD,

2015; OECD et al., 2016; Rae, 2007). Rae (2007) suggests that universities can organise a variety of practical papers for students to apply theory into practice. Although Rae's research focused on business-study students, he claimed his idea could improve students' employability in all types of study. With an over-supply of graduates and the increased desire for employers to hire work-experienced graduates, work-based learning and experience can positively contribute to enhancing a person's employability and may increase the possibilities for a person to be employed (OECD, 2015). However, more research needs to be done, particularly on students doing non-business degrees. Nevertheless, the general consensus seems to be that students and graduates need access to a range of activities to improve their personal skills, abilities, and experiences in preparation for full-time employment.

### **Shirley's Perspective on Employability**

As outlined in the previous sections, Shirley has social and cultural capital that provides her with advantages in the New Zealand labour market, however, she also demonstrates she is aware that competition has increased in the labour market. In general, Shirley's perspective on employability reflects the contemporary neoliberal understandings (discussed in Chapter One):

Maybe is the growth of populations (? *Assumption tone*). So, it is more competitive, you need to have more things under your belt. Whereas, previously, you can have no experience and there is no one going for the jobs, you have a better chance. But now, there might be a hundred of people going for this position, so you need to make yourself more employable, to increase the chances to get the job.

*I: Do you think it is worth having a degree?*

Yes, I think you need a degree. But I would suggest having stuff on top of it, just to kind of have...to show employers more examples in the interview. Could be voluntary positions as well

Shirley's comments indicate that for her being employable means gaining degrees and other experience. She also lists a few factors that are beneficial for seeking formal employment for the first time and these include being: (1) hard-working, (2) willing to learn and grow in the role, (3) able to do teamwork, (4) punctual, (5) reliable, (6) organised, (7) able to do administration, and (8) obtaining degrees and other practical experiences relevant to the field of study.

Shirley particularly highlights the ability to work well with people as being central to employability given that almost every job requires engaging with people such as clients, co-workers, bosses, and so on. Her perspective on employability is consistent with Andrews and Higson (2008) who recommend that graduates with business relevant degrees should obtain both professional knowledge and interpersonal competencies (such as social skills, teamworking, and public speaking). Piercy and Steele (2016) also argue for the increased importance of social skills, due to the technological changes and the precarious nature of work in the 21st century. In short, the widespread information on improving employability for graduates is that they should enhance their personal aptitudes, skills, and experiences (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Even though Shirley seemed to be job-ready before graduation, she still perceived some constraints in her job-search process. Firstly, Shirley said being young and having no experience are the two main barriers for a new graduate in the job-hunting process. Shirley explained that employers, especially in small organisations, value work experience. Shirley thinks the reason is because employers generally refuse to take reputational and financial risks by hiring someone who does not know workplace culture and how to present themselves. Employers, in general, are less willing to invest money in training new employees, especially new graduates. Shirley states, *“well, it is kind of outrageous cycle, eh! they want you to have some experiences, but they won’t give it to you, how you supposed to get experience”*.

Apart from being inexperienced, Shirley considers her degree in social sciences could be another disadvantage for finding a position in HR. She chose to study Human Resources in Social Sciences rather than in Management as this reduced the length of study by one year and because she is more interested in social sciences. However, she discovered that many HR job advertisements state that they are only looking for business degrees. Shirley finds this rather unfair:

What if I was better than these business graduates, they wouldn’t take me because they want somebody with economic understanding but it’s for a recruitment role. And I’m just thinking, do you really need to have so much business knowledge to hire people (? Assuming tone)

Despite her concerns, she still managed to generate job-hunting strategies. For example, she looked for jobs that were open to new graduates or were entry-level. Those types of jobs are normally designed for people who have less workplace experience. She also formatted her CV to make herself look employable, such as highlighting her best academic achievements and listing experiences in activities beyond study. Shirley also had a strong conviction that she would secure a job, and that it was just a matter of timing.

When considering possible solutions to current employment and employability issues, Shirley has ideas for governments, universities, and employer-employee organisations. As mentioned previously, Shirley suggests that employers could be more willing to give opportunities to new graduates. She said, new graduates may be inexperienced, but they can be harder workers and are more willing to learn compared to experienced workers. To initiate such changes, Shirley suggests governments could provide more subsidies for employment-programmes for students, such as internships and graduate programmes, some of which have been introduced in the New Zealand job market (Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, 2018).

Shirley's account reflects that she has several advantages in her quest to become a work-ready job-seeker. She has resources and support from her family, and knowledge from her studies in HR to understand the labour market and the way to prepare for employment. However, the uncertainty in securing a job caused some anxiety for Shirley, even though she is confident of her employability. She also considers being young and inexperienced as two main disadvantages in full-time employment. Lastly, Shirley questions why employers generally have high expectations for a "job-ready" graduate but are reluctant to provide relevant support for assisting graduates in becoming "job-ready". The following chapter discusses the connections between the four participants' accounts, with theoretical framework of this thesis and the contemporary circumstances in labour markets.



## **Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, securing a job is an uncertain process and graduates carry more individual responsibility for becoming employable than in the past. This thesis has explored how the concept of employability is constructed and understood by university students and recent graduates in New Zealand. Using social constructionism, I discovered that my participants' understandings of contemporary employment issues are shaped by their everyday life experiences, which differ based on their socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, and nations (see Chapter Two). The findings in this thesis present diverse perspectives on the issue of employment and employability from the perspective of different identities in New Zealand – two international students, one resident immigrant, and one local New Zealander. Accordingly, this thesis reveals the influence of social expectations and societal structures from three different cultures on people's perspectives of employability.

This chapter highlights key themes from the participants' stories, which are (1) how the socioeconomic class of a person plays a significant role in constructing perspectives on employment; (2) the internalised beliefs that the demands of employability changes constantly; (3) how the uncertain nature of employment process can be experienced as opportunity or as stress; and (4) the challenge to manage several social expectations while trying to become employable. My discussion is drawn from the main theoretical concepts that are covered in Chapters One and Two, which are neoliberal ideology, the concept of self – the dialogue between “I” and “Me”, and everyday life experiences. However, as people and the social world interlace in complex ways, the interpretations of my research can only offer limited possible explanations for contemporary issues of employment and employability. The chapter will conclude with suggestions for future research.

### **Our Everyday Life is Significant**

The stories of the four participants in this research all reflect how they have internalised the pressures and expectations of pursuing degrees for employment. They are all striving to secure knowledge-skilled jobs, albeit in slightly different ways. To explain this from a micro level, as mentioned in Chapter Two, the processes of socialisation shapes the way people perceive the social world. Many

researchers have revealed that parents are the primary facilitators of cultural values, including shaping their children's understanding of employment regarding future occupation and personal thoughts of their career (Diemer, 2007; Koumoundourou et al., 2011; C. Li & Kerpelman, 2007). Further, as occupation is an important determinant of a person's socioeconomic class, children's socioeconomic class is decided by their parents' occupations (Bagguley & Hussain, 2016; Giddens & Sutton, 2013; Hodgetts et al., 2010; Rohall et al., 2014). Accordingly, parents and other close family members are major influences of a person's socioeconomic class. The stories of David and Sarah particularly reflect this idea. Both Sarah and David have illustrated that their interactions with their parents have had a significant influence upon their career and lifepath decisions. As their parents are all professionals, both David and Sarah did not question why their parents put so much pressure on them to become white-collar workers.

Friends and long-term acquaintances also influence a person's career thinking. They generally share similar resources and environments because they belong to the same socioeconomic class. Consequently, comparisons between peers about the "right" types of jobs may turn into a form of employment pressure for young people. When occupation is a decisive factor in a person's socioeconomic class, people who grow up in a middle-class family may want to maintain their socioeconomic status by securing a "good" job. For instance, Shirley's narratives have revealed that it is mostly her friends and peers who have influenced her particular career path. In her case, securing an elite job is not simply about economic independence, but also reflects a need to be admired and accepted by people in her social circle. In contrast to the other three participants, Diana has her own desires that she wants to fulfil in her life, which are against her peers' expectations. Her desires are also not pushed by her parents' expectations regarding her career. Diana's intentions also show the cultural influences of Taoism, related to her Chinese background. As discussed in Chapter four, one of the core philosophies of Taoism suggests that the harmony of society is achieved through people recognising and balancing their desires, rather than constraining or suppressing them. Significantly, Diana's intentions of progressing through her life can also be aligned with neoliberal ideology, which emphasises that the individual will benefit from having more freedom of choices in employment as the primary means to seek to progress their own well-being and

fulfilment (see Chapter One). Diana's story shows how, despite micro level influences, the factors from macro level (the structure of contemporary economy and dominant neoliberal ideology) also affects people's perspectives on employment.

The global economy has had a significant increase in the need for knowledge-based workers after the 1980s because of globalisation and innovations in technology. Accordingly, there is a widespread view that most well-paid and stable jobs require a tertiary qualification. As such, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many people who live in industrialised countries and come from middle-class backgrounds tend to normalise participation in higher education as a preparation for employment. In addition, many industrialised countries have adopted neoliberal ideology as a means to respond to the competitive global economy, which places the burden of employment solely on individuals (see Chapter One). However, knowledge-based jobs are difficult to secure because there are not enough jobs available for all degree-holders, which places additional competitive pressure on job seekers.

Although the participants have different experiences that have constructed their understanding of the contemporary issues of employment, the dominant neoliberal ideology has been present in all of the participants' narratives. The narratives of the four participants express a belief that they hold personal responsibility for their employment in competitive labour markets. As they all grew up in an era where a knowledge-based economy was predominant, they all acknowledge the pressure of competition in the labour market. For example, Sarah and David both express feelings of helplessness towards the competition in the labour market. They do not know what can be done to slow down the intense competition in the labour market, thus, they accept its disadvantages as an inevitable difficulty to be overcome alone. David further conveys the belief that there is a need to become "outstanding" through keeping gaining valuable skills in order to gain and remain employment.

### **Challenges in Becoming "Employable"**

Participants' concerns regarding contemporary economy reveals two main challenges when they try to become employable, which are (1) what is required to be employable changes regularly; and (2) the struggles to balance fulfilling several different expectations that generate from their social roles.

### **The constant changes in the demands of employability**

There are two possible reasons for the constant changes in the demands of employability: (1) unpredictable economic trends that lead to changeable demands of employability (see Chapter One), and (2) mismatched information about employability that results from participants' taken-for-granted knowledge and their experience in job-hunting. Due to rapid societal and economic changes, the demands for skills in labour market are difficult to predict (OECD, 2015). As changing jobs frequently has become a norm, people nowadays can be required to constantly re-examine and upskill their employability so as to secure another job. This illustrates that the struggles my participants face may not be just because they are university students or recent graduates. Further, in contrast to my participants, this requirement can be more challenging for those who have less resources to upskill themselves.

The changes in the demands of employability not only occur because of the different time-frames associated with degrees and job-hunting, but also occur due to the desired locations of employment and occupation, and the rules to become employable in different cultures (see Chapter One). The narratives from David have reflected this idea, with his story demonstrating a clear set of tensions in his journey of becoming employable. For example, he believes that the process of recruitment is supposed to be based on the value of meritocracy, but he notices the recruitment process in China relies more on social connections with people in workplaces. Further, David has the desire to secure a job in New Zealand, but his primary knowledge of employment is shaped through the Chinese employment context. As a result, David experiences a great degree of frustration in constructing the concept of employability for himself. His story informs us that although people in this neoliberal era have more freedom in choosing their pathway to their employment, more choices do not necessarily assist people in making "good" decisions. Instead, the pressure to choose and decide correctly can be overwhelming and frustrating. The idealised assumption of neoliberalism, that more choices benefits people's well-being, can instead mean that freedom is experienced like a dizziness that causes anxiety (Kierkegaard S, 1980).

In order to cope with the economic change, many long-term jobs are being replaced by various short-term jobs, which increases the uncertainty in long-term

employment (see Chapter One). This precarious nature of employment contributes to the constant changes of employability. The stories of Sarah and Shirley reflect the situation that as good jobs (longer-term and well-paid) are scarce and competitive to secure, as a coping mechanism many people choose short-term jobs as stepping stones to what *might* one day be a long-term job. For example, in Sarah's case, she did several contract jobs for the university that can be classed as precariat while pursuing her doctoral degree, which eventually led her to secure a longer-term contract job. However, not all graduates are this fortunate. Shirley's narrative also shows that she accepts the idea of securing her dream job by doing several jobs. She is pragmatic in her expectations about her first job; and she anticipates that her first job may not be her dream job. She believes that the experience of her first job will contribute to her future jobs, and she will eventually secure a job that she desires.

Connecting to Standing's (2012, 2013) arguments on the precariat, all four participants expressed anxiety due to the uncertain processes of employment. David expresses his anxiety through the loss of confidence in his employability, and frustration regarding his efforts in becoming employable. Sarah revealed that she got physically sick because of her strong feeling of anxiety towards her unknown employment future. Sarah clearly internalised the burden of securing a job in the era that economic changes rapidly. Shirley conveys her anxiety by seeking information and directions about job-hunting from career counsellors and questioning why it is an individual's responsibility for becoming employable.

In contrast to the other three participants, Diana views the uncertainty in employment as opportunity. Although she also experiences anxiety regarding the precariat, she is comfortable with the idea that employability is a dynamic concept rather than being a fixed objective. This is because she believes that people have different talents. Diana's perspectives express the idea that people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are able to define employability in relation to their personal values and capabilities. These two factors can help direct people to particular occupations, and also, function as assets to actively select an occupation that a person wants. This approach to employability offers potential to avoid the power imbalances in the recruitment process. Accordingly, she encourages people to be willing to explore their talents by taking any kind of job opportunity that comes their way and suits

their personal interests. Being willing to explore oneself can also be a way to learn more about your own capabilities or limits. Informed by Taoism and neoliberalism, Diana believes the journey of exploring and developing talents for employment will lead to the destination of a person's dream occupation. This idea of self-defining employability, as expressed by Diana, is significantly different from previous research that seeks to categorise employability (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Ju et al., 2012; Omar et al., 2012; Rae, 2007). However, Diana's ability to develop her perspective of self-defining employability needs to be understood in the context of parental support, including the freedom to self-develop with less burden of being the primary provider for her family.

### **Becoming employable through reaching multiple social expectations**

As people living in a social world, people have several social roles which generate through different social expectations. In the process of becoming employable, participants all convey their juggling act regarding fulfilling different social roles. Firstly, as job-hunters, there is a need to achieve employers' expectations so as to secure a job in a competitive labour market. As discussed in Chapter One, many employers tend to hire flexible workers who have "sufficient" factors for employment to adapt to the changes of the economy (I. Campbell & Price, 2016). "Sufficient" factors for knowledge-skilled jobs often include a degree from higher education, the ability to combine higher-level of cognitive with other abilities, and transferable skills. For example, a cultural awareness may be a preferable factor for employment in a multicultural workplace (see Chapter One).

In order to gain "evidence" to show employers that graduates have "sufficient" factors for employment, graduates are usually encouraged to participate in activities beyond studying (such as a part-time job or a student club) (Kraus & Vonken, 2009; Tymon, 2013). These suggestions are often communicated through media, career counsellors, or the expectations from parents (see Chapter One). The story of Shirley is an example of receiving advice from a career counsellor. Due to the advice she received, Shirley felt obliged to participate in a part-time job and internship to gain work experiences and transferable skills. Diana also intentionally engages in a part-time job and an internship to learn about New Zealand culture and gaining social skills in preparation for an employment in New Zealand.

The individuals' burden of reaching employers' expectations of being employable can be reinforced by neoliberal ideas that relate to the meritocratic illusion. This illusion suggests that people will be rewarded with prizes (such as securing a dream job) by working hard enough (Higgins & Nairn, 2006). However, people may not always perceive that they have opportunities to take part in extracurricular activities. In addition, essentially, there are not enough jobs for degree-holders. The illusion can provide a false sense of hope. Accordingly, graduates suffer a degree of frustration and anxiety. David and Sarah encounter this challenge. David mentioned that he could not find a way to be exposed to New Zealand culture, which is an important factor for people who intend to work in New Zealand. His only experiences of New Zealand culture are through in-class events and group work assignments. Sarah also did not experience connections with potential employers while pursuing her doctoral degree. The opportunities she received were all offered by her supervisors, but not every PhD student can have this privilege. Lastly, employers' expectations for ideal employees can also lead to a certain preference for ethnicity, nationality, or the types of degrees, for example, Shirley perceives her degree in social sciences is a disadvantage in applying for relevant HR positions.

Apart from the identity of job-hunters, graduates also have other social roles, meaning that the need to fulfil other social expectations during the journey of becoming employable (see Chapter Two). Therefore, graduates can find it challenging to find a balance among different social expectations. The four participants have shared stories relevant to the tensions of managing different social expectations. For David, the needs to fulfil the roles of being a son and a male in the Chinese culture have placed a huge pressure on him. He feels burdened by carrying the cultural expectations to be responsible for financially supporting his family and secure an elite job as a fulfilment of his parents' expectation. As a final-year student who has started worrying about his future plans, David struggles to decide where he would like to settle down and what occupations he would like to apply for. David is so burdened by the pressures from his social roles that he really has little space to consider what he might like to do in life or what he might be good at. Sarah has also negotiated several expectations between her role as a good

daughter within a South Asian culture and as an independent adult. However, different from David, Sarah considers her personal thoughts about her career.

In contrast, Diana seems to not carry such cultural pressure regarding to a family role, like David and Sarah, but she has been trying to balance personal values with the constraints of culture and society. She refuses to conform to social norms in China, where pleasing authority is a response of showing respect. Therefore, she left China and challenged herself by seeking overseas experiences in New Zealand – the country she considered as having more freedom to pursue personal achievements without being constrained by tradition and conformity. Lastly, Shirley has been managing to fulfil the expectations of her social groups, which drives her to pursue degree and find a knowledge-based job. As many of her friends have desires to secure an elite job, she aim for securing an elite job as a way to remain in her social groups. With the understanding of how competitive it is to secure an knowledge-based job, Shirley challenges herself to not only participate in tertiary education, but also gain other valuable skills for employment through different activities. As such, she is able get ahead of other job-seekers. During the journey of becoming employable, the four participants were all challenged to manage different stresses that generate from different social expectations.

### **The Implication of Research Findings**

The journey of becoming employable is stressful as it involves reaching expectations from society, culture, family, and employers. In terms of easing the tension of reaching different expectations from the former three factors, developing a sense of true-self is a way to overcome this challenge and establish personal career thought. As discussed in Chapter Two, the true-self refers to a type of “Me” that find a balance among several social roles, which is important to build career paths. Those who receive good quality support from others seems to have the space to develop a sense of true-self. For example, both Diana and Shirley have received support from family who have provided sufficient space for them to discover their career paths and have been willing to guide them through any challenge. Consequently, they have positive attitudes about their unknown future and are willing to explore life possibilities. Sarah’s parents, especially her father, tended to impose career expectations on her. This pressure generated tension between Sarah and her parents, which lead her to experience anxiety. Fortunately, Sarah has had



mentorship. Her mentorship provides a safe space to develop her true-self, which aides Sarah to overcome challenges in preparing for academic jobs and finding jobs. In contrast, David has met mentors in life, who are willing to guide him through the journey of becoming employable, and he does not receive a safe zone from his parents to generate a sense of true-self. Consequently, David has lost confidence in how employable he is, and has been frustrated by the lack of direction in knowing how to secure a job.

The research findings also reveal the challenge to reach employers' expectation of being employable. The anxieties exhibited by the four participants are related to the circumstance that the future skills needed for employment are difficult to predict precisely, and that it is their fault to be unemployable. However, the contemporary demand for skill in the labour market is mostly known by employers. If employers are reluctant to assist people in employment the issue of unemployment, and mismatching skills will be harder to solve. Literature offers some suggestions – such as providing training to new graduates, co-operating with educational institutions to organise work-based learning, and offering internships, graduates' programmes, and entry-level jobs (I. Campbell & Price, 2016; OECD, 2015; OECD et al., 2016). Although such programmes have already been introduced, there is still a need to ensure these programmes are accessible to a wider range of employers with the increased willingness to provide support. Suggestions do not necessarily raise employers' awareness of taking more responsibility for supporting graduates' employment. Therefore, governments need to play a role by making relevant policies enforceable and providing subsidies. Consequently, the pressure of solving graduates' employment can become a shared-responsibility among governments, employers, and individuals.

## **Conclusion**

This research has focused on exploring how young graduates and final-year universities students construct their understanding of employability. The research topic considered how graduates perceive the contemporary economic situation, how they enhance personal skills and the ability for employment, and what challenges they face when becoming employable. The research findings are interpreted from a psycho-societal perspective, which considers a range of macro and micro factors when discussing the issues of employment and employability. For example, this

thesis highlights that neoliberalism leads people to internalise the burden of becoming employable by their own, through doing the “right” actions that fit with social, societal and personal expectations. Thus, it is worth questioning neoliberal assumptions because it is the dominant ideology, and people are less aware of how structural factors shape these expectations.

Since people live in a complex social world, people carry various social roles and constantly deal with the need to fulfil different social expectations. In the journey of becoming employable, increasing one’s employability is the primary but not the only social expectation to reach. My participants stories illustrate how people may face tensions in managing different social expectations. Developing a sense of true-self can be a solution to ease these tensions and, accordingly, to be able to discover personal thoughts about future career. In order to develop a sense of true-self, people need a safe space to include internal voices to find a balance between personal desires and collective rules. This thesis illustrates that support from people, such as family, friends, or mentors, play an important role in providing quality support for a person to develop the sense of true-self.

The collective expectations of “being employable” are shaped through structural factors, but these expectations are not stable. Due to globalisation, free-markets, and innovations in technology, the demands of employability in labour markets change rapidly. As such, young graduates’ understandings about labour market while pursuing their degrees may not be applicable by the time they job-hunt. In addition, employers gradually have more power in setting the expectations of what being employable mean, but they are also more reluctant to assist people to gain employment opportunities. The imbalanced power in the employment relationship in the neoliberal world means graduates are more vulnerable in the struggle to become “job-ready” alongside all the other demands of transitioning into adult life. Therefore, it can be difficult and confusing for young graduates to figure out the “best” and “right” actions to take so as to become employable.

When the demands of employability are unpredictable, there is a need to question the belief that the burden for employment should be solely placed on individuals. Employers, the party that understands the skill needed for labour markets the most, can to take more responsibility for solving the issue of

employment. In order to raise employers' awareness about their need to be involved, governments can also play a role by supervising employers' actions through policy-making. As such, one possibility for future research is to explore the current ways that employers assist graduates' employment in this neoliberal era, and what can be improved. Future research can also explore solutions to the precariousness in employment relationship from organisational management perspectives, such as new strategies in human resources management. Thirdly, future research can focus on understanding the role of institutions in tertiary education and on-campus career centres. For example, developing ways institutions can structure educational programmes to aid students to develop the ability to cope with the uncertainty of employment and become employable. How the services of on-campus career centres influence students' perceptions regarding internalisation of employability, and what kind of support they can provide to aid students to overcome challenges in job-hunting. Finally, future research can explore the possibility of unmasking and challenging the myth of the "elite" job and encouraging school-leavers to consider participating in other types of training beyond university study as another solution to unemployment.

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## Appendix 1

Photo journal (feel free to copy and paste the table if you need some extra)

*Insert your photo here.*

*(Photos of things that can demonstrate how you are improving your soft skills or are extending your life experience, and, you are likely to present those activities in your CV.)*

*Thoughts to share with Yoyo*

*Why did you choose this photo?*

*Why would you like to participate in this activity?*

*What skills or abilities have you learned which are related to employment?*

*Do you feel obliged to participate in such activities?*

## **Appendix 2**

### **Research Project Information Sheet for Participants**

#### **Am I employable? The viewpoints of final-year students or recent graduates on employability**

Hi \_\_ (name of the participant) \_\_,

My name is Chian Yow Kwek (Yoyo Kwek) and I am a Master's student at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Waikato. My thesis title is *Am I employable? The viewpoints of final-year students or recent graduates on employability*. Final-year students refer to those who are finishing their degrees or qualifications in terms of Bachelor's or post-graduate qualifications. This research has been given ethical approval by the School of Psychology.

Nowadays, having a paid-job is almost essential to support a person's life or a family. The aim of this research is to explore the perspectives on preparing for employment from new graduates or soon to be graduates. I hope I can provide a platform for people who are new to labour markets to share their thoughts on how they make themselves employable and what kinds of challenges they have faced along the way.

#### **What is involved in taking part in this research?**

As a participant, I will invite you to two interviews. The first interview will be about 20 to 30 minutes. The second one will run for approximately 60 minutes. Both interviews will be audio recorded with your permission. The venue of the interview can be at an agreed location but a quiet place will be the preference. Also, you will be given an opportunity to take or provide photos which illustrate the ways you are preparing for employment and to write a short journal for each photo.

#### **What will we discuss in interviews?**

The interviews will allow you to share your thoughts and stories around getting ready for employment. The first interview will be a brief introduction to this research and I will explain clearly the procedure of this research and your rights as a participant. You are also welcomed to ask any questions. Lastly, we will briefly discuss how you make yourself look employable on your CV.

The second interview will be an in-depth discussion of how to be employable. At the beginning of this interview, you will be invited to share your thoughts on how to get ready for employment. Then, we will look at the photos that you have taken or provided and discuss how you are making yourself more employable. Lastly, you are invited to share what challenges and stresses you have faced while preparing for employment.

Throughout the two interviews, you are encouraged to share your feelings of how the issue of employment impacts on your well-being. If our discussions raise any issues or feelings and you feel you need to seek further support, I am willing to provide contact details of on-campus services.

### **How will your privacy be protected?**

Your privacy and confidentiality are the priority of this research. To protect your identity, you are invited to give yourself a pseudonym (fake name). I am happy to assist you with this if you need some help. Any identifiable information will be changed or will not be included in my thesis. Also, you have the right to ask me not to present any information you provided in my thesis. Only I will have the access to the raw data.

The interviews will be transcribed and you will have an opportunity to read your own transcripts and make changes if required. However, please be aware that you cannot request to read other participants' materials. You are only allowed to read your own materials.

All the collected data will be protected by passwords for five years. The consent form signed by you and me will also be kept confidential and stored securely.

### **What are my rights in being a participant?**

Participating in this research is voluntary so you are advised to be aware of the following rights that you have when taking part in this research. You have the right to:

- Ask any question or express concerns while participating in this research
- Refuse to answer any question
- Withdraw from the research at any stage
- Ask me, the researcher, not to present any of your information in my thesis



If you have other concerns about this research that you think I am not the one to talk to, you can contact my supervisors, who are Dr Otilie Stolte (School of Psychology) and Mrs Gemma Piercy (School of Social Sciences). Their contact details are provided at the end of this document.

**How can I take part?**

After reading the research information, you do not have to agree to become a participant straight away. You are welcome to take your time and have a think first. If you decide to take part, please send me an email and we can arrange for our first interview. I look forward to hearing from you!

**Contact details:**

The researcher: Chian Yow Kwek (Yoyo Kwek), email:

[cyk6@students.waikato.ac.nz](mailto:cyk6@students.waikato.ac.nz)

The supervisors of this research:

Dr Otilie Stolte (School of Psychology), Ph. ext. 6454, email:

[ottilie@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:ottilie@waikato.ac.nz)

Mrs Gemma Piercy (School of Social Science), Ph. ext. 9360, email:

[gemma@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:gemma@waikato.ac.nz)

Note: This research project has been approved by School of Psychology Human Research and Ethics Committee. If you have any ethical concerns or would like to discuss other concerns with someone independent from this research, you can contact the convenor of the committee team, Dr Rebecca Sargisson ([rebeccas@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:rebeccas@waikato.ac.nz)).

### Appendix 3: David's original quotations

因為一方面就是…那個…自己的方面，因為要結婚生子嘛，這肯定是自己的義務，然後父母那方面…也是…但就是要看依據不同國家的情況來定，像那些發達國家，他們的養老機構…養老的這一套政策很好，然後就是說父母這一種退休阿，這種不需要子女太擔心的…這個…就…可能…不會…做為你一個就業的動機。但是如果像中國這種地方，就是說，養老這種…這一塊不是太健全，然後子女就有這方面的壓力…所以就會變成是就業的動機之一

I: 喔~ 那你會覺得因為你是男生，所以你必須承受更多的就業壓力嗎？

嗯，對，這是肯定的。因為這個社會本來就是這樣的嘛…因為…因為…男的本來就承受的壓力比女生稍微大一些，加上這社會結構好像男性從事的行業就比女的多，然後再加上一些傳統觀念…比如說，一對夫妻的話，男的在外面就是有工作，女的做家庭主婦的話，這樣就沒什麼，但如果是那個…男的做家务…男的在家裡的話，就會被當成笑話就是了

就是說…因為人是會變老的嘛，這麼下去，不斷會有比你更年輕的人進來，如果你僅僅就是說…抱著滿足目前的一種底層的現狀的話，這樣的話就是說，不斷會有年輕的人進來，年輕人進來…比你體力更好，然後腦筋又快，然後你又同樣跟他處在這個地方，你說這個…如果公司遇到這個情況的話，老闆會裁你還是裁他，就這個意思

對…但就是沒辦法…大學必須要念

對…就是不知道要怎麼弄…就是…這個就很難搞…而且還…這一方面還有就是不知道自己到底有什麼能力…就包括我在國內讀預科的時候，我自己曾經感覺我演講這方面，有優勢嘛…但過來之後，發現沒優勢了…就那個優

勢是在上海的...感覺自己是有的，在這邊的話...因為就是很多人母語是英語  
嘛，就是說...可以明顯感覺曾經的優勢已經不具有優勢了

## Appendix 4: Diana's original quotations

而且你是畢竟希望，你是可以順利找到工作的，你都學了好幾年了，是不是

對...但我就是覺得很難，因為我也給自己訂了好多小目標，就練習自己的打字速度呀~然後練習這個練習那個，其實...就是你工作下來呀，你學習之後，你已經很累了，就你沒有...就有時間你也沒有那個心思去做這些東西了，所以我就去找一些我比較享受的，或者是不需要太用腦的一些活動，然後還可以學習的，就看個電影呀，聽個歌呀，我會覺得，唉...舒服呀~還不錯，可是你要是要我....我已經在那邊做一天了，五點六點，我吃完飯了，七點鐘準時在電腦面前狂練這些...打字呀什麼的，我也是會覺得，我不行了，我受不了，還是要...怎麼說，平衡自己的生活吧~你要是...不是很開心的話，工作也做不好

因為忠於自我的時候，不管他開不開心，它是沒有壓力的，你所謂的忠於自我並不是說就什麼也都不做，我就自己就這樣，沒有的。我有自己的邏輯，我有自己的想法，也許我想法跟大眾所要求的是不一致的，但我也會盡量去思考大眾的一些想法，但我不會拋下自己說...我...這方面我可能不符合大眾我就一定會改成大眾所想的那種，沒有耶...就我也不知道怎麼改。就是在個性和文化之中的一個東西...形成了，很難去變了，不然我就覺得壓力比較大吧，心理壓力...或者是...比較抓狂

其實實習這個東西不是我們選擇的，而是一個機會嘛，就是你有這個機會你就會想去嘗試，就很多人可能他想實習，但他沒有找到合適的，其實是一個道理的，恩...我不知道怎麼講...反正就是你做的一些事情都是對於你以後職業有影響的，不是說你透過實習就一定是這樣的，就很多人都有各種各樣的方式，然後他們也不一定說實習做這個，最後也都做這個了，因為我也有同學，現在做了文職工作了，做 office 的工作，其實這都是有可能的，這

個東西就是...讓你以後...有一個想法，你知道自己喜歡什麼、擅長什麼，然後，以後想要做什麼，成為什麼樣的人，就...大概是這樣的吧~

這個東西很沒有方向...也沒有固定的答案的，[...] 這世界就是多樣性的，只要你在某個地方你做得好、別人也覺得你做得好，我覺得你就是可以的，就是沒有一個十全十美，就是你十全八美我都覺得很難了，就是...這怎麼講...這世界上有太多的人了，不一定每次都能遇到那個最好的，遇到一個最合適的，就發現其中，一兩個閃光眼的人，我就覺得已經很好了，沒有必要一直去...推自己或者是...一定要做一個什麼樣的人，我覺得會很累，就我的想法，可能，我現在還比較隨性，我還沒有一個很嚴謹的說，求職者就應該是怎麼樣的，就應該有什麼樣的技能，不是的，我覺得每個人有每個人的角色，就像一塊磚在建築裏面，他的意義和他的價值都是不同的，所以這就是為什麼我一直回答不出你的問題