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**Cross-National Doctoral Transitions and
Employability Development:
A Multilevel Qualitative Study of Chinese
Doctoral Students in the UK**

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**Thesis submitted to the University of Glasgow for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy
School of Education**

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Abstract

International doctoral education is characterised by complex, multi-layered transitions, yet much existing research has focused on single or isolated domains—such as supervision, language, or social integration—without recognising that cross-national doctoral study involves multiple, interdependent, and temporally evolving transitions that collectively shape academic development and employability outcomes. In addition, only minimal empirical work has examined employability as an ongoing developmental process during the doctorate, especially for those navigating dual academic systems and labour markets across different cultural and policy environments. These gaps are particularly salient for Chinese doctoral students in the UK, who must simultaneously adapt to the expectations of the host system while preparing for potential future careers in China.

To address these limitations, this thesis adopts a dual-study qualitative design. Study 1 draws on retrospective interviews with eight Chinese social science doctoral graduates who completed their PhDs in the UK within four years and are now employed at globally ranked top 200 universities, revealing how academic, cultural, social, institutional, and career-related transitions interact and accumulate across the doctoral lifecycle. Study 2 complements this by examining the real-time experiences of twelve current Chinese social science doctoral students at different stages of progression, demonstrating how employability planning is shaped by supervisory relationships, institutional structures, labour-market expectations, and shifting visa regulations.

Together, these findings highlight that doctoral transitions are relational, ecological, and cumulative, with agency developing through dynamic interactions across multi-level environments. The thesis advances theoretical understanding by refining transition categorisation through the dimensions of controllability and locus of influence; proposing a Bicultural Transitional Adaptation Model to explain identity negotiation across UK and Chinese academic cultures; and extending Bioecological Systems Theory by showing how system-level influences shift over time. An original multilevel integrative framework is developed to explain how employability is co-constructed across ecological layers rather than acquired solely through individual effort. Practically, the research calls for coordinated support at policy, institutional, supervisory, and individual levels to strengthen equitable developmental opportunities and sustainable career futures for international students.

Overall, this thesis moves beyond deficit-based framings of international students and demonstrates that Chinese doctoral students in the UK are actively negotiating recognition, belonging, and future possibilities across intersecting sociocultural systems, offering a more holistic and human-centred understanding of cross-national doctoral journeys.

Contents

Abstract	I
Contents.....	II
Acknowledgements	VIII
Author Declaration.....	IX
List of Tables and Figures	X
Abbreviations	XI
1. Introduction.....	12
1.1 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE	12
1.2 RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS.....	18
1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	20
1.4 OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS STRUCTURE	23
2. Theoretical Framework	29
2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF STUDY 1.....	29
2.1.1 Transition Theory	30
2.1.1.1 Types of Transition.....	31
2.1.1.2 Transition Process	32
2.1.1.3 Factors that Influence Transitions-The 4S System	34
2.1.1.4 Comparison with Alternative Frameworks.....	40
2.1.2 Four Stages of Learning Framework.....	41
2.1.2.1 Unconscious Incompetence	43
2.1.2.2 Conscious Incompetence	44
2.1.2.3 Conscious Competence	45
2.1.2.4 Unconscious Competence	46
2.1.2.5 Comparison with Alternative Framework	47
2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF STUDY 2	48
2.2.1 The Bioecological Systems Theory.....	48
2.2.1.1 Microsystem	50
2.2.1.2 Mesosystem.....	51
2.2.1.3 Exosystem	53
2.2.1.4 Macrosystem.....	54
2.2.1.5 Chronosystem	55
2.2.1.6 Comparison with Alternative Frameworks.....	56
3. Literature Review	59
3.1 UNDERSTANDING TRANSITION IN DOCTORAL EDUCATION	59
3.1.1 Defining “Transition”	59
3.1.2 Differentiating Transition from Various Related Concepts	61
3.1.2.1 Change vs. Transition	62

3.1.2.2 Adaptation vs. Transition	62
3.1.2.3 Integration vs. Transition	63
3.1.2.4 Progression vs. Transition	64
3.2 INFLUENCING FACTORS SHAPING THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS.....	65
3.2.1 Understanding the Multi-layered Nature of Transition	65
3.2.1.1 Academic transition.....	66
3.2.1.2 Social transition	67
3.2.1.3 Cultural transition.....	68
3.2.1.4 Employability-related Transition.....	69
3.2.1.5 The Interconnected Nature of Academic, Social, Cultural and Employability Transitions	70
3.3 INFLUENTIAL FACTORS SHAPING THE TRANSITIONS OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS	72
3.3.1 Academic Environment and Supervision	73
3.3.1.1 Implicit Academic Norms and Structural Inequalities.....	73
3.3.1.2 Supervisory Relationships, Feedback Practices, and Emotional Dynamics	76
3.3.2 Language and Communication Challenges	78
3.3.2.1 Academic Writing Expectations	78
3.3.2.2 Oral Academic Communication.....	79
3.3.2.3 Supervisory Feedback Challenges	80
3.3.2.4 Language Proficiency, Adaptation, and Identity Development.....	81
3.3.3 Social Network and Peer Relationships	82
3.3.3.1 Formal Social Network.....	83
3.3.3.2 Informal Social Network.....	85
3.3.4 Institutional and Structural Influences	88
3.3.4.1 University Support Structures	88
3.3.4.2 Policy and Immigration Environment.....	89
3.3.4.3 Shimen Culture and Career Gatekeeping	90
3.3.5 Proactivity as an Implicit Expectation in Doctoral Education	92
3.3.6 Summary and Implications.....	95
4. Research Methodology	98
4.1 RESEARCH PARADIGM.....	98
4.2 THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH	99
4.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	102
4.4 STUDY 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY	103
4.4.1 Introduction for Study 1	105
4.4.2 Methodology for Study 1	106
4.4.2.1 The Research Design	106
4.4.2.2 Sampling Strategy and Participants.....	109
4.4.2.3 Data Collection	112
4.4.2.4 Data Analysis	116

4.4.2.5 Researcher Positionality	错误!未定义书签。
4.5 STUDY 2: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY	117
4.5.1 Introduction	117
4.5.2 Research Context	120
4.5.3 Methodology for Study2	124
4.5.3.1 Sampling Strategy and Participants.....	125
4.5.3.2 Data Collection	127
4.5.3.3 Data Analysis	129
4.5.3.4 Researcher Positionality.....	错误!未定义书签。
5. Study 1: Findings and Discussion	131
5.1 FINDINGS OF STUDY 1	131
5.1.1 Academic Pressure and Growth	133
5.1.1.1. Sources of Academic Pressure	134
5.1.1.2 Strategies for Overcoming Academic Pressure.....	135
5.1.1.3 Growth in Skills, Confidence, and Academic Maturity.....	138
5.1.2 Social Support and Community Belonging	140
5.1.2.1 Sources of Social Support	140
5.1.2.2 Strategies for Building Community Belonging	142
5.1.2.3 Outcomes of Social Integration.....	143
5.1.3 Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Diverse Experiences	145
5.1.3.1 Challenges in Cross-Cultural Adaptation.....	145
5.1.3.2 Proactive Approach to Adaptation	147
5.1.4 Career Preparation and Employability Development	150
5.1.4.1 Leveraging Academic Opportunities	150
5.1.4.2 Exploring Professional Growth Through Work and Volunteering	152
5.1.4.3 Building Employability Skills and Confidence	153
5.1.5 Practical Advice and Reflections for Navigating the PhD Journey.....	155
5.1.5.1 Prioritizing Academic Excellence and Clear Goals	155
5.1.5.2 Exploring Career-Oriented Activities	156
5.1.5.3 Adapting to Supervisory Relationships and Academic Cultures.....	156
5.1.5.4 Balancing Opportunities with Personal Well-Being.....	157
5.1.5.5 Building Language and Cultural Competence	158
5.2 DISCUSSION OF STUDY 1	160
5.2.1 Theoretical Contributions of Study 1	160
5.2.1.1 Move In: Entering the Doctoral Journey with Unconscious Incompetence.....	163
5.2.1.2 Move Through: From Awareness to Competence - Navigating Challenges with 4S	166
5.2.1.3 Move Out: From Competence towards Independence and Professional Consolidation	171
5.2.2 Practical Contributions	173
5.2.2.1 Recommendations for Doctoral Students	174
5.2.2.2 Recommendations for Supervisors	176
5.2.2.3 Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)	179

5.2.3 Strengths and Limitations.....	180
6. Study 2: Findings and Discussion	182
6.1 FINDINGS OF STUDY 2	182
6.1.1 Meaning-Making of Employability Challenges	185
6.1.1.1 Challenges as Obstacles	185
6.1.1.2 Challenges as Opportunities	187
6.1.2 Supervisory Mediation of Employability Development.....	189
6.1.2.1 Supervisor Responsiveness and Communication	190
6.1.2.2 Supervisor and Doctoral Student Emotional Dynamics.....	192
6.1.2.3 Supervisors' Role in Career Guidance	193
6.1.3 Peer Mediation of Employability Development	195
6.1.3.1 Peer Information and Resource Sharing.....	195
6.1.3.2 Insights into Job Markets through the "Grey Area"	196
6.1.3.3 Dual Impact of Peer Support on Emotional Well-being	198
6.1.4 Relationally Embedded Career Decision-Making	200
6.1.4.1 Location Preferences and Family Considerations.....	201
6.1.4.2 Career Guidance and Expectations from Family.....	201
6.1.5 Institutional and Structural Conditioning of Employability	203
6.1.5.1 The Role of Institutional Environment	203
6.1.5.2 Navigating UK Work Visas and Employability Challenges.....	205
6.1.5.3 Influences of Shimen Culture	207
6.1.6 Cultural and Lifestyle Adaptation	209
6.1.6.1 Navigating the UK Academic and Professional Communication Context.....	209
6.1.6.2 Lifestyle Adjustment in the UK.....	211
6.1.7 Temporal Shifts in Employability Orientation	212
6.1.7.1 Initial Adjustment and Emerging Role Awareness	212
6.1.7.2 Reflections and Regrets in Later Stages	213
6.1.7.3 Reframing Doctoral Progress and Employability Development	214
6.2 DISCUSSION OF STUDY 2.....	215
6.2.1 Theoretical Contribution.....	216
6.2.1.1 Microsystem	218
6.2.1.2 Mesosystem.....	223
6.2.1.3 Exosystem	224
6.2.1.4 Macrosystem.....	226
6.2.1.5 Chronosystem	228
6.2.2 Practical Contributions.....	231
6.2.2.1 Recommendations for Doctoral Students	231
6.2.2.2 Recommendations for Supervisors	233
6.2.2.3 Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)	235
6.2.3 Strengths and Limitations.....	236
7. General Discussion and Conclusion.....	239

7.1 SYNTHESISING FINDINGS ACROSS STUDIES 1 AND 2: A MULTILEVEL ANALYSIS OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS' TRANSITIONS AND EMPLOYABILITY DEVELOPMENT....	239
7.1.1 From Challenge to Growth: Individual Development	243
7.1.2 Relational Dimension in Transition: From Dependence to Autonomy	246
7.1.3 Institutional and Structural Contexts: Negotiating Opportunities and Constraints	251
7.1.4 Cultural and Identity Adaptation: Negotiating Self and System	253
7.1.5 Integrative Perspective: Interconnected Dimensions of Transition and Employability Development	255
7.2 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS	258
7.2.1 Advancing Transition Theory in Cross-National Contexts	258
7.2.2 Extending the Dynamic Mechanisms of the 4S System	261
7.2.3 Enhancing the Application of Bioecological Systems Theory in Higher Education	263
7.2.4 An Original Multilevel Integrative Framework for Cross-national Doctoral Transitions.....	265
7.3 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	267
7.3.1 Institutional-Level Implications: Strengthening University Support Systems	267
7.3.2 Supervisor-Level Implications: Supporting Doctoral Transition and Employability through Routine Supervisory Practices	270
7.3.3 Student-Level Implications: Navigating Doctoral Study and Career Development.....	272
7.4 METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS	273
7.4.1 Strengths of the Research Design.....	274
7.4.2 Limitations and Methodological Challenges.....	278
7.4.3 Reflections on Analytic Integration Across the Two Studies.....	281
7.5 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	284
7.5.1 Longitudinal Research on Doctoral Transitions and Employability Development	284
7.5.2 Cross-national Comparative Research on International Doctoral Trajectories	285
7.5.3 Empirical Validation and Further Development of the Multilevel Framework	286
7.6 FINAL THESIS CONCLUSION.....	287
7.7 PERSONAL REFLECTION.....	290
8. References	292
Appendix A. Participant Information Sheet (Study 1)	309
Appendix B. Consent Form (Study 1).....	311

Appendix C. Instructions for The River of Experience (Study 1)	313
Appendix D. Illustrative River Drawings (Study 1).....	314
Appendix E. Interview Guide (Study 1)	315
Appendix F. Participant Information Sheet (Study 2)	316
Appendix G. Consent Form (Study 2)	318
Appendix H. Interview Guide (Study 2).....	320

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Author Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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Signature:

List of Tables and Figures

Table 4.1 Participant Profile of Study 1	112
Table 4.2 Participant Profile of Study 2	127
Table 5.1 Key Themes and Analytical Categories in Study 1	132
Figure 5.1 A Spiral Transition Model for Chinese Doctoral Students: Integrating Schlossberg's Transition Stages, 4S Framework, and FSL	162
Table 6.1 Key Themes and Analytical Categories in Study 2	183
Figure 6.1 An Integrated Chrono-Ecological Model of Employability Development among Chinese Doctoral Students in the UK	217
Figure 7.1 A Multilevel Integrative Framework of Chinese International Doctoral Students' Transitions and Employability Development	242
Figure 7.2 Overview of the Theoretical Contributions of the Thesis	258
Figure 7.3 Refined Transition Typology for International Doctoral Students	260
Figure 7.4 Internal Negotiation Model of Bicultural Transitional Adaptation	261
Figure 7.5 Temporal-System Interaction Model of Cross-National Doctoral Transitions	264

Abbreviations

Bioecological Systems Theory	BST
Four Stages of Learning Framework	FSL
Graduate Teaching Assistant	GTA
Higher Education	HE
Higher Education Institution	HEI
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	IPA
Doctor of Philosophy	PhD
Post-Study Work	PSW
Schlossberg's 4S Transition System	4S
Research Assistant	RA
Reflexive Thematic Analysis	RTA
United Kingdom	UK
UK Research and Innovation	UKRI
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education	QAA

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

In recent decades, pursuing a doctorate abroad has become a defining feature of global higher education systems. Increasing numbers of students choose to cross national borders to undertake doctoral training, driven by intensified global competition for research talent and the rapid internationalisation of knowledge production (OECD, 2025). International organisations such as UNESCO and the OECD report a steady rise in the proportion of doctoral candidates studying outside their home countries (OECD, 2025; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2025). International doctoral students now play a critical role not only in advancing scientific innovation and research excellence within host institutions, but also in contributing significantly to the national economy—through tuition fees, living expenses, participation in high-skilled labour, and the long-term retention of research talent that strengthens the host country’s global competitiveness (Lewis et al., 2025; London Economics, 2023).

The United Kingdom occupies a leading position in the global landscape of international doctoral mobility, hosting one of the highest proportions of overseas PhD researchers worldwide (HESA, 2024; OECD, 2025). International candidates constitute approximately 45% of all doctoral enrolments, with representation exceeding 50% in research-intensive Russell Group universities (HESA, 2024). Beyond strengthening the UK research workforce, international students also generate considerable economic value. For example, a single cohort of international students who began their studies in 2021/22 contributed an estimated £41.9 billion in economic benefits to the UK, even after accounting for their public service costs (London Economics, 2023). This contribution varies

across levels of study: while undergraduate programmes typically involve lower annual fees but longer durations of study, Master's programmes usually attract higher fees over shorter periods. Within this broader picture, postgraduate – and particularly doctoral – students are increasingly recognised as key contributors, not only through tuition-related income but also given their longer periods of residence relative to taught postgraduate cohorts, their sustained engagement in research labour, and their deeper integration into academic and local economies.

However, their strong presence and contributions do not necessarily translate into smooth doctoral experiences. While many doctoral challenges are shared across student groups, international doctoral students often encounter these challenges in qualitatively different ways. In particular, they may experience multiple and overlapping forms of isolation, negotiate learning orientations shaped by prior educational systems, and face mismatches between cultural and academic expectations within the UK doctoral context – reflecting the onset of multiple, overlapping transitions that unfold across different stages of the doctoral journey (Elliot, 2023). Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised that educational and doctoral experiences involve multiple and interconnected transitions across academic, social, cultural, and identity domains, rather than isolated or linear changes (Jindal-Snape, 2023).

The attractiveness of the UK as a doctoral destination is reinforced by its long-established supervisory tradition, strong global academic reputation, and a comparatively shorter doctoral duration. Whereas PhD programmes in the United States typically take 5-7 years to complete, full-time PhD programmes in the UK usually require 3-4 years, offering a more time-efficient pathway into academic or professional careers (CGS, 2023; UKCISA, 2023). Yet, this accelerated structure—combined with high expectations for independent research and significant scholarly output—can heighten the adaptive pressures placed on

international doctoral students, particularly those transitioning from more structured and hierarchical and where independent research practices are developed more gradually. As a result, the UK international doctoral journey often entails a heightened level of complexity, not because of isolated academic demands, but due to the simultaneity and layering of multiple, interconnected transitions. International candidates are required to adapt to unfamiliar academic norms, develop researcher autonomy from the outset, and manage social and professional adjustments within a compressed doctoral timeframe – a configuration of demands that distinguishes international doctoral experiences from those of domestic peers and renders this cohort particularly worthy of focused scholarly investigation.

China has become one of the largest source countries of international doctoral students in the UK, particularly within the social sciences and related fields (King's College London, 2023; Universities UK, 2024). Their prominence is therefore not only demographic but also analytically significant, as their doctoral journeys are shaped by multiple, intersecting academic, cultural, and career-related transitions across national systems (including higher education structures, academic evaluation logics, and labour market expectations in both the UK and China).

In this thesis, the term international doctoral students is used to describe individuals undertaking a PhD outside their home country, with a specific focus on Chinese doctoral students studying in the UK. Although terms such as doctoral researchers or doctoral scholars are increasingly adopted in UK policy and institutional contexts to emphasise the research role and scholarly output, this thesis uses doctoral students to reflect its analytical focus on doctoral study as a lived and developmental process for this particular group. Entering the UK doctoral system often requires them to simultaneously learn unfamiliar academic conventions, modes of supervision, and expectations of researcher

independence, while also navigating new linguistic, cultural, and institutional environments in their everyday lives. In this context, the term doctoral students more readily captures the ongoing learning- and transition-oriented nature of their experiences than the more role-specific emphasis implied by alternative terminology.

While navigating the academic, social and cultural transitions embedded in the UK doctoral system, Chinese students simultaneously remain connected to the expectations and evaluation logics of Chinese academia. Although not all intend to return home after graduation, the increasingly competitive labour markets in both countries encourage many to prepare for parallel career possibilities. This often requires aligning their research outputs, publication strategies, and academic profiles with China's evaluation criteria—despite having limited opportunities to establish meaningful academic connections within domestic networks—while simultaneously developing skills and experiences valued in the UK. As a result, their transitional tasks extend beyond academic adjustment in the UK to also include future-oriented career positioning across divergent systems—a dual pressure that intensifies the complexity of their doctoral journey (Wang et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024).

Although Chinese international doctoral students represent one of the largest international doctoral groups in the UK and are expected to navigate multiple, intersecting transitions that fundamentally shape their academic progression and future career trajectories, existing research has predominantly examined isolated aspects of these experiences—such as supervisory relationships, language and academic writing, or cultural and social adaptation—resulting in a fragmented understanding that overlooks how challenges accumulate and interact across the doctoral journey .

In addition, the doctoral experience is often treated as a short-term adjustment process focused primarily on the entry stage, overlooking the

evolving and cumulative nature of transition throughout the PhD lifecycle (Liu et al., 2022; Ye, 2018). As doctoral students progress from initial adaptation to increasingly complex academic expectations, identity negotiation, and career decision-making, the types and intensity of transitional demands shift substantially (Shi, 2024). Yet, comparatively limited research attends to how these experiences change over time or how earlier challenges influence later academic confidence, wellbeing, and employability development, particularly under the cross-national conditions, understood here as the need to navigate and respond to academic, institutional, and career expectations across both the UK and Chinese higher education systems (Huang & Cohen, 2024; Ye, 2025).

Furthermore, although employability is widely recognised as a key motivation for undertaking doctoral study abroad, existing research has predominantly focused on post-graduation outcomes, such as job acquisition and mobility patterns. Recent studies have explicitly called for greater attention to how employability is developed and negotiated during the doctoral process itself, particularly for international doctoral students (Zhao et al., 2024). Responding to this gap, the present study examines how employability is progressively constructed throughout the PhD, rather than treating it solely as an outcome at the point of graduation. For Chinese international doctoral students, employability development is particularly complex, as they need to position themselves competitively in both the UK and Chinese labour markets, each governed by distinct evaluation logics and structural constraints (H. Huang & Cohen, 2024; Wang et al., 2025). However, limited scholarship has explored how these doctoral students engage in career planning and strategically construct academic capital during their doctoral studies, or how their employability aspirations are shaped by shifting visa policies, local labour market access, and the publication-driven systems of Chinese academia (Liu & Li, 2024; Shen et al., 2024; Shi, 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). As a result, the

formative processes through which employability is negotiated, challenged, and redefined throughout the doctoral lifecycle remain insufficiently understood.

In this thesis, doctoral transitions and employability development are conceptualised through a cross-national lens. The term cross-national is used to emphasise that these processes are shaped through ongoing interactions between multiple national academic, cultural, and labour-market systems. Rather than conceptualising doctoral experiences as occurring solely within a single host-country context, a cross-national perspective foregrounds how Chinese doctoral students in the UK simultaneously navigate, compare, and negotiate expectations, opportunities, and constraints across both UK and Chinese systems over time.

Beyond these empirical gaps, conceptual limitations also persist in existing research on cross-national doctoral transitions. The current literature also offers limited explanatory power for understanding the complexity of Chinese international doctoral students' experiences (Li et al., 2025; Wu & Hu, 2020; Yang & MacCallum, 2022b). Studies drawing on transition-related frameworks often apply them in narrow or static ways, without fully addressing how transitions accumulate and interact within multilevel academic and labour market systems (Wu & Hu, 2020; Yang & MacCallum, 2022b). At the same time, research on doctoral employability tends to foreground individual responsibility and skills acquisition, while paying insufficient attention to how employability development is socially and structurally embedded—particularly within the power dynamics, evaluation logics, and shifting mobility policies that shape Chinese students' academic futures in both host and home contexts (Hou, 2024; Li et al., 2025). This theoretical fragmentation highlights the need for a more integrated conceptual approach that links transitions across time, space, and social systems with the formation of employability identities and capabilities.

Taken together, these limitations demonstrate the need for a theoretically informed and process-oriented examination of how Chinese international doctoral students negotiate multiple, interconnected transitions throughout their PhD, and how these evolving experiences shape their employability identities and future career trajectories across multiple academic systems.

To address these gaps, the following section presents the research aims and questions guiding this thesis.

1.2 Research Aims and Questions

Building on the conceptual and empirical gaps identified above, this thesis aims to develop an integrated understanding of how Chinese international doctoral students in the UK navigate multiple transitions across their doctoral journey and how these experiences influence their emerging career trajectories. Recognising that doctoral learning and future career development are interconnected rather than separate processes, the research focuses on the processual, relational and contextual nature of these transitions.

To address this aim, the thesis adopts a sequential multi-study qualitative design. Study 1 maps the accumulation of multiple doctoral transitions as narrated by graduates, while its findings indicate that employability constitutes a particularly salient and anxiety-laden dimension of the doctoral experience. On this basis, Study 2 focuses on employability development as an ongoing and negotiated process during doctoral study.

Study 1 investigates how Chinese doctoral graduates who completed their PhDs within four years and subsequently secured academic positions narrate their transition journeys. It focuses on how they managed academic, social and cultural challenges, and how these experiences supported their postdoctoral career positioning and academic identity development.

Study 2 explores ongoing employability development as a transition process embedded within academic, social and professional challenges, focusing on how personal, institutional and structural factors influence career planning and professional identity formation during doctoral study.

Guided by this rationale, the specific research questions for each study are as follows:

Study 1: Navigating Multiple Transitions

a) How do successful Chinese international doctoral students in the UK navigate academic, social, and cultural transitions within the UK education system?

b) What key factors and forms of support enable these students to navigate academic, social, and cultural transitions more effectively during their doctoral journey?

Study 2: Ongoing Employability Development

a) How do Chinese international doctoral students perceive and navigate employability development as an ongoing transitional process during their doctoral studies in the UK?

b) What personal, institutional, and structural factors shape their employability development across academic, social and cultural transitions?

Together, these two studies provide a process-oriented and multilevel perspective that connects the “during” and “after” phases of doctoral education. This design enables a comparative and complementary understanding of how employability development is embedded within, and shaped by, ongoing academic, social, and cultural transitions. By examining both current doctoral students and those who have progressed into academic careers, the thesis

captures how employability is developed, enacted, and sustained across time and across different academic systems.

By addressing these questions, this thesis advances a more nuanced conceptualisation of the doctoral experience as a continuous and interconnected transition process. It also offers theoretical contributions to the study of international doctoral mobility by linking transition and employability scholarship, while providing practical insights for universities and policymakers seeking to enhance international doctoral students' academic success, well-being, and long-term career prospects.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This thesis contributes to the growing body of research on international doctoral education by offering a more integrated, longitudinal, and context-sensitive understanding of Chinese doctoral students' transitions and employability development in the UK. Its significance lies in three main areas: theoretical contribution, methodological innovation, and practical and policy relevance.

Theoretical Contribution

This thesis advances theoretical understanding of international doctoral transitions by conceptualising them as a continuous and interrelated process, rather than a short-term adjustment confined to the early stages of study. Through combining Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981) and the Four Stages of Learning framework (FSL) (Howell, 1982) in Study 1 with Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) in Study 2, the research connects the micro-level experiences of individual doctoral students with the wider institutional and structural environments in which those experiences are situated.

This integrative approach addresses a noted limitation in existing literature, which tends to treat academic, social and career-related transitions separately. By demonstrating how these transitions intersect and evolve across the doctoral lifecycle, the thesis offers a more dynamic and relational conceptualisation of doctoral development.

Furthermore, the thesis contributes to employability scholarship by reframing employability as a developmental and identity-building process, rather than solely as an outcome measured through post-PhD employment. The findings show how employability is shaped through doctoral students' proactive engagement with opportunities, negotiation of shifting expectations in the UK and Chinese systems, and responses to structural constraints such as visa regulations and academic evaluation logics. In doing so, the thesis bridges the literatures on transitions, doctoral learning, and professional identity, offering a more ecologically grounded account of how employability emerges during the PhD journey.

Methodological Contribution

Methodologically, this thesis offers a contribution by employing a sequential multi-study qualitative design that connects retrospective and real-time accounts of doctoral transitions. Study 1 explores the multi-dimensional nature of transitions as narrated by graduates who have already completed their doctoral journey, while Study 2 builds on this foundation to investigate how employability development is currently being negotiated by Chinese doctoral students in the UK. This structure allows the research to capture both continuity and change across different temporal positions in the doctoral lifecycle, addressing a common limitation whereby studies on international doctoral experiences are restricted to a single timepoint.

In addition, the research utilises in-depth semi-structured interviews, supplemented by visual elicitation techniques in Study 1 (e.g., the river of experience) (Reavey, 2011), enabling participants to articulate developmental processes and relational influences that may otherwise remain difficult to express. The integration of macro-level contextual analysis in Study 2 further strengthens the ecological validity of the findings by situating individual narratives within institutional, cultural and structural conditions.

Through these methodological choices, the thesis demonstrates an approach that is sensitive to both personal meaning-making and broader systemic dynamics, thereby generating richer insights into how transitions and employability development unfold throughout and beyond doctoral study.

Practical and Policy Relevance

Practically, this thesis provides insights that can inform more responsive support for Chinese international doctoral students in the UK. By foregrounding the interdependence of academic, social and employability-related transitions, the findings can guide universities in designing interventions that recognise the whole doctoral experience rather than treating student needs in isolation. This includes more tailored guidance on publishing expectations, opportunities to develop professional networks, and early career planning support that acknowledges the dual labour market challenges faced by this group.

The research also highlights implications for supervisory and institutional practices. Understanding the dynamic nature of doctoral transitions can support supervisors and programme leaders in identifying critical points where targeted support can strengthen students' academic confidence and wellbeing. Institutions may also reflect on how formal structures—such as teaching and research opportunities, visa advising, or access to career development programmes—shape doctoral students' agency and strategic decision-making.

The thesis contributes to broader scholarly debates on international doctoral education and cross-national academic mobility, particularly in relation to how institutional and structural contexts shape doctoral transitions and employability development. The study emphasises the importance of equitable access to employment pathways for international doctoral students, alongside the recognition of diverse academic evaluation logics that students must navigate when considering careers in both the UK and China. Insights from this research therefore offer value not only to universities but also to policymakers seeking to support sustainable internationalisation and long-term competitiveness in the global research workforce.

In sum, this thesis offers a timely and original contribution by advancing theoretical understanding of doctoral transitions, applying a methodologically robust sequential design, and providing practically relevant insights for supporting international doctoral students' career development. By situating employability within the broader context of academic, social and cultural transitions, the study highlights the importance of recognising the doctoral journey as a dynamic and interconnected developmental process. The following section outlines the structure of the thesis and explains how each chapter contributes to addressing the research aims introduced above.

1.4 Overview of the Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured into eight major chapters that together build a coherent argument progressing from conceptual foundations to empirical exploration and theoretical innovation. The overall design reflects the two-phase nature of the research, combining retrospective and real-time perspectives to generate a temporal and multilevel understanding of Chinese international doctoral students' transitions and employability development in the UK. The chapter outline below demonstrates how each component

contributes to the overarching research aims, offering both analytical depth and programmatic coherence across the thesis.

Chapter 1 establishes the empirical, conceptual, and policy foundations of the thesis. It situates Chinese international doctoral students within the global expansion of cross-border doctoral mobility and the UK's research-intensive doctoral system, highlighting the economic, academic, and strategic importance of this population. It then conceptualises doctoral study as a cross-national, multi-transitional process, shaped simultaneously by UK academic norms and the career, evaluation, and labour-market logics of Chinese higher education. By critically reviewing existing research, the chapter identifies three interrelated gaps: the tendency to fragment academic, social, and employability transitions; the lack of attention to how transitions accumulate over the doctoral lifecycle; and the limited theorisation of employability as a process rather than a post-graduation outcome. On this basis, Chapter 1 formulates the research aims and questions and justifies the sequential two-study design, which links retrospective accounts of doctoral success with real-time experiences of employability development.

Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical and conceptual foundation of the thesis. It first clarifies the meaning of doctoral transition and distinguishes it from related concepts such as adaptation, integration, and progression, thereby strengthening the analytical framework for examining doctoral experiences over time. The chapter then introduces the key theoretical lenses used across the two studies: Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the Four Stages of Learning for Study 1, and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory for Study 2. Together, these frameworks enable the thesis to analyse doctoral transitions as both developmental and relational processes, linking individual meaning-making and competence development with wider institutional, cultural, and cross-

national environments that shape Chinese doctoral students' experiences and employability trajectories.

Chapter 3 reviews the empirical literature on doctoral transitions with a specific focus on Chinese international doctoral students in the UK. It first clarifies the conceptual foundations of the thesis by defining “transition” and distinguishing it from related terms such as change, adaptation, integration, and progression, thereby strengthening analytical precision for the subsequent empirical chapters. The chapter then synthesises research demonstrating the multi-layered nature of doctoral transition, highlighting how academic, social, cultural, and employability-related transitions are experienced as interwoven rather than discrete domains. Building on this, it identifies five interrelated factors shaping doctoral transitions—academic environment and supervision, language and communication challenges, social networks and peer relationships, institutional and structural influences, and proactivity/doctoral agency—emphasising how these operate as an interconnected ecology that unevenly distributes access to support, recognition, and opportunity. The chapter concludes by reframing doctoral agency and employability development as relational and structurally mediated processes, and by specifying the empirical and conceptual gaps that motivate the design of the two studies that follow.

Chapter 4 introduces Study 1 and outlines its qualitative, interpretivist methodology. It explains the rationale for focusing on Chinese doctoral graduates who completed their PhDs within four years and progressed into academic employment, in order to examine how multiple academic, social, and cultural transitions were successfully navigated. The chapter details the research design, including semi-structured interviews supported by the River of Experience technique, purposive sampling, ethical procedures, and reflexive thematic analysis, establishing the foundation for analysing doctoral transitions as a developmental and meaning-making process.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of Study 1, drawing on retrospective interviews and River of Experience drawings with Chinese doctoral graduates who completed their PhDs within four years and progressed into academic employment. Five interrelated themes capture how participants navigated academic, social, cultural, and career-related transitions across the doctoral journey, including the transformation of pressure into growth, the mobilisation of support, cross-cultural academic negotiation, and the development of career-relevant orientations and capabilities. These findings are interpreted through Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the Four Stages of Learning framework to illuminate how doctoral transitions unfold as a staged developmental process from early uncertainty to increasing competence, confidence, and independence.

Chapter 6 introduces and justifies Study 2, which shifts the analytical focus from retrospective accounts of doctoral success to the real-time employability experiences of current Chinese doctoral students in the UK. Building on the insight from Study 1 that employability emerged as the most salient and anxiety-producing dimension of doctoral transition, this chapter explains why employability warrants focused investigation as a critical site where academic, institutional, and personal transitions converge. It situates the study within the UK doctoral and visa regime and the contrasting Chinese publication-driven labour market, demonstrating how structural and policy contexts shape students' career planning during the PhD. The chapter then outlines the interpretivist qualitative design, purposive and snowball sampling across different stages of doctoral progression, and the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews to capture how employability is actively negotiated under time pressure, institutional constraints, and cross-national expectations.

Chapter 7 presents and interprets the findings of Study 2, revealing how Chinese international doctoral students construct employability through ongoing

interaction with personal, relational, institutional, and cross-national systems. The chapter first reports seven interrelated themes that capture how doctoral students experience challenges, supervision, peer dynamics, family influence, institutional environments, cultural adaptation, and temporal change during their PhD journeys. It then integrates these findings through Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, demonstrating how employability is shaped across nested systems—from immediate relationships with supervisors, peers, and family, to institutional support structures, immigration policies, and culturally embedded practices such as Shimen culture, and across time. By theorising employability as an ecological and developmental process rather than a set of individual skills, this chapter advances a system-level understanding of how international doctoral students navigate career formation within complex cross-national academic and labour-market contexts.

Chapter 8 provides an integrated general discussion and conclusion that brings together the findings from Study 1 and Study 2 to develop a multilevel and temporally informed understanding of Chinese international doctoral students' transitions and employability development. Rather than restating empirical results, this chapter synthesises the two datasets through Schlossberg's Transition Theory, the Four Stages of Learning, and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory to show how individual agency, relational support, institutional structures, and cultural systems interact and shift across different phases of the doctoral journey. It introduces an original multilevel integrative framework that conceptualises employability as an ecologically embedded and temporally evolving process, and articulates the thesis's theoretical contributions, practical implications, and methodological reflections. The chapter concludes by situating Chinese doctoral students' experiences within broader cross-national academic and labour-market systems, offering a final conceptual account of how doctoral transitions and employability are co-constructed across time, space, and social contexts.

Through this structure, the thesis develops a comprehensive and theoretically robust account of how Chinese international doctoral students in the UK navigate transitions that are simultaneously personal, relational, institutional, and global. Each chapter builds toward a multi-layered explanation of doctoral transitions and the formation of employability as a dynamic and cross-systemic process—offering both scholarly advancement and actionable insights for the future of global doctoral education.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Theoretical Framework of Study 1

This study employs a combined theoretical framework that draws on Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1984, 2011) and the Four Stages of Learning Model (Howell, 1982). The use of two perspectives reflects the complexity of international doctoral students' experiences, which involve both navigating multiple transitions and developing new competencies over time.

Transition Theory provides a lens for analysing how individuals experience change, including the types of transition they encounter, the temporal phases they move through, and the personal and contextual resources that shape their responses. This makes it particularly relevant for understanding how Chinese international doctoral students in the UK interpret and manage academic, social, cultural, and career-related transitions.

The Four Stages of Learning Model, in turn, offers a developmental perspective on how individuals progress from initial unfamiliarity to eventual mastery. It highlights the internal processes of skill acquisition and confidence-building, showing how learners refine their academic, cultural, and professional capacities across different stages of their doctoral journey.

Taken together, these frameworks provide a more holistic account of how Chinese international doctoral students experience and adapt to the challenges of the PhD journey. Transition Theory helps explain how students navigate multiple transitions through the interaction of situational factors, personal characteristics, support systems, and coping strategies, while the Four Stages of Learning Model offers a developmental lens for understanding how competence and confidence are gradually acquired over time. Importantly, these frameworks are not applied deductively as fixed models; rather, they serve as interpretive

lenses that help explain patterns identified through the inductive analysis. As such, they form the conceptual foundation of Study 1 and guide the interpretation of the findings presented later in this thesis.

By considering both frameworks together, this study captures two equally important dimensions of the doctoral experience: how students interpret and respond to external transitions, and how they undergo internal processes of learning and development. The following sections introduce each framework in turn, beginning with Transition Theory.

2.1.1 Transition Theory

Transition Theory was first proposed by Schlossberg (1981) within the field of psychology to explain how adults experience and adapt to change, and was further elaborated in 1984 to provide a more systematic account of transitions (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). Over time, its application expanded beyond adult development into educational and career contexts, offering a flexible framework for understanding how individuals manage significant life changes (Goodman et al., 2006). Because of this breadth, the theory has been widely employed across domains such as adult learning, career development, and retirement (Anderson et al., 2012).

In higher education, it has proven particularly valuable for analysing how students adapt to new academic and social environments. More recently, the framework has been applied to international and cross-cultural contexts. For example, Arafah (2020) used the framework to examine the experiences of Saudi female students studying in the United States, showing how personal resources and social support shaped their ability to navigate academic and cultural challenges. Similarly, Agbaje and Sehoole (2022) applied the theory to international students in Nigeria, highlighting the gap between expectations and realities and the ways in which institutional factors shaped their transitions.

More recently, Nemes (2025) conducted a narrative review of 28 international studies on first-year students' transitions, using the theory to synthesise common areas of support such as emotional adjustment, academic preparedness, and institutional engagement. Although Nemes' focus was on undergraduates, the findings underscore the cross-cultural relevance of Transition Theory while also pointing to recurring critiques, such as its tendency to generate reactive rather than proactive support strategies. While much of this literature has focused on undergraduates or taught postgraduates, the framework is equally relevant to doctoral education, where doctoral students need to manage prolonged and overlapping transitions. In particular, it offers a valuable lens for examining the experiences of Chinese international doctoral students, who face not only academic demands but also cultural and career-related challenges in the UK context.

2.1.1.1 Types of Transition

Within the framework, Schlossberg (Schlossberg, 1981, 2011) identified three categories of transition: *anticipated transitions*, *unanticipated transitions*, and *non-events*. *Anticipated transitions* refer to the expected and predictable changes in roles that occur throughout an individual's life cycle, including events such as marriage and retirement (Anderson et al., 2012). In the context of international education, studying abroad is typically regarded as an anticipated transition, since students often plan and prepare for it in advance through language training, financial arrangements, or applications for admission and visas. Nonetheless, my experience as a Chinese international doctoral student highlight that even with substantial preparation, the realities of adapting were more demanding than anticipated. For instance, although I had passed the IELTS test before arriving in the UK, I soon realised that academic communication in seminars and with supervisors required far more than test-based language skills,

as it involved navigating implicit expectations, disciplinary jargon, and culturally nuanced interaction styles.

Unanticipated transitions are disruptive life events that occur unexpectedly, such as the sudden loss of a job or the onset of a serious illness (Schlossberg, 2011). In the case of international students, unanticipated transitions may take the form of unexpected visa delays, sudden changes in supervision, or global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In my own doctoral journey, the outbreak of COVID-19 in my first year meant that I had to complete the first eight months of my programme remotely from China. When I eventually arrived in the UK, I was confronted with the dual challenge of managing the heavy demands of thesis writing while simultaneously adjusting to a new academic and cultural environment, which significantly intensified the transition process.

Non-events refer to expected life changes that fail to occur, such as not receiving a promotion or not getting married when anticipated (Schlossberg, 2011). Within international education, non-events might include failing to secure a scholarship, not being selected for a conference presentation, or missing out on employment opportunities despite prior expectations. Such experiences can evoke disappointment and feelings of stagnation (Goodman et al., 2006). In my own case, I once anticipated securing a teaching assistantship to enhance both my income and CV; however, when the opportunity did not materialise, I had to re-evaluate my career preparation strategies and seek alternative ways to build professional experience.

2.1.1.2 Transition Process

Identifying the type of transition is only the first step; equally important is understanding how individuals move through these changes over time. To capture this dynamic dimension, Schlossberg and her colleagues proposed that

transitions typically progress through three sequential phases: *Moving In*, *Moving Through*, and *Moving Out* (Goodman et al., 2006; L. D. Patton, 2016). The first phase, *Moving In*, refers to the initial stage when individuals enter a new situation and must familiarise themselves with its roles, routines, and expectations. In higher education, this stage often involves navigating unfamiliar academic systems, building new social connections, and adjusting to different cultural environments. Research suggests that this is frequently the most challenging phase of the transition, as students experience a sense of disorientation and must reconcile prior expectations with the realities of their new context (Arafeh, 2020; Nemes, 2025).

The second phase, *Moving Through*, captures the period in which individuals begin to engage more deeply with their new environment while coping with ongoing challenges and uncertainties (Schlossberg, 2011). During this stage, students are no longer newcomers but are still in the process of adjusting, testing strategies, and negotiating their roles within the academic and social community. For international students, this often involves developing effective study routines, sustaining motivation over extended research projects, and managing competing pressures from academic expectations and personal life. This phase can be marked by both progress and setbacks: while some students gradually establish a sense of belonging and confidence in their academic skills, others may encounter persistent difficulties such as cultural dissonance, isolation, or feelings of inadequacy (Arafeh, 2020; Krsmanovic, 2022). The *Moving Through* stage therefore highlights the iterative nature of adaptation, where persistence, resilience, and access to supportive networks play a crucial role in shaping outcomes.

The final phase, *Moving Out*, refers to the period when individuals leave or conclude a transition and begin to integrate their experiences into future plans (Schlossberg, 2011). In higher education, this often coincides with the

completion of a programme, where students reflect on the knowledge and skills acquired while preparing for the next stage of their academic or professional journey. For international students, *Moving Out* may involve decisions about whether to remain in the host country, return home, or pursue opportunities elsewhere. In the case of Chinese doctoral students in the UK, this underscores how visa regulations, labour market competition, and divergent career expectations between countries can complicate the *Moving Out* phase, creating both uncertainty and opportunities for growth.

While distinguishing between different types of transition and recognising the temporal process of moving in, moving through, and moving out provides a useful conceptual map, these perspectives alone do not explain why individuals experience transitions so differently. To address this, Schlossberg (Schlossberg, 1984, 2011) introduced the *4S System—Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies*—as a framework for analysing the resources individuals draw upon when coping with change. This model highlights how personal attributes, external supports, and coping approaches interact with the specific features of a transition to shape adaptation outcomes. In the context of international education, and particularly for Chinese doctoral students in the UK, the *4S System* is valuable for illustrating how challenges such as academic adjustment, social integration, cultural adaptation, and career preparation are mediated not only by external circumstances but also by the personal and social resources students are able to mobilise.

2.1.1.3 Factors that Influence Transitions-The 4S System

The first element of Schlossberg's *4S System* is *Situation*, which refers to the question: 'What is happening?' (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 61) It encompasses various conditions related to the transition itself, such as the trigger that initiated the transition, the timing of the transition, the anticipated duration, and the level of control an individual has over the transition (Goodman et al.,

2006; Schlossberg, 1984, 2011). Together, these factors shape how individuals appraise the significance of the transition and the degree of challenge it poses.

In the context of international doctoral education, situational characteristics are often decisive. The trigger for doctoral study abroad may be voluntary, such as a desire for academic advancement, or shaped by external expectations, including family influence or institutional policies (Montgomery, 2017). The timing of entry into doctoral programmes can also be perceived differently across cultures: while immediate progression from a master's degree may be regarded as normative, delayed entry may be seen as “off-time,” creating additional pressures. In Schlossberg's terms, “off-time” refers to life events or transitions that occur outside the expected or socially accepted schedule, which may amplify stress and complicate adaptation (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1984). Similarly, the duration of doctoral study is tightly regulated in the UK, where most PhD programmes are expected to be completed within three to four years (Home Office, n.d.), which can heighten stress compared with longer programmes in other systems. A further critical factor is control. Although the decision to study abroad may be voluntary, students' sense of agency is frequently constrained by external forces, such as visa requirements, funding arrangements, or disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic.

These examples illustrate that situational factors shape international students' transitions not only at the point of entry but also throughout their programmes. Research shows that misalignments between expectations and realities, such as funding uncertainties or institutional barriers, can exacerbate stress and create feelings of marginality (Agbaje & Sehoole, 2022; Hayman et al., 2024). In this study, the *Situation* dimension is therefore a crucial lens for analysing how Chinese doctoral students in the UK interpret and manage the contextual demands of their multiple transitions.

The second dimension, *Self*, addresses the question: “To whom is it happening?” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 61). It encompasses the personal characteristics and psychological resources that individuals bring to a transition. Schlossberg (2011) distinguishes between demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, socio-economic status, cultural background) and internal resources (e.g., resilience, self-efficacy, values, and identity), both of which shape how individuals perceive and respond to change (Goodman et al., 2006).

In the context of international students, the *Self* dimension plays a central role in shaping how challenges are interpreted. The same difficulty—such as struggling with academic writing or receiving critical feedback—may be framed either as a source of pressure or as an opportunity for growth, depending on the individual’s resilience, self-efficacy, and prior experiences. For Chinese doctoral students in the UK, this interpretive process is especially significant, as they often encounter multiple and overlapping challenges, including language barriers, unfamiliar academic conventions, and cultural adjustment (Dai & Elliot, 2023; Sendur et al., 2022). The extent to which these difficulties are seen as threats to progress or as opportunities to develop new competencies directly influences their capacity to adapt successfully. In this sense, the *Self* dimension highlights the subjective nature of transition, emphasising that it is not the challenge itself but the way students construe and respond to it that influences adaptation outcomes (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2011).

However, critics have noted that an exclusive focus on *Self* risks overemphasising individual agency while overlooking the structural and institutional constraints that strongly affect international students’ experiences. While Schlossberg herself acknowledged that *Self* must be interpreted in relation to contextual factors (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2011), subsequent scholarship has argued that relying too heavily on personal characteristics such as resilience or self-efficacy can obscure the powerful role of systemic

conditions. For instance, Patton et al. (2016) caution that student development theories may inadvertently individualise responsibility for adaptation while neglecting institutional obligations. These critiques suggest that the *Self* dimension should not be understood in isolation, but as embedded within broader socio-cultural and institutional structures.

Thus, while *Self* highlights the role of individual attributes in shaping transitional outcomes, it is equally important to recognise that no student negotiates change entirely alone. The availability and quality of external resources, captured in the dimension of *Support*, represent a crucial complement to personal characteristics in understanding international students' experiences.

The third dimension, *Support*, addresses the question: "Who is helping?" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 61). It refers to the resources available to individuals during a transition, including family, friends, peers, supervisors, mentors, and institutional services. Such support systems are not only instrumental in buffering stress but also shape how individuals perceive and respond to challenges (Schlossberg, 2011). In international education, the role of *Support* is particularly salient, as students need to simultaneously adapt to unfamiliar academic practices, social norms, and cultural expectations. Research demonstrates that the availability and quality of supervisory guidance, peer networks, and institutional services often determine the extent to which international students feel integrated into their academic communities (Buirski, 2022; Lee, 2017).

It is also important to acknowledge that individuals have diverse support needs and perceptions, which can shape how they engage with available resources. Actively listening to their perspectives on who and what serves as supports not only respects their autonomy but also plays a pivotal role in providing assistance that is uniquely tailored and empowering (Anderson et al.,

2012). For example, as a Chinese international doctoral student navigating transitions, I found that, in contrast to psychological support, my emphasis leaned more towards the need for practical assistance, particularly in the form of constructive academic feedback. This illustrates how international students' understanding of "support" may differ from institutional assumptions, which often prioritise general well-being services over targeted academic and career-related guidance.

Critically, while the dimension of *Support* is often assumed to be universally beneficial, it is not equally accessible to all students. Factors such as language barriers and cultural norms around help-seeking can restrict international students' ability to make full use of available resources (Kim et al., 2019; Sakız & Jencius, 2024). In addition, institutional resources may not be distributed or experienced equally, with students frequently encountering gaps between their expectations and the actual support provided (Agbaje & Sehoole, 2022; Hayman et al., 2024).

Overall, the *Support* dimension underscores the importance of interpersonal, institutional, and cultural resources in shaping how international students navigate transitions. However, support alone is insufficient; its effectiveness depends on how students actively engage with and deploy these resources in practice. This points directly to the fourth dimension of Schlossberg's model—*Strategies*—which addresses the concrete coping methods individuals use to manage the challenges and opportunities of transition.

The fourth dimension, *Strategies*, addresses the question: "How does the person cope?" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 61). It refers to the range of coping responses individuals employ when navigating transitions, encompassing behavioural, cognitive, and emotional approaches to managing change. Within Schlossberg's framework, *Strategies* capture the coping mechanisms individuals employ to manage transitions. These strategies are commonly described in three

forms: (a) modifying the situation, for instance by seeking additional resources or adjusting routines; (b) reframing the meaning of the transition, such as interpreting challenges as opportunities for growth; and (c) managing stress through emotional or behavioural regulation, which enables individuals to sustain their well-being while adapting to change (Goodman et al., 2006). Importantly, the balance among these strategies is critical, as over-reliance on any single approach can hinder adaptation.

In the context of international students, coping strategies play a central role in managing multiple transitions across academic, social, and cultural domains. Research indicates that these strategies often combine problem-focused approaches, such as improving language skills or developing new study routines, with emotion-focused responses, including seeking comfort from family members or co-national peers (Yang & MacCallum, 2022a). For Chinese doctoral students in the UK, coping becomes particularly complex as they must also navigate culturally inflected supervisory relationships, implicit expectations of independence, and challenges in establishing professional networks (Dai & Elliot, 2023; Dai & Hardy, 2021; Zhao et al., 2024). Some students reframe such difficulties as opportunities for resilience and cross-cultural competence, while others primarily experience them as stressors, especially when compounded by structural barriers such as visa restrictions or limited access to teaching opportunities. Nonetheless, coping strategies should not be viewed in isolation, as their effectiveness is shaped by broader institutional and systemic conditions that extend beyond the control of individual students.

Taken together, the four dimensions of *Situation*, *Self*, *Support*, and *Strategies* show that transitions are shaped not only by the event itself but also by the interaction of personal resources, external supports, and coping choices. This aligns with the broader contribution of Transition Theory, which integrates the classification of transition types, the temporal process of moving in, moving

through, and moving out, and the 4S system into a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals adapt to change. Its focus on the subjective interpretation of events and the interplay between personal and contextual factors makes it especially useful for analysing the complex realities faced by Chinese international doctoral students in the UK. At the same time, critiques that it places too much weight on individual factors underscore the need to apply the theory critically, with attention to wider institutional and structural conditions (Patton, 2016).

2.1.1.4 Comparison with Alternative Frameworks

Alternative perspectives were also reviewed. Kim's Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (ITCCA) (Kim, 2001) conceptualises adaptation as a dynamic 'stress-adaptation-growth' process, and has been widely used in studies of international students and migrants. However, ITCCA is primarily oriented towards cultural adaptation, focusing on communication and identity shifts in intercultural encounters. While highly relevant for exploring cross-cultural issues, it provides a narrower lens for analysing the multiple transitions—academic, social, cultural, and career-related—that characterise doctoral study. Given that Study 1 examines a broad set of transitions beyond cultural adjustment, ITCCA was therefore not selected as an important framework.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model similarly offers valuable insights by situating students within multi-layered ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), emphasising how institutional, policy, and socio-cultural contexts influence development (Crawford et al., 2020; Tong & An, 2024). Yet, as critics note the model is best suited to longitudinal designs that trace how proximal processes unfold over time (Navarro & Tudge, 2023; Tudge et al., 2009). This makes it less compatible with the present study, which is based on retrospective qualitative interviews capturing doctoral students'

lived experiences rather than extended observations of developmental processes. Moreover, while the bioecological model situates individuals within multi-layered systems, it does not provide the same conceptual tools as Transition Theory for distinguishing between types of transition, mapping temporal phases, or analysing the personal and contextual resources mobilised during change. These limitations reduce its suitability for Study 1, which specifically seeks to capture the subjective meanings and coping strategies underpinning Chinese international doctoral students' navigation of multiple transitions in the UK.

Overall, although ITCCA and the Bioecological Model both provide useful insights, they are less suited to the specific focus of Study 1, which examines the multiple and subjective transitions experienced by Chinese international doctoral students. By contrast, Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1984) is particularly relevant, as it captures both the interpretation of change and the interaction of personal and contextual resources across academic, social, cultural, and career-related domains. At the same time, this study does not rely on a single theoretical perspective. The Four Stages of Learning Model (Howell, 1982) is also employed to provide a developmental lens, tracing how students gradually build competence and confidence throughout their doctoral journey. Taken together, these two perspectives illuminate different but interconnected aspects of the doctoral experience. The next section introduces the Four Stages of Learning in more detail.

2.1.2 Four Stages of Learning Framework

In examining the internal learning processes of doctoral students, this study draws on the Four Stages of Learning framework. Although the overall analytic approach is inductive, the model is introduced here as an interpretive lens to help make sense of patterns identified through the analysis. The model, originally developed by Noel Burch in the 1970s and later popularised in Howell's

The Empathic Communicator (1982), outlines four progressive stages: *Unconscious Incompetence* (you are unaware of your limitations and the skills you lack), *Conscious Incompetence* (you recognise the gap between your current ability and what is required), *Conscious Competence* (you can perform the task but only through focused effort and practice), and *Unconscious Competence* (you achieve a level of mastery where performance becomes automatic and requires little conscious thought). Initially applied in professional training and counselling psychology to describe the development of practitioner competence (Donati & Watts, 2005; Montgomery, 2016), the framework has since been extended into educational contexts, with Flower (1999) highlighting its relevance for learning and skill development. More recently, Elliot et al. (2020) have argued that the model provides a useful lens for understanding the complex transitional experiences encountered by doctoral students during their studies.

While Howell's (1982) Four Stages of Learning provides a clear framework for describing how learners progress from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence, its linear structure risks oversimplifying the iterative nature of doctoral learning. Elliot (2022), for example, highlights that the shift from unconscious to conscious incompetence is often one of the most daunting moments in the doctoral process, marked by frustration, self-doubt, and even imposter syndrome (the persistent feeling of being inadequate or undeserving of one's place despite evidence of competence). Recognising one's limitations, however, should not be seen merely as a deficit but as a crucial step in growth. Similarly, Dunn-Jensen et al. (2021) found that learners in intercultural competence programmes sometimes performed worse on post-tests than pre-tests, as their growing awareness made them more attuned to complexity, which made learners more cautious and critical in their responses. Such findings illustrate that development is not always linear or immediately visible.

Taken together, these critiques suggest that FSL should be applied cautiously in doctoral education: rather than treating the stages as fixed or sequential, it is more useful to view them as fluid and context-dependent, with students often moving back and forth between stages as they acquire new competencies through both formal and informal learning (Elliot, 2022; Elliot et al., 2020). This perspective is particularly relevant for international doctoral students, who must navigate academic, social, and cultural challenges simultaneously. For Chinese doctoral students in the UK, it underscores the need to understand developmental trajectories as dynamic and situated, shaped by individual effort, feedback, reflection, and institutional support. Accordingly, the Four Stages of Learning is treated here as a flexible guide rather than a rigid sequence, and the following subsections (2.1.2.1-2.1.2.4) examine each stage in turn.

2.1.2.1 Unconscious Incompetence

Beginning with *Unconscious Incompetence*, this stage refers to a point where learners not only lack the necessary skills but are also unaware of these gaps, which can generate misplaced confidence in their abilities (Howell, 1982). Within doctoral education, this stage may characterise novice researchers who are not yet aware of what they lack for doctoral-level study and who may still carry a sense of preparedness from their earlier academic experiences. Elliot (2022), for example, illustrates this stage through the case of critical thinking: because the concept is contested and has multiple interpretations, doctoral students may initially hold only a blurred or superficial understanding of it, limiting their ability to apply it effectively in academic writing.

This challenge can be particularly pronounced for Chinese doctoral students in the UK, many of whom have received little or no formal training in critical thinking during their earlier education in China. This lack of awareness can be traced back to their prior educational experiences, where English instruction in

Chinese universities has traditionally been lecture-driven and teacher-centred (Tang, 2016; Wang & Parr, 2021). Although recent curriculum reforms have introduced more critical thinking-oriented teaching (Jiang et al., 2024), the emphasis on standardized examinations remains dominant. This makes unconscious incompetence especially salient at the outset of their journey, where the limits of self-perception soon become evident. As students receive feedback and compare themselves with peers, these unrecognised gaps gradually surface, marking the transition into conscious incompetence.

2.1.2.2 Conscious Incompetence

Moving to *Conscious Incompetence* stage, learners become aware of their lack of competence in a given area and acknowledge the need for improvement (Howell, 1982). This awareness often arises in doctoral education when students encounter higher standards and critical feedback, which make visible the gaps in their skills and understanding. Elliot (2022) illustrates this stage with the example of critical thinking: through supervisors' comments, doctoral students may realise that their writing still lacks a critical dimension, yet they struggle to transfer this awareness into practice. Navigating this stage can be difficult, as students need to simultaneously cope with the pressures of mastering new competencies while fulfilling other core doctoral obligations (such as producing thesis drafts and meeting progression requirements).

For international Chinese doctoral students, this recognition can be particularly unsettling. Having been accustomed to hierarchical teacher-student relationships in China, many initially expect structured guidance and directive feedback (Lou, 2024; Xu & Chan, 2023). By contrast, the UK system emphasises independent research, critical engagement, and self-directed learning (Elliot et al., 2020; Lou, 2024). When supervisors challenge their ideas or provide critical feedback, students may misinterpret this as failure rather than as developmental guidance, which can lead to insecurity, reluctance to seek

feedback, or hesitation in supervisor meetings (Geng & Yu, 2024). Language barriers and cultural differences in communication styles may further compound this sense of inadequacy, especially in fast-paced discussions or academic debates where confidence and critical dialogue are expected (Lu et al., 2025; Ma, 2020). Although often marked by discomfort, this stage is critical for growth: by recognising their shortcomings, students begin to identify the skills they need to develop, setting the stage for progression to conscious competence.

2.1.2.3 Conscious Competence

Progressing to *Conscious Competence* stage, learners begin to develop the necessary skills and knowledge but still require deliberate effort to apply them effectively (Howell, 1982). A key marker of progress is the gradual mastery of threshold concepts—transformative understandings that fundamentally reshape students’ perspectives once grasped (Elliot, 2022; Kiley, 2009). These include, for example, critical argumentation, methodological reflexivity, and the development of a researcher identity, which signal deeper engagement with doctoral work and the discipline (Elliot, 2022; Elliot et al., 2020; Kiley, 2009). While students at this stage still need to concentrate deliberately and practise extensively, they begin to develop a stronger sense of confidence and a growing academic voice. This is often visible in their writing, where arguments become not only clearer and more critical, but also demonstrate increasing independence.

For international Chinese doctoral students, this stage may involve the conscious effort to move from descriptive to critical writing, to integrate theory into their studies, or to adjust to disciplinary paradigms unfamiliar from their prior education. While this process can be demanding and sometimes accompanied by periods of being ‘stuck’ or relying on mimicry (Kiley, 2009), it represents an essential developmental moment in which deliberate practice

leads to growing competence. This conscious effort lays the foundation for the eventual transition to unconscious competence, where such practices become embedded and more intuitive.

2.1.2.4 Unconscious Competence

Advancing to *unconscious competence*, learners have internalised the necessary knowledge and skills to the extent that they can perform tasks effortlessly and with confidence (Howell, 1982). At this stage, doctoral students undertake tasks such as constructing critical arguments, engaging reflexively with methodology, and situating their work within disciplinary debates with increasing fluency and assurance, rather than through effortful performance (Elliot et al., 2020). Development towards this stage is supported by a range of activities, including formal opportunities such as conference presentations and publications, semi-formal practices such as fieldwork and writing, and informal exchanges with peers (Elliot, 2022; Mantai, 2015). These diverse engagements, which may initially appear mundane, collectively shape students' scholarly identity and sense of belonging within the academic community.

For international Chinese doctoral students, reaching *unconscious competence* often requires greater effort than for their domestic peers, as it involves not only mastering advanced academic practices but also adapting to life in the UK and achieving a level of language proficiency sufficient to teach or communicate these competencies with confidence. However, it is important to recognise that not all competencies may reach this level by the end of the doctorate. As Elliot et al. (2022) note, unconscious competence often requires years of sustained practice, and certain skills may continue to demand conscious effort. This highlights that the Four Stages of Learning should not be understood as a rigid or universal trajectory, but rather as a dynamic and uneven process shaped by disciplinary contexts, institutional opportunities, and individual experiences.

In sum, the Four Stages of Learning provides a useful lens for understanding doctoral competence development, albeit with acknowledged non-linearity and contextual variation. Rather than being imposed deductively, the framework is treated here as a flexible guide that informs the interpretation of Chinese doctoral students' experiences as interpreted through the analysis. To situate its contribution more clearly, the following subsection compares FSL with an alternative perspective, Stress and Coping Theory.

2.1.2.5 Comparison with Alternative Framework

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress and Coping Theory was also considered, as it provides a framework for understanding how individuals cognitively appraise stressors and employ coping strategies in response. This model has been widely applied in studies of international students' adjustment (Moll, 2023; Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022). For example, it can help explain how a student manages the stress of a tight submission deadline by seeking social support or adjusting study strategies. However, coping models are primarily designed to capture short-term responses to specific stressors (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007), and thus offer limited explanatory power for the longer-term, multidimensional adaptation processes that doctoral study entails. By contrast, the Four Stages of Learning Model, often attributed to Howell (1982) conceptualises adaptation as a developmental trajectory—from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence—thereby providing a more dynamic account of how doctoral students gradually acquire new academic skills and cultural competences.

Overall, while Stress and Coping Theory provides useful insights into how individuals respond to specific challenges, the Four Stages of Learning Model offers a more suitable developmental perspective for understanding doctoral competence development over time. The next section turns to the theoretical

framework of Study 2, which draws on Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory to analyse employability-related transitions.

2.2 Theoretical Framework of Study 2

This section outlines the theoretical framework for Study 2, which examines the employability transitions of Chinese international doctoral students in the UK. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory is used here as a conceptual lens, not deductively, but as a way of contextualising the findings within multi-level environmental influences. The discussion introduces the origins and development of the model, summarises its key components, considers its application in higher education and international student research, and reflects on its relevance and limitations in relation to employability transitions, while also briefly comparing it with alternative perspectives to justify its use in this study.

2.2.1 The Bioecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner first introduced the Ecological Systems Theory in the late 1970s to explain how human development is shaped by interrelated environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It was later refined into the *Bioecological Model*, which placed greater emphasis on individuals' active roles, developmental timing, and proximal processes—the regular, reciprocal interactions between people and their immediate environments (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This reformulation was articulated through the PPCT model (Process-Person-Context-Time), which highlights development as the joint product of proximal processes, individual characteristics, multiple environmental contexts, and temporal influences. Within this framework, five nested systems—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—are commonly used to illustrate the layered contexts shaping development, from immediate relationships to broader cultural and historical forces.

Although first developed in the context of child development, the model has since been widely applied in higher education research. Studies have used it to examine doctoral students' wellbeing (Beasy et al., 2021), the intercultural experiences of Chinese international students (X. Xu et al., 2021), and broader applications in international and intercultural education (Tong & An, 2024). These studies demonstrate the value of the bioecological perspective in capturing how individual development is shaped by multiple, interrelated systems within and beyond academic contexts.

In the context of doctoral education, this perspective highlights that doctoral students' development extends beyond academic learning to encompass employability. Their trajectories are influenced not only by research performance, but also by institutional practices, cultural contexts, and broader policy environments. Building on this view, Wang et al. (2024) applied the model to examine the employability perceptions of international doctoral students in UK business schools, illustrating its potential for analysing transitions into the labour market. However, their study focused on a broad international cohort within a single disciplinary field, leaving open questions about how particular groups, such as Chinese doctoral students in the social sciences, experience employability transitions across diverse academic and cultural contexts.

Responding to the gap identified above, this study focuses on Chinese doctoral students in the UK to explore how employability transitions are experienced within specific academic, institutional, and cultural contexts. The bioecological perspective is adopted as a conceptual lens, enabling attention to the multiple, interacting systems that shape employability trajectories over time. Its multi-level structure suggests that employability development can be understood not only as an individual attribute but as an outcome of interactions across academic, social, and policy environments over time. At the same time, critics have cautioned against reductive applications of the model that focus

narrowly on mapping nested systems while overlooking the importance of proximal processes, individual characteristics, and temporal dynamics (Navarro & Tudge, 2023; Tudge et al., 2009, 2016). Acknowledging these critiques, the framework is used to help contextualise findings within complex, multi-level environments. To operationalise this framework, the five interrelated systems are outlined below, with attention to their potential relevance for the employability transitions of Chinese doctoral students in the UK.

2.2.1.1 Microsystem

Microsystem is the first level of the bioecological system, referring to the immediate environment where individuals engage in direct interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For doctoral students, this typically includes relationships with supervisors, peers, and close academic networks, which strongly shape both academic progress and employability development. These interactions are not one-directional: students are influenced by the support and feedback they receive, but their own behaviours—such as showing initiative, responsiveness, or disengagement—also affect how others in the microsystem respond to them. Such reciprocal dynamics are particularly evident in the supervisory relationship, where the quality of interaction can directly influence doctoral students' confidence, career planning, and access to professional opportunities (Buirski, 2022).

Supervision is often regarded as the central element of doctoral students' microsystems. Positive supervisory relationship can enhance students' academic confidence, provide valuable career guidance, and open up research or employment opportunities (Geng & Yu, 2024; Janssen et al., 2021). Conversely, strained communication or a lack of feedback may result in decreased motivation and hinder employability planning (Geng & Yu, 2024). For international doctoral students, these dynamics are often intensified by

differences in academic cultures and expectations, underscoring how the microsystem plays a decisive role in shaping employability trajectories.

In addition to supervision, peers and academic networks also constitute important elements of the microsystem (F. Cao et al., 2024; Ihuoma & Bista, 2025). These interactions foster a sense of belonging and collaborative learning, but they also provide practical benefits for employability—for instance, sharing information about career opportunities, building collaborative research skills, and developing cross-cultural communication competence (Wang et al., 2024). Importantly, when the microsystem functions effectively—such as when supervisors provide timely and constructive feedback, or when peers offer mutual academic support—doctoral students are more likely to progress smoothly in their research, freeing cognitive and emotional resources to consider long-term career planning and employability development. Conversely, difficulties within the microsystem may absorb students’ energy and delay attention to employability concerns. Together, these examples highlight how the microsystem not only supports doctoral study but also directly contributes to employability outcomes. This focus naturally leads to the mesosystem, where the connections between these immediate environments become equally significant.

2.2.1.2 Mesosystem

The mesosystem is the second level of the bioecological model, referring to the interconnections between different microsystems in which individuals are actively involved, such as the relationship between home and school or between peer groups and academic environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Rather than functioning independently, these microsystems are mutually influential, and their alignment or misalignment can significantly shape individual development. Importantly, individuals also play an active role in strengthening or weakening

these inter-systemic connections, reflecting the reciprocal nature of development emphasised in Bronfenbrenner's model. (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

In the context of doctoral employability development, the mesosystem may include, for example, the connection between students' academic experiences and their interactions with institutional support services. When academic departments actively promote career workshops and maintain effective communication with career centres, students may benefit from a more cohesive developmental environment. This is consistent with findings by Tomlinson (2017), who noted that coordinated efforts between academic and employability support structures can enhance students' career readiness. Similarly, integration into peer communities or extracurricular settings can reinforce students' academic and professional identities (Caskey et al., 2020). By contrast, when these systems operate in silos—such as when career services fail to address the specific needs of international students—employability strategies may remain underdeveloped.

While such interconnections are important for all doctoral students, they are particularly critical for international doctoral students, whose employability development is often shaped by additional cultural and structural complexities (Wang et al., 2024). For some Chinese doctoral students, family expectations emphasise rapid completion of the degree so that they can return home for employment and reduce both emotional and financial pressures. This urgency is often reinforced by the Chinese labour market, where age is a significant factor in hiring decisions, making delayed graduation a potential disadvantage for employability (Lin, 2025). In contrast, academic institutions regard the doctorate as an inherently lengthy process that requires time and depth to produce original research. This misalignment can place students under considerable strain, limiting the energy available for proactive career planning. This example illustrates how misalignments between different microsystems

within the mesosystem can constrain doctoral students' employability development. Beyond these immediate interactions, however, employability is also shaped by factors outside students' direct involvement—such as institutional policies, departmental priorities, or supervisors' workloads—which belong to the exosystem.

2.2.1.3 Exosystem

The exosystem comprises settings that do not involve the individual in a direct, face-to-face way but still exert a significant influence on their experiences, opportunities, and decisions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These systems typically include institutional structures, regulatory frameworks, and policy environments that shape the conditions in which individuals operate.

In the context of this study, key exosystemic factors may include institutional policies, immigration regulations, scholarship criteria, and broader university-level decisions regarding international students. For instance, visa limitations on post-study work options can directly affect students' ability to remain in the UK for employment, thereby influencing their long-term career planning and sense of stability (Ahmed & Davies, 2025; Zhang & Morgan, 2024). Similarly, departmental rules concerning access to Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) roles or research funding can either create or restrict opportunities for skill-building and professional development. Although students may have little say in these decisions, their employability pathways are deeply shaped by such external structures.

From a bioecological perspective, doctoral students may respond to external constraints in diverse ways—such as by seeking alternative professional experiences, considering employment in other national contexts, or reframing their career goals within available institutional structures. These potential responses illustrate how the exosystem interacts with individual agency,

highlighting that employability development is not determined solely by structural conditions but is dynamically negotiated within them. However, these institutional and regulatory frameworks do not exist in isolation. They are shaped by the broader cultural and ideological values that underpin national education systems and labour markets—elements that belong to macrosystem.

2.2.1.4 Macrosystem

The macrosystem represents the broader cultural, societal, and ideological contexts in which all other systems are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It encompasses values, belief systems, and dominant discourses about work, education, success, and international mobility. Unlike the more immediate systems that directly shape daily interactions, the macrosystem operates at a more abstract level, influencing how institutions are structured and how individuals interpret their roles and responsibilities.

In the UK context, qualities such as autonomy, critical thinking, and self-promotion are often emphasised in academic and employment settings. In contrast, many Chinese international students are influenced by collectivist values and familial expectations (Zeng et al., 2020), and are embedded within more hierarchical academic systems characterised by strong institutional authority (Ying et al., 2017). Taken together, these contrasting cultural orientations reflect the broader values embedded within the macrosystem, which shape how individuals define success and navigate their educational and professional trajectories. Consequently, cultural background can significantly influence how Chinese doctoral students interpret employability, approach career decision-making, and engage with institutional norms in the UK.

For example, cultural beliefs around work, education, and success in China often emphasise stability, security, and a strong sense of familial obligation

(Zeng et al., 2020). These underlying values may influence Chinese doctoral students' career aspirations, making them more inclined to pursue secure, long-term employment opportunities in China—where they perceive greater cultural alignment and social support—rather than navigating less familiar and less predictable career pathways in the UK. At the same time, these cultural orientations may also shape how students interpret employability expectations in the UK context—for instance, by placing greater emphasis on academic performance and institutional prestige, while being less familiar with the importance of networking or self-promotion that may be emphasised in certain UK and Western employment contexts (R. Huang & Turner, 2018). The macrosystem thus provides a lens to examine how broader ideologies interact with personal and institutional experiences. However, these cultural and institutional influences are not static; they evolve in response to broader temporal and historical changes, which are best understood through the chronosystem.

2.2.1.5 Chronosystem

The chronosystem refers to the temporal dimension of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, highlighting how development is influenced by the passage of time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It encompasses both life-course transitions at the individual level and broader socio-historical events that occur in the surrounding environment. Unlike the more spatially defined systems, the chronosystem focuses on how change and continuity over time affect human development.

For Chinese international doctoral students, career aspirations and employability strategies are likely to evolve across different phases of the doctoral journey (Hu & Wang, 2024). Academic milestones, shifting self-perceptions, changing personal relationships, and growing familiarity with the UK context may all contribute to changing priorities and expectations. For

example, students who initially aspire to academic careers in the UK may later reconsider this trajectory as they become more aware of academic job scarcity, visa- and contract-related insecurities, and evolving personal priorities, leading them to explore non-academic or cross-national career pathways.

At the same time, macro-level events—such as Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, or changes in UK immigration policy—have added layers of unpredictability to post-study planning (Ahmed & Davies, 2025; Song & Kim, 2023). These disruptions may prompt students to adjust timelines, consider alternative destinations, or re-evaluate decisions around return migration. The chronosystem thus reinforces that employability development is not a linear or static process, but rather a temporally embedded one—shaped by historical moments, life transitions, and the timing of opportunities and constraints.

In summary, Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model offers a conceptual lens to understand how personal, institutional, and cultural factors interact over time to influence Chinese international doctoral students’ employability development. The five interconnected systems highlight how experiences within academic, social, and policy contexts are embedded in broader historical and cultural forces. In study 2, the model is used flexibly to interpret participants’ experiences and to situate employability development within its ecological and temporal context. To clarify the rationale for this choice, the next subsection briefly contrasts the bioecological model with alternative perspectives (e.g., Social Cognitive Theory and the earlier Ecological Systems Theory), indicating why the bioecological formulation is retained as the most suitable interpretive lens for Study 2.

2.2.1.6 Comparison with Alternative Frameworks

Following the discussion of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological framework, this section compares it with other perspectives considered during the design of

Study 2. Study 2 focuses on employability-related transitions, which involve the interaction of personal, institutional, and structural influences on doctoral students' career development. In the initial design stage, two alternative perspectives were reviewed. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), particularly the concept of Reciprocal Determinism (Bandura, 1978), highlights the dynamic interplay between personal factors, behaviour, and the environment. While this perspective provides useful insights into the ways individuals and contexts mutually shape one another, it remains primarily centred on individual learning and behavioural regulation. As such, it offers limited explanatory power for the broader structural and temporal influences—such as immigration policies, institutional regulations, and labour market dynamics—that significantly affect international doctoral students' employability experiences.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was also considered, as it laid the foundation for understanding human development within nested environmental systems ranging from the microsystem to the macrosystem. Although highly influential, this early model has been critiqued for being largely descriptive and relatively static, as it mapped structural influences without fully incorporating individual characteristics, proximal processes, or the temporal dimension of development (Tudge et al., 2009). These omissions limited its capacity to explain how adaptation unfolds dynamically over time.

For these reasons, Study 2 draws on the mature version of Bronfenbrenner's framework—Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which extends the earlier ecological model by including the chronosystem and by formalising the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) framework. PPCT emphasises that development results from the interaction of proximal processes (e.g., ongoing engagement in research or networking activities), person characteristics (e.g., language ability, resilience), multiple layers of context

(e.g., departmental practices, visa regulations, national labour markets), and temporal influences (e.g., adaptation across the doctoral years or wider historical shifts in higher education). This mature version provides a more dynamic and contextually grounded analysis of employability transitions and is particularly well suited for examining how Chinese international doctoral students navigate the interplay of personal agency, institutional influences, and systemic structures.

In summary, the theoretical choices for both studies reflect a deliberate consideration of alternative perspectives and their limitations. Study 1 draws on Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the Four Stages of Learning Model to capture both the contextual demands and developmental aspects of doctoral transitions, while Study 2 applies the mature form of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory to situate employability development within multi-layered and temporal contexts. Together, these frameworks provide complementary insights that support a nuanced and contextually grounded analysis of Chinese international doctoral students' experiences.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Understanding Transition in Doctoral Education

3.1.1 Defining “Transition”

The original definition of a transition describes it as the movement from one phase, condition, or status of life to another, involving aspects such as time, process, and perception (Chick & Meleis, 1986). The experience of transition is dynamic and context-dependent, varying across individuals rather than following a linear or standardised trajectory (Willson, 2019). In other words, transitions are seen as personal and unique, rather than following a predetermined structure.

In general, a transition refers to “any event or non-event” that leads to changes in relationships, routines, assumptions, or roles (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 33). An *event* typically involves a visible or identifiable occurrence—such as graduation, migration, or starting a new job—that prompts noticeable changes in one’s life circumstances. A *non-event*, by contrast, refers to a transition that does not occur as a visible or marked incident, but still brings about internal or structural change (Goodman et al., 2006). Transitions can manifest in various forms, encompassing both significant life changes and more subtle shifts in daily experiences. While some transitions may be dramatic and challenging, others can be gradual, positive, or even unnoticed. This nuanced perspective highlights the complexity of human experiences, as individuals continuously navigate different layers of change in their personal and professional lives. Understanding transitions in this way underscores the importance of adaptability and resilience, encouraging a more holistic appreciation of the diverse ways people respond to change (Anderson et al., 2012).

Bridges (2009) offers a psychological lens, introducing the concept of the *neutral zone*—a liminal space “between the old reality and the new one”(p. 2). In this stage, individuals begin to let go of familiar structures or identities, even though the new ones are not yet fully formed. According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), intentionally acknowledging the need to release what is familiar marks the first active step in managing a transition. This framing reinforces the idea that transition is not always defined by an external shift, but rather by internal awareness and adjustment. For instance, consider an international doctoral student adapting to an academic environment in the UK. Initially, they may struggle to shift from a structured, coursework-based system to the UK’s independent research model. This transition requires them to let go of their previous learning habits and develop new approaches, such as self-directed study, critical engagement, and independent project management. By recognizing this need for change, they begin to navigate the transition more effectively.

After the initial step of acknowledging change, individuals enter what Bridges (2009) calls the *neutral zone*—a period of uncertainty and ambiguity. During this stage, the old identity begins to fade, but a new one has yet to be fully formed. However, transitions are not always marked by clear events; as Goodman et al. (2006, p. 33) argue, “a non-event can be defined as a transition if it results in change.” This suggests that transition may be internal and gradual, rather than outwardly observable.

This can be illustrated by the experience of a Chinese doctoral student beginning their doctoral studies in the UK. Upon entering a new academic context, they may encounter unfamiliar methods, shifting expectations, and a different academic culture—factors that gradually render their prior academic identity less applicable. However, the formation of a new identity may not occur immediately. Instead, the student finds themselves in the *neutral zone* (Bridges,

2009), navigating uncertainty while letting go of familiar norms and adjusting to new academic and cultural expectations. Although hypothetical, this example reflects a common experience among international doctoral students, highlighting how transitions can be internal, gradual, and difficult to pinpoint as specific “events” (Anderson et al., 2012).

In this study, transition is conceptualised as a fluid, internal, and ongoing process through which Chinese international doctoral students interpret and adapt to a series of changes encountered during their doctoral journey in the UK. Drawing on the perspectives of Bridges (2009), Schlossberg et al. (1995), and Goodman et al. (2006), transition in this context is not defined by a single event, but by the evolving psychological and emotional responses to academic, cultural, and social adjustments. This interpretation centres the subjective experience and emotional dimension of change, rather than treating transition as a fixed or one-time event. With this understanding of transition established, the following section explores how this concept differs from other commonly used terms—such as change, adaptation, integration, and progression—that, while related, carry distinct meanings and implications.

3.1.2 Differentiating Transition from Various Related Concepts

While transition serves as the key analytical lens in this study, it often intersects with related concepts such as change, adaptation, integration, and progression. To avoid conceptual ambiguity and enhance analytical precision, it is necessary to differentiate transition from these terms. The following section explores these distinctions in detail, particularly in relation to the experiences of Chinese international PhD students.

3.1.2.1 Change vs. Transition

Change is characterized by its external nature—driven by situational circumstances or events and marked by tangible outcomes. Changes may occur rapidly, often triggered by specific external factors (Petch, 2009). For Chinese international doctoral students, such change may involve relocating from their home country to the UK in pursuit of higher education. This shift is externally prompted, often involving limited personal control and requiring adaptation to new academic systems and cultural settings.

In contrast, “transition” refers to the internal psychological processes through which individuals make sense of such external changes (Bridges & Bridges, 2019). Unlike change, which is externally observable, transition unfolds over time as individuals respond emotionally and cognitively to their evolving circumstances (Ivins et al., 2017).

In this context, transition encapsulates the ongoing internal adjustments that Chinese international doctoral students experience as they engage with academic, cultural, and social challenges in the UK. These processes are subjective and personal, reflecting students’ efforts to interpret, absorb, and adapt to change on a deeper psychological level.

3.1.2.2 Adaptation vs. Transition

Although often used interchangeably, adaptation and transition reflect distinct yet interconnected processes. Numerous studies have explored both concepts through various theoretical lenses, including ecological models (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), psychological theories (Bandura et al., 2001), and sociological frameworks (Schlossberg, 1981), to understand how individuals respond to change.

In her early work, Schlossberg (1981) conceptualised transition primarily as a form of human adaptation. However, Hopson (1981) critiqued this view, arguing that not all responses to transitions are adaptive in nature—some are temporary coping strategies that may not lead to long-term adjustment. He proposed the more neutral term “responses to transition” to better reflect the diversity of possible reactions.

In response to such critiques, Schlossberg later shifted the framework’s focus from adaptation to the broader construct of “the individual in transition” (Schlossberg, et al., 1995), thereby expanding its scope to include a range of psychological, social, and contextual factors.

This conceptual distinction is particularly relevant for understanding the experiences of Chinese international doctoral students, whose responses to academic, cultural, and social challenges may not always follow a linear or adaptive path. Rather than framing their journey solely in terms of adaptation, this study adopts the lens of transition to capture the full range of internal processes, including uncertainty, identity negotiation, and psychological change.

3.1.2.3 Integration vs. Transition

Tinto (1993) conceptualised student integration as a multifaceted process encompassing academic progress, cognitive development, and positive learning experiences. For international doctoral students, integration extends beyond the academic realm to include social dimensions such as building friendships, participating in cultural events, and developing a sense of belonging in the host community (Abdul-rahman et al., 2022).

Transition, by contrast, refers to the process through which students adjust to a new environment, involving psychological, academic, and social adaptations (Yang & MacCallum, 2022b). While integration reflects the outcome of successful adjustment, transition encapsulates the journey itself.

For instance, a Chinese international doctoral student may initially encounter academic, cultural, and social unfamiliarity upon arrival in the UK. Navigating these complexities—understanding institutional norms, building connections, and managing cultural differences—constitutes the transition phase. Over time, as the student becomes actively engaged in academic discourse, collaborative research, and social communities, integration takes place.

In this sense, transition can be considered a prerequisite for integration. Although the two concepts are closely related, they remain analytically distinct. Transition refers to the evolving psychological and sociocultural processes through which students adjust to a new academic and cultural environment, whereas integration represents a more stable outcome characterised by a sense of belonging and effective participation in both the host culture and one's heritage culture (Berry, 2005; Ward et al., 2001). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that successful adaptation unfolds gradually, with transitional experiences laying the foundation for deeper integration over time.

3.1.2.4 Progression vs. Transition

In educational contexts, progression refers to a linear and continuous process of academic development, marked by the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and scholarly achievements (Hurley et al., 2022; Sendur et al., 2022). For all doctoral students, including Chinese international doctoral students, progression may involve achieving research milestones, publishing in academic journals, presenting at conferences, and deepening expertise within a specific discipline.

In contrast, transition encompasses a broader and more complex range of adjustments, extending beyond academic growth to include cultural, social, and emotional dimensions (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017; Sleeman et al., 2019),

particularly as students engage with unfamiliar academic cultures and social environments.

In essence, progression emphasises academic achievement and performance, whereas transition captures the holistic process of adaptation, identity negotiation, and personal growth that underpins international doctoral experiences.

In conclusion, the concepts of change, adaptation, integration, progression, and transition offer distinct but interconnected lenses through which to understand the experiences of Chinese international doctoral students. While change refers to external shifts, transition captures the internal psychological processes through which individuals make sense of and respond to such changes. Adaptation and integration may be outcomes of successful transitions, while progression reflects academic advancement along a linear path. Transition, by contrast, foregrounds the subjective, dynamic, and often nonlinear journey of personal and professional adjustment.

With this conceptual foundation established, the following section explores how these understandings of transition manifest in the lived experiences of Chinese doctoral students in the UK. Drawing on existing literature, it examines how academic, cultural, social, and career-related transitions intersect to shape students' developmental journeys during their PhD study.

3.2 Influencing Factors Shaping the Transition

Experiences of Chinese International Doctoral Students

3.2.1 Understanding the Multi-layered Nature of Transition

For Chinese international doctoral students, pursuing a PhD in the UK represents not only an academic milestone but also a multidimensional and deeply personal process of transformation that extends across various domains of

life. As Beasy et al. (2021) observe, doctoral study is rarely something that can be “clocked off” from at the end of the day—it is interwoven with everyday life due to the intensity and all-encompassing nature of the PhD journey in contemporary higher education. This means that the transitions students experience are not limited to their academic development but also encompass social, cultural, emotional, and identity shifts (C. Cao et al., 2021; Caskey et al., 2020; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017).

3.2.1.1 Academic transition

Academic transition refers to the academic, social, and emotional adjustments that students must make when entering a new higher education culture (Gale & Parker, 2014). At the doctoral level, this process involves becoming an independent researcher and renegotiating one’s scholarly identity in response to new disciplinary expectations and institutional norms (Elliot & Bengtson, 2023; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011).

For Chinese international doctoral students, this transition is often the first and most visible hurdle. Many come from highly structured educational systems in which academic progress is guided by clear syllabi, frequent assessments, and close teacher supervision (Bell, 2022). In contrast, the UK doctoral system places a strong emphasis on autonomy, critical thinking, and original contribution to knowledge, requiring students to manage their time, motivation, and research direction with minimal external scaffolding (Belavy et al., 2020; Elliot & Makara, 2021; Ye & Edwards, 2017). This shift entails more than simply acquiring new study skills: it involves developing a scholarly identity, adjusting to unfamiliar feedback practices, and navigating supervisory relationships that differ markedly from familiar teacher-student hierarchies (Buirski, 2022; Geng & Yu, 2024; Ye & Edwards, 2017).

3.2.1.2 Social transition

Social transition adds another layer of complexity. The concept of “social transition” for international doctoral students can be meaningfully understood through the lens of the Social World, which expands on Phelan, Davidson, and Cao’s (1991) framework. While their original model described students’ negotiation between the “family world” “peer world” and “school world”, Yang and MacCallum (2022a) propose a reconceptualisation that is more applicable to the doctoral context. Specifically, they combine the “family world” and “peer world” into a Social World that encapsulates doctoral students’ social activities, interactions, and networks in a broader relational context.

Students leave behind familiar peer networks and familial support systems, often arriving in a setting where social norms, communication styles, and community structures are vastly different (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2023; Pazil, 2019). They face the dual challenge of dealing with isolation and simultaneously building new friendships—sometimes only within co-national circles, sometimes with more diverse peers and academics (Li & Pitkänen, 2018; Taušová et al., 2019). Social transitions are not just about forming new connections; they also involve learning how to participate in the informal, often unspoken, social codes of academic life (Li & Pitkänen, 2018).

For instance, participation in culturally engaging campus environments—such as student societies, cross-cultural activities, and peer learning communities—can help international doctoral students expand their social networks and develop a stronger sense of belonging. Such engagement promotes both emotional wellbeing and persistence in their studies, as it enables students to feel valued and supported within the host institution (Glass et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the doctoral community itself can serve as a crucial social resource that supports students’ adaptation. Holliday (2017) found that

participation in a diverse PhD community provided international students with a “safe space” to negotiate identities, build supportive relationships, and foster a shared sense of academic belonging. These community-based interactions not only lessen feelings of alienation but also enhance students’ confidence, intercultural awareness and personal growth, thereby enriching their overall doctoral experience in the host environment.

3.2.1.3 Cultural transition

Cultural transition can be conceptualised as a form of cross-cultural adaptation — a dynamic process in which newcomers establish and maintain stable, reciprocal, and functionally effective relationships with members of the host culture (Kim, 2001). Building on Kim’s work, Searle and Ward (1990) distinguish two intertwining strands of this process: sociocultural adaptation (behavioural skills for coping with daily life) and psychological adaptation (emotional well-being and life satisfaction). For international doctoral students, navigating both sociocultural and psychological adaptation is closely linked to identity transition, as they continually reshape their personal, social, and academic selves in response to changing cultural and institutional expectations (Phan, 2023).

For many Chinese international doctoral students, this cultural transition manifests in everyday academic interactions. The UK academic environment often emphasises open debate, critical questioning, and individual expression—values that may contrast sharply with Chinese norms that prioritise harmony, deference to authority, and modesty (Durkin, 2008; Newsome & Cooper, 2016). Such mismatches can lead to confusion in discussions, reluctance to challenge supervisors, or discomfort in asserting one’s scholarly voice.

Moreover, students may experience internal tensions as they navigate disparate cultural expectations (Bui, 2021). Some report feeling caught between

a desire to assimilate into the host academic culture and a wish to remain authentic to their home-based identities (Bui, 2021; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). This ongoing negotiation can yield multiple or hybrid academic identities in which learners selectively adopt host practices while preserving elements of their own culture (Adewale et al., 2018; Phan, 2023). Identity work is not always smooth: many feel compelled to “perform” cultural fluency in seminars (Durkin, 2008), whereas others experience marginalisation or misrecognition within supervisory and peer networks (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2023).

3.2.1.4 Employability-related Transition

Beyond academic, social, and cultural adaptation, employability-related transition has become a key dimension of the doctoral journey, particularly for international students in the later stages of study (Dong et al., 2025; R. Huang & Turner, 2018). For Chinese doctoral students in the UK, preparing for the next phase—whether returning home, remaining in the UK, or seeking opportunities elsewhere—involves navigating complex institutional, cultural, and structural landscapes (Hu & Wang, 2024; Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016; Zhao et al., 2024).

In this thesis, employability-related transition refers to the ongoing process through which Chinese international doctoral students convert the academic, social and cultural resources accumulated during the PhD into labour-market capital, while navigating structural opportunities and constraints (e.g., immigration regulation, institutional support disparities, and sector hiring logics) (Fakunle, 2021; Hu & Wang, 2024; Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). Rather than a discrete “end phase,” it is a developmental trajectory that unfolds alongside academic, social and cultural adjustment (Fakunle, 2021; Zhao et al., 2024). Students simultaneously interpret host-country recruitment norms and evaluation criteria, weigh return or international options, and formulate dual or multi-sited career strategies (Dong et al., 2025; Shen et al., 2024).

In this sense, employability-related transition involves more than skills acquisition. It requires doctoral researchers to actively draw on and adapt their academic experiences, social networks, and cultural resources to different employment contexts, while navigating institutional processes and informal expectations surrounding career preparation (Hu & Wang, 2024; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020; Shen et al., 2024). This conceptualisation thus provides a critical lens for examining how Chinese doctoral students in the UK navigate intersecting academic and labour-market transitions across national contexts.

3.2.1.5 The Interconnected Nature of Academic, Social, Cultural and Employability Transitions

Although academic, social, cultural and employability-related transitions are often discussed as separate strands in existing scholarship, they are in practice deeply interwoven in the lived experiences of international doctoral students, who continuously navigate these intersecting demands within everyday doctoral life (Elliot, 2023).

Building on a multi-dimensional view of transition, Jindal-Snape's Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory argues that transitions rarely occur in isolation. Instead, individuals experience multiple transitions simultaneously across different domains of life, and change in one domain can trigger or reshape transitions in others, producing a dynamic "ripple effect" across academic, social, cultural and personal spheres (Jindal-Snape, 2023; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). This conceptualisation aligns with Elliot's (2023) account of doctoral study as an intercultural journey in which academic learning, identity development and social participation are mutually constitutive rather than separable processes. For Chinese international doctoral students, this interconnectedness is particularly evident as negotiating new academic norms and roles is closely bound up with their evolving cultural identities and social belonging within the host institution (Yang & MacCallum, 2022b).

Elliot (2023) similarly describes the doctoral journey as a continuous and emotionally demanding process that permeates daily life, requiring students to juggle research responsibilities, relational adjustments and future planning simultaneously. Students may revise their research late at night, respond to emails over the weekend, or use short breaks to participate in workshops and networking events. Meanwhile, they are simultaneously managing new communication practices in supervisory relationships, forming and sustaining friendships, and making time-sensitive decisions around visa requirements and career opportunities (R. Huang & Turner, 2018; Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). These overlapping demands demonstrate that academic, social, cultural and employability-related transitions unfold not sequentially, but concurrently, within the same temporal and emotional space.

For Chinese doctoral students, progress or barriers in one transition domain can recalibrate the pace, direction and emotional quality of others. Smooth academic adjustment often enables earlier participation in career preparation activities, while persistent academic uncertainty can intensify employment anxiety and heighten emotional distress (Zhao et al., 2024), particularly when institutional and interpersonal expectations remain implicit—leaving students to navigate multiple transitions at once with limited explicit guidance (Elliot, 2023). Limited social interaction can undermine students' emotional wellbeing and motivation, while also restricting access to informal networks through which crucial labour-market information and opportunities are exchanged (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Pham, 2022b).

Social participation further facilitates cultural learning, allowing students to gain tacit knowledge of local norms and expectations which supports both belonging and labour market integration. Additionally, structural constraints—such as visa restrictions, limited work rights, and uncertainties surrounding post-

study pathways—can amplify these interdependencies, making employability considerations emerge much earlier in the doctoral trajectory (Fakunle, 2021).

These patterns illustrate that doctoral transition is a relational, continuous and structurally mediated process, rather than a set of compartmentalised adjustments. Elliot (2023) conceptualises the doctoral journey as a multi-layered and emotionally demanding intercultural transition, shaped by implicit academic cultures, unequal access to support and the continuous negotiation of belonging and identity. Such insights offer a valuable lens for understanding the interconnected transitions experienced by Chinese international doctoral students in the UK, highlighting the need to examine the contextual conditions that enable or hinder their successful adaptation.

Paying greater attention to transitional processes is also essential for equalising opportunities in doctoral education, particularly because international students are often left to navigate these complex and intersecting changes with limited institutional guidance (Elliot, 2023; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Building on this perspective, the next section examines the key personal, social, and institutional factors that shape this transition and influence how Chinese international doctoral students manage their employability development in the UK.

3.3 Influential Factors Shaping the Transitions of Chinese International Doctoral Students

This section reviews key factors shaping the doctoral transitions of Chinese international doctoral students in UK universities. Drawing on the literature, it identifies five interrelated factors that consistently influence students' academic, social, cultural, and career-related transitions: (a) the academic environment and supervision, (b) language and communication challenges, (c) social networks and peer relationships, (d) institutional and structural

influences, and (d) proactivity and doctoral agency. Rather than treating these factors as isolated variables, this section emphasises their dynamic interplay and highlights how access to support, opportunities, and recognition is unevenly distributed across doctoral contexts. The subsections that follow examine each factor in turn, while foregrounding their relational and structural implications for equity in doctoral education.

3.3.1 Academic Environment and Supervision

This section is organised into two subsections. The first examines how implicit academic norms and institutional structures shape unequal doctoral transitions, while the second focuses on supervisory relationships, feedback practices, and emotional dynamics in everyday academic interactions.

3.3.1.1 Implicit Academic Norms and Structural Inequalities

Adapting to the UK academic environment is often one of the first and most significant transitions faced by Chinese international doctoral students. The UK doctoral system places strong value on originality, critical thinking, and independent scholarship; however, these expectations are often implicit and not clearly explained to international students. These expectations include autonomous project management, proactive engagement with supervisors, and the development of a distinct academic voice (Belavy et al., 2020; McCulloch & Bastalich, 2023).

Although often presented as “universal” academic norms, such expectations in practice privilege students who already familiar with Western research cultures. International doctoral students are therefore required to decode implicit rules of participation while simultaneously demonstrating their academic legitimacy (Elliot, 2023). Scholars further argue that this assumption of student-ready independence reflects a deficit of institutional responsibility, as students are left to navigate academic uncertainty, emotional pressures, and

informal support-seeking without adequate structural guidance (Elliot & Makara, 2021; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014). Over time, these structural conditions may contribute to inequities in employability development, as limited institutional support during doctoral study can translate into uneven career preparation opportunities.

Empirical evidence illustrates how such implicit norms operate in practice. In a large-scale qualitative study of 199 commencing doctoral students in Australia, McCulloch and Bastalich (2023) found that students believed their supervisors expected them not only to work hard and produce high-quality writing, but also to exhibit a “researcher mindset”—including criticality, autonomy, initiative, and intellectual creativity. However, the majority of participants in their study (67.3%) were domestic students who had progressed through Western academic systems, positioning them to more readily recognise and enact these implicit norms. What is often framed as an objective standard of “doctoral readiness” therefore risks reproducing cultural privilege, as students unfamiliar with Western epistemic values must first learn how academic independence is locally defined before they can meet these expectations (Elliot, 2023).

The uneven visibility and accessibility of these expectations further compound transitional challenges for international doctoral students. Synthesising international research, Gao (2021) highlights that many international students struggle to identify and respond to implicit academic norms, particularly those embedded in feedback practices and disciplinary conventions. In the absence of explicit guidance, students often experience prolonged periods of uncertainty, attempting to “learn how to learn” while simultaneously establishing academic legitimacy in unfamiliar environments. As Elliot et al. (2016c) note, this experience is akin to “transplanting a mature plant”: international doctoral researchers are uprooted from familiar academic

ecologies yet expected to immediately thrive in new soil, despite receiving insufficient institutional nurturing to support such adaptation.

These challenges reflect a deeper structural issue: expectations such as independence, critical thinking, and taking ownership of research may disadvantage students who are unfamiliar with Western research cultures. Collectively, these experiences point to a deeper structural issue within doctoral education. Expectations surrounding independence, critical thinking, and research ownership—while ostensibly neutral—function as gatekeeping mechanisms that advantage students possessing the cultural capital to decode and perform them effectively (Elliot et al., 2016b; Li et al., 2018; Park, 2022). When communicated implicitly, such norms risk reinforcing structural inequalities, underscoring the need for more transparent, inclusive, and scaffolded institutional support for international doctoral students.

Beyond implicit norms, institutional environments vary significantly across and within UK universities. Belavy et al. (2020) argue that doctoral success is often shaped less by individual brilliance than by the broader research ecosystem—one that includes quality supervision, resource access, and disciplinary culture. Doctoral students supervised by experienced academics in well-funded and high-priority research areas tend to complete their degrees more successfully and produce more research outputs. This finding challenges the idea that academic success depends only on individual ability and effort, and instead emphasises the role of institutional environment, especially for international students who are unfamiliar with local academic systems and networks. These structural conditions shape not only the broader academic environment but also the everyday interactions through which doctoral students experience and negotiate academic expectations.

3.3.1.2 Supervisory Relationships, Feedback Practices, and Emotional Dynamics

While institutional cultures and structural inequalities shape the broader conditions of doctoral study, these pressures are often experienced most directly within the everyday supervisory interactions. The supervisor-student relationship is central to this environment, functioning not just as an instructional dynamic but as a space of identity negotiation and intercultural adaptation (Dai & Elliot, 2023; Elliot & Kobayashi, 2019). However, cultural mismatches can complicate this relationship. For instance, UK supervisors often expect students to respond critically to feedback and clearly express their own ideas as researchers, whereas some Chinese students may initially perceive feedback as judgmental or disempowering due to different norms around face, hierarchy, and authority (Geng & Yu, 2024; Quan et al., 2016). These mismatches can be further exacerbated by language barriers and writing anxiety, which will be explored in the next section.

Supervisory interactions, however, are not unidirectional or purely hierarchical. Xu et al. (2021), drawing on a longitudinal case study of two Chinese doctoral students in New Zealand, reveal that students actively engage with feedback through ongoing dialogue shaped by their agency, relationships with supervisors, and growing understanding of feedback practices. Rather than passively accepting supervisory comments, students selectively adopt, discuss, or challenge feedback based on its clarity, relevance, and relational tone. This challenges stereotypes of Chinese students as passive and highlights their increasing confidence and intercultural competence in supervisory communication. Importantly, their findings suggest that feedback literacy is not simply an individual skill to be acquired, but a socially situated process shaped by power relations, disciplinary norms, and intercultural negotiations. For Chinese international doctoral students, developing the confidence to engage

with feedback critically often involves a gradual shift in academic identity—from perceived novice to legitimate scholarly participant—mediated through emotionally charged and culturally embedded supervisory encounters.

Emotional experiences are an integral but often underexplored dimension of the doctoral academic environment, particularly for Chinese international students navigating unfamiliar feedback cultures. Geng and Yu (2024) found that feedback on academic writing frequently triggered anxiety, identity insecurity, and motivation—especially when supervisory comments clashed with students’ expectations of hierarchical teacher authority and indirect communication.

At the same time, the psychological wellbeing of supervisors is equally important. Under conditions of institutional pressure or emotional fatigue, supervisors may become less communicative or responsive, inadvertently intensifying students’ confusion and feelings of neglect—particularly among those who hesitate to seek clarification (Blackmore et al., 2019; Elliot & Kobayashi, 2019; Elliot & Makara, 2021). Doctoral supervision, therefore, should be conceptualised not merely as a pedagogical task but as a dynamic emotional relationship shaped by mutual vulnerability, structural pressures, and intercultural understanding (Elliot & Kobayashi, 2019). Acknowledging the emotional dynamics on both sides is crucial to fostering more inclusive and responsive supervisory practices.

In sum, the academic environment offers both opportunities and hidden challenges for Chinese international doctoral students, particularly where expectations remain implicit, support is uneven, and emotional demands are high. These dynamics highlight the need for more transparent and inclusive academic practices to prevent institutional inequalities from accumulating across doctoral transitions. However, institutional structures alone do not shape these experiences. Language plays a critical mediating role in how students engage with academic expectations, feedback processes, and identity

development. The following section therefore examines the intersection between language, communication, and doctoral adaptation.

3.3.2 Language and Communication Challenges

Language and communication challenges are central to Chinese international doctoral students' transitions in English-medium universities. These challenges go beyond general language proficiency and involve academic writing, oral participation, and supervisory communication. The following subsections examine these dimensions.

3.3.2.1 Academic Writing Expectations

Early studies tended to frame Chinese students' difficulties with academic writing as a result of inadequate preparation. For example, Tian and Low (2012) found that many Chinese postgraduates were unfamiliar with the structure and argumentation norms expected in UK academic writing, particularly around literature synthesis, critical voice, and citation conventions. These students often struggled with issues such as overuse of quotations, lack of argument cohesion, or confusion about what constitutes plagiarism.

However, more recent scholarship has questioned the fairness of this assumption. Rather than viewing students' difficulties as personal failings, these studies argue that such challenges stem from deeper misalignments between students' prior educational experiences and the communicative norms of English-medium academia. In particular, they highlight tensions around what it means to be "critical", how knowledge is structured and evaluated, how academic voice is enacted in writing, and how feedback is delivered and interpreted in classroom and supervisory settings (Heng, 2018; Lou, 2024; Spies et al., 2021). While such challenges are not exclusive to international doctoral students—domestic doctoral students also report uncertainty about how to enact criticality, develop an academic voice, and interpret feedback conventions

(Bearman et al., 2024)—they are often considerably more acute and multi-layered for international researchers, who must simultaneously navigate unfamiliar epistemic norms, linguistic constraints and culturally embedded communicative expectations. As a result, challenges that may seem shared can have much more serious effects on international students' confidence, engagement, and academic progress.

3.3.2.2 Oral Academic Communication

Language-related challenges are not limited to writing. Doctoral students are also expected to engage in seminars, group discussions, and supervisory meetings, where spontaneous speaking, critical questioning, and disciplinary fluency are often required. However, students from Confucian-heritage cultures may find it difficult to adjust to these interactional norms. Le and Gardner (2010), drawing on interviews with Asian international doctoral students in STEM disciplines, found that many participants struggled with classroom participation not merely due to linguistic limitations, but also because of culturally embedded concerns related to “face” (i.e., the desire to preserve dignity, avoid embarrassment, and maintain harmony in social interactions), authority, and peer perception. Students hesitated to speak for fear of making mistakes or appearing disrespectful to professors or peers.

These concerns are further echoed in Lou's (2024) recent study of Chinese PhD candidates in UK universities. Lou observed that many participants avoided verbal participation in academic settings—not only because of language anxiety, but due to uncertainty about how to critique or disagree appropriately. Their previous educational experiences had emphasised deference and harmony, leading to caution in voicing dissent or asserting strong claims. Such hesitation contributed to feelings of invisibility and exclusion, as students worried that their silence might be misread as a lack of competence or engagement. Together, these findings suggest that effective oral participation in doctoral

study depends not only on English proficiency, but also on students' ability to navigate complex intercultural norms of academic communication and to develop communicative confidence over time (Spies et al., 2021).

3.3.2.3 Supervisory Feedback Challenges

Supervisor-student interactions require not only disciplinary knowledge but also sophisticated linguistic and pragmatic competence. Supervisory feedback is frequently delivered in indirect or hedged language, requiring students to interpret both the intended meaning and the relative importance of different comments. Drawing on a qualitative framework synthesis of 86 empirical studies, Bearman et al. (2024) demonstrate that such feedback practices can create significant interpretive barriers for international doctoral students who are unfamiliar with idiomatic expressions, discipline-specific terminology, and implicit evaluative cues. When feedback lacks clarity or explicitness, students may misinterpret supervisors' intentions, resulting in surface-level revisions, confusion, or disrupted feedback dialogue.

This dynamic is further illustrated in Lou's (2024) study of Chinese doctoral researchers in the UK. Participants frequently reported difficulties in interpreting supervisory feedback—not due to limited comprehension of literal language, but because of uncertainty surrounding the underlying intent and evaluative weight of particular expressions. Similarly, Elliot (2023) highlights how pragmatic aspects of supervisory feedback can be challenging for international doctoral researchers. Feedback framed as tentative suggestions, such as “You may wish to reconsider...” or “Perhaps you could expand this section,” was often interpreted as strong criticism, generating anxiety and prompting excessive or unnecessary revisions.

Cultural norms related to hierarchy and face further intensify these challenges. Elliot (2023) explains that students may hesitate to seek clarification

in order to avoid appearing incompetent or challenging supervisory authority. Research on Chinese doctoral researchers likewise shows that concerns about maintaining relational harmony and respecting hierarchical boundaries frequently lead students to remain silent when confused, instead attempting to infer supervisors' expectations independently (Li et al., 2018; Lou, 2024). Collectively, these studies suggest that difficulties in feedback interpretation emerge from the interplay between linguistic pragmatics and culturally shaped communication norms, which together constrain open and effective supervisory dialogue.

3.3.2.4 Language Proficiency, Adaptation, and Identity Development

Beyond supervisory feedback, broader research highlights how language proficiency shapes doctoral adaptation in diverse and interconnected ways. Quantitative studies consistently show a positive relationship between language competence and students' academic and psychosocial adjustment. For example, Meng et al. (2018) found that Chinese international students with stronger English and local language skills reported higher levels of social connectedness and academic adaptation, an effect mediated by their global competence. Complementing this, Taušová et al. (2019), using cross-European survey data, observed that language proficiency was significantly linked to lower acculturative stress and improved psychological well-being. Similarly, Koo et al. (2021) demonstrated through a longitudinal study in the UK that English proficiency was associated with greater social connectedness and fewer adjustment difficulties among Chinese postgraduates in their first year. Despite methodological differences, these studies collectively suggest a robust, positive relationship between language proficiency and international students' academic and psychosocial adaptation.

Complementing these findings, qualitative research offers a more contextualised view of language-related challenges. Heng (2018) found that for

Chinese international students, language development was closely linked to academic confidence and identity. As their communicative competence improved, students felt more able to assert themselves in academic discussions. Ye and Edwards (2017) similarly showed that language shaped students' sense of belonging and legitimacy in academic spaces. Their participants described using language not only to meet expectations, but also to negotiate their place within unfamiliar academic cultures.

Taken together, these studies illustrate that language-related challenges are not merely technical but profoundly social and emotional. They shape how Chinese international doctoral students participate in academic dialogue, negotiate scholarly identities and build peer relationships. These dynamics form a bridge to the next section, which examines how social networks and peer interactions further mediate the doctoral transition experience.

3.3.3 Social Network and Peer Relationships

As conceptualised in higher education research, social networks describe the web of interpersonal relationships and interactions that facilitate students' academic, social, and personal development (Elliot et al., 2016a; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). In doctoral study, these networks can be understood along two dimensions—formal networks, emerging through institutionally organised activities such as induction programmes, research seminars, mentoring schemes, and student associations, and informal networks, developing organically through everyday interactions, shared experiences, and personal initiative (Elliot et al., 2016a; Trimpe, 2022). Both dimensions can significantly influence doctoral students' academic success, emotional resilience, and sense of belonging, particularly for international students navigating unfamiliar cultural and institutional landscapes (Elliot et al., 2016a; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Yang & MacCallum, 2022a).

Beyond their immediate social and emotional functions, these networks also serve deeper developmental purposes. Recent scholarship in doctoral education further highlights that social networks are central sites for accessing the hidden curriculum—the unofficial, often tacit forms of learning that occur through relationships, interactions, and participation in the wider doctoral ecology (Elliot et al., 2023). These hidden curricular processes provide critical insight into expectations, norms, and disciplinary practices that are rarely made explicit in formal instruction but crucial for doctoral success. Although access to the hidden curriculum often occurs informally, the extent to which students are able to participate in both formal and informal networks strongly shapes what they can learn and how quickly they adapt.

3.3.3.1 Formal Social Network

Formal networks offer structured and institutionally legitimised opportunities to enter academic communities, providing a foundation from which students—especially those new to UK doctoral cultures—can begin to decode expectations and norms. It is therefore useful to first consider how formal structures facilitate (or constrain) international doctoral students’ social integration before turning to the informal interactions through which much of the hidden curriculum is actually accessed.

Formal networks refer to structured opportunities for engagement within the doctoral and institutional environment, typically designed and facilitated by the university (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). These include induction programmes, research seminars, writing groups, mentoring schemes, student associations, and leadership or representation roles. Such initiatives provide systematic entry points into the academic community, particularly for international doctoral students navigating unfamiliar institutional and cultural contexts.

Montgomery and McDowell (2009) emphasise that institutionally organised academic and social activities—such as research seminars, student associations, and collaborative projects—can provide structured spaces where international and domestic students work together toward shared goals, fostering meaningful interaction and reducing social distance. Building on this, Trimpe (2022) highlights how structured support programmes can act as scaffolds that ease students' cultural and academic transitions by offering predictable, inclusive opportunities for participation. Such environments not only expand access to academic resources but also create legitimised avenues for engagement, which can be particularly important for those who might otherwise feel marginalised in less formal settings.

Evidence from doctoral contexts further illustrates the transformative role of such formal structures. Ciampa and Wolfe's (2023) qualitative case study of a doctoral peer-review writing group demonstrates how structured collaboration enabled students to transition from isolation to active scholarly participation, fostering both academic confidence and a stronger sense of belonging. Lee's (2017) reflective account as an international doctoral student shows that formal mentoring schemes—when culturally sensitive—can also support students in navigating supervisory expectations and institutional norms. Lorenzetti et al. (2023) similarly note that well-designed institutional platforms can help reduce the risk of social exclusion for international doctoral students by creating intentional opportunities for diverse interactions. For Chinese doctoral students, who may face linguistic or cultural barriers in informal settings, formal networks can serve as crucial gateways into wider academic and social communities (Yang & MacCallum, 2022a). In this sense, formal networks are not merely supplementary to the doctoral experience but are integral mechanisms for both academic integration and emotional resilience.

3.3.3.2 Informal Social Network

However, formal structures alone cannot fully capture the breadth of doctoral students' social experiences. Many crucial forms of support, emotional connection, and practical advice occur in informal networks, which develop organically through everyday interactions, shared experiences, and personal initiative. For international doctoral students, these informal spaces can complement formal engagement by offering culturally and emotionally resonant connections, though they may be more challenging to access for those facing linguistic or cultural barriers (Lorenzetti et al., 2023; Yang & MacCallum, 2022a).

Informal networks are typically formed through unstructured social interactions such as casual conversations, coffee breaks, shared office spaces, spontaneous peer collaborations and student-initiated leisure or hobby groups (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). These spaces often provide a more relaxed environment for relationship-building, enabling trust and mutual understanding to develop over time (Lorenzetti et al., 2023; Nilsson, 2019). They can be particularly valuable for exchanging tacit knowledge, sharing coping strategies, and fostering a sense of belonging that extends beyond formal academic settings (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2023; Elliot et al., 2023; Newsome & Cooper, 2016). Through these informal interactions, students often learn how feedback is interpreted, how academic voice is negotiated, which opportunities “matter,” and how disciplinary expectations operate in practice—forms of tacit knowledge that are rarely articulated through formal instruction (Elliot et al., 2023).

Montgomery and McDowell (2009) observe that these informal connections often facilitate deeper cultural learning and trust-building than formal structures alone, as they are grounded in reciprocity and shared lived experiences. Rienties and Nolan's (2014) longitudinal social network analysis shows that both host and co-national ties can significantly influence

international students' academic outcomes, with diverse networks offering the greatest benefits for integration.

For Chinese international doctoral students, informal networks frequently begin with co-national friendships that provide emotional security and a culturally familiar space, especially during the early stages of transition (Yang & MacCallum, 2022a). However, Yang and MacCallum (2022a) also note that these students often oscillate between the comfort of co-national networks and the aspiration to integrate into broader academic communities, a process shaped by language proficiency, cultural confidence, and institutional contexts. While such ties can mitigate feelings of isolation, they may also limit opportunities for intercultural engagement if relied upon exclusively (Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Nilsson, 2019).

Lorenzetti et al. (2023) caution against viewing co-national groups solely as barriers; instead, they highlight their constructive role in offering practical advice, emotional support, and a stable base from which students can explore broader academic communities. Nilsson's (2019) study of the Buddy Programme in Sweden further illustrates that while students often gravitate towards peers from similar backgrounds, structured opportunities for intercultural contact can extend the benefits of these informal ties. Taken together, these studies suggest that informal networks operate in complex and dynamic ways, simultaneously providing emotional security and shaping opportunities for broader social integration. Ultimately, informal networks provide continuity, flexibility, and context-specific support that complements formal structures, with the two dimensions intersecting to enhance doctoral students' academic success, resilience, and sense of belonging.

From a doctoral education perspective, these networks function as key sites through which the hidden curriculum is accessed and negotiated—that is, the tacit expectations, norms, and practices that shape academic participation but

often remain implicit (Elliot et al., 2016b; Elliot et al., 2023). While some elements of this hidden curriculum may be encountered through formal pedagogical spaces, much of it is learned through informal and co-created communities, such as peer writing groups, journal clubs, and everyday scholarly interactions, where learning is inherently relational and rather than individualised (Elliot et al., 2023).

For Chinese international doctoral students, the interplay between formal and informal networks is especially consequential. Formal structures can help lower initial barriers to participation by offering predictable and legitimised opportunities for engagement, while informal connections—particularly when extended beyond co-national circles—enable deeper integration, identity negotiation, and longer-term resilience. However, access to these informal spaces is uneven: linguistic challenges, culturally shaped communication norms, and unfamiliarity with local academic practices can constrain international students' participation in the very networks through which the hidden curriculum is transmitted.

Recognising doctoral learning as a socially situated and interdependent process therefore foregrounds a critical issue of equity: when institutions rely on informal networks to complement formal support, yet leave access to these networks to chance or individual initiative, opportunity gaps are likely to be reproduced rather than mitigated. Creating inclusive doctoral environments thus requires not only valuing both formal and informal networks, but also taking institutional responsibility for making these relational spaces more visible, accessible, and supportive for international doctoral students navigating complex cross-cultural transitions.

3.3.4 Institutional and Structural Influences

Doctoral students' transitions are shaped not only by personal and peer-level factors but also by broader institutional and structural conditions that govern access to resources, opportunities, and recognition (Cao et al., 2024; Huang & Turner, 2018). For Chinese international doctoral students in the UK, these influences operate across multiple levels, including university support structures, policy and immigration environments, and cultural-academic systems such as Shimen culture. Together, these conditions play a critical role in shaping doctoral experiences and the equitable distribution of opportunities.

3.3.4.1 University Support Structures

Within the doctoral environment, university support structures form a critical formal layer that can facilitate students' adaptation and progression across different transition domains. In the UK context, these include academic writing support, research skills training, career development workshops, and mental health provision, often complemented by peer mentoring and induction activities (Huang & Turner, 2018; Singh, 2023). When designed with disciplinary relevance and cultural sensitivity, such services can enhance academic readiness, reduce transitional stress, and strengthen employability-related transitions (Cao et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

However, both studies caution that the mere existence of services does not guarantee engagement. Wang et al. (2024) found that some Chinese international doctoral students overlooked relevant opportunities due to limited visibility, lack of targeted promotion, or uncertainty about alignment with personal career trajectories—factors that can slow or complicate career-related transitions. Similarly, Huang and Turner (2018) reported that students' perceptions of a service's usefulness and accessibility strongly shaped their willingness to participate, with initiatives that explicitly linked activities to

future employment pathways more likely to sustain engagement. Together, these findings indicate that the effectiveness of institutional support depends not simply on availability, but on its visibility, perceived relevance, and alignment with students' academic and employability trajectories (Park, 2022; Valmeekanathan et al., 2021; Wang & Liardét, 2025).

3.3.4.2 Policy and Immigration Environment

Similarly, the policy and immigration environment sets critical boundaries for how doctoral transitions unfold. The UK Graduate Route visa offers doctoral graduates an extended post-study work period, potentially easing the employability transition by reducing immediate sponsorship pressures (UK Government, 2021; Ahmed & Davies, 2025). However, research suggests that immigration regulations continue to impose significant structural constraints on international students' career trajectories. Policy uncertainty, strict eligibility conditions, and complex sponsorship requirements compress the school-to-work transition and restrict opportunities for sustained career exploration (Li et al., 2024; Song & Kim, 2022).

Restrictive immigration rules have been shown to narrow the scope of career choices, often compelling international students to prioritise pragmatic employment options over long-term professional aspirations (Song & Kim, 2022). For Chinese doctoral students seeking to remain in the UK, this can result in the abandonment of academic career pathways when securing sponsored academic positions proves difficult. Instead, some graduates redirect their trajectories toward roles—such as professional services positions within universities—that are perceived as more attainable within existing visa frameworks.

However, these alternative pathways are frequently experienced as transitional and uncertain rather than stable career solutions. While professional services roles may function as temporary stepping stones that enable graduates

to remain in the UK labour market, it remains unclear whether such positions can ultimately lead to academic opportunities that align with students' scholarly aspirations and long-term employability goals. This uncertainty is further intensified by continually changing immigration policies and the finite duration of post-study work visas, which together constrain graduates' capacity for long-term career planning.

For many Chinese international doctoral students, the cumulative effects of policy uncertainty, limited sponsorship opportunities, and high-risk transitional pathways reduce the perceived viability of remaining in the UK labour market. Rather than continuing to navigate insecure and constrained career trajectories, some students opt to return to China, where academic and professional pathways—though structured by different institutional logics—may appear more predictable and attainable. This pattern of constrained career choice illustrates how immigration regimes shape not only employment pathways within the host country, but also international doctoral graduates' decisions to return to their home countries.

3.3.4.3 Shimen Culture and Career Gatekeeping

In addition to formal institutional support and national policy frameworks, cultural-academic structures play a critical role in shaping the doctoral experiences of Chinese international students. Within the Chinese doctoral education system, Shimen culture refers to a distinctive academic-social structure in which a doctoral supervisor (*shi*) and their students (*men*) form a tightly knit community, often characterised by hierarchical relationships, reciprocal obligations, and long-term professional affiliation (Dai & Elliot, 2023). Rooted in Confucian traditions of mentorship and respect for authority, this system extends beyond academic supervision to encompass broader dimensions of career guidance, research collaboration, and network-based resource sharing (Dai & Elliot, 2023; Liu & Dong, 2025). However, while not formally established

by universities or departments, it nonetheless operates as an influential informal structure (Dai & Elliot, 2023; Zheng et al., 2018).

For Chinese international doctoral students in the UK, the relevance of Shimen culture is closely tied to post-graduation trajectories. Given the restrictive visa environment in the UK, particularly for those in the social sciences and humanities, many Chinese doctoral students are compelled to return to China for academic employment rather than out of personal preference. In this context, the presence—or absence—of Shimen-based networks can significantly shape career prospects. Doctoral graduates who have studied within China are typically embedded in Shimen relationships, benefiting from career guidance, professional endorsements, and privileged access to academic opportunities (Dai & Elliot, 2023). By contrast, Chinese students who have pursued their doctorates abroad often lack such affiliations and may encounter barriers to reintegration into the domestic academic system, where Shimen connections frequently function as gatekeepers to career advancement (Dai & Elliot, 2023; Shen et al., 2024).

This is not to suggest, however, that returnees are entirely excluded from opportunities, as many possess strong academic credentials—such as substantial publication records and international research experience—that enhance their competitiveness in the domestic job market. Rather, their career pathways tend to be more constrained and uncertain in the absence of Shimen ties, given the continued gatekeeping function of such networks in Chinese academia.

This highlights the dual role of Shimen culture: while it provides strong academic and career support for those within the network, it also creates disadvantages for returnees who lack such connections. Yet, despite the acknowledged significance of Shimen culture in shaping academic careers, little is known about how its absence affects the employability transitions of Chinese international doctoral students returning from the UK. Addressing this gap, the

present study examines how these students navigate the interplay of structural constraints and cultural-academic norms in shaping their career trajectories.

3.3.5 Proactivity as an Implicit Expectation in Doctoral Education

Proactivity has been widely recognised as a key factor shaping doctoral students' academic development, career preparation, and capacity to navigate complex transitions. Within doctoral education, however, proactivity should not be understood simply as an individual personality trait or personal disposition. Rather, it reflects doctoral students' capacity to exercise agency by actively seeking information, mobilising resources, and shaping their learning and career trajectories within institutionally structured and culturally bounded environments (Mantai, 2015; Yu et al., 2021). From this perspective, proactivity is relational and contextual: it is enacted through interactions with supervisors, peers, and institutional systems, rather than residing solely within the individual.

In highly autonomous doctoral systems such as those in the UK, expectations of proactivity are often implicit rather than explicitly articulated (Elliot, 2023; Elliot et al., 2023; Mantai, 2015). Mantai's (2015) study of early-stage doctoral students demonstrates that many newcomers initially struggle to "feel like a researcher" precisely because norms surrounding independence, initiative, and self-direction remain largely unspoken. Doctoral students are expected to proactively seek feedback, identify research opportunities, and manage their academic development, yet they receive limited guidance on how such expectations should be enacted in practice. In this sense, expectations of proactivity constitute a key element of the hidden curriculum of doctoral study, learned informally through observation, trial and error, and social participation rather than through formal instruction (Elliot et al., 2023; Mantai, 2015).

Against this backdrop of implicit expectations, a growing body of empirical research indicates that proactive engagement—such as information-seeking, help-seeking, and strategic career planning—is positively associated with academic adjustment, career exploration, and career self-management (Meng et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2021). For example, Yu et al. (2021) found that proactive personality significantly predicted career self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and clarity of career goals among Chinese students, highlighting the role of agency in navigating uncertain academic and employment pathways. Studies situated in cross-cultural higher education contexts further suggest that proactive engagement is associated with students' access to informal knowledge, social support, and developmental opportunities that are rarely made visible through formal institutional channels (Elliot et al., 2016b; Elliot et al., 2023).

However, recent studies emphasise that proactivity should not be viewed simply as an individual trait. Instead, doctoral students' ability to act proactively is shaped by their relationships, cultural backgrounds, and institutional environments, which can both support and limit their agency (Mantai, 2015; Stanley, 2023; Elliot et al., 2016). Opportunities to act proactively often depend on access to supportive supervisors, inclusive peer networks, and institutional environments that recognise and legitimise students' initiative. When these conditions are unevenly distributed, proactivity expectations may unfairly burden students who are already marginalised in doctoral education (Elliot et al., 2023; McCain et al., 2024).

For international doctoral students—particularly those from educational traditions that emphasise structured guidance and hierarchical academic relationships, such as China—the demand for proactivity can be especially complex (Elliot et al., 2023; Xu & Chan, 2023). Prior learning experiences within such educational contexts may not have required students to routinely initiate

academic dialogue, challenge supervisory feedback, or independently seek developmental opportunities. Research on Chinese students' transitions conducted within the domestic higher education context further suggests that, while many demonstrate strong motivation and persistence, they may hesitate to enact agency when communicative norms, power relations, and disciplinary expectations remain unclear (Yu et al., 2021).

Notably, this hesitation can be seen even in familiar educational settings, suggesting that students are often unsure about when, how, and with whom it is appropriate to be proactive. This uncertainty directly shapes their behaviour. Therefore, such hesitation should not be viewed as a lack of initiative or ability, but rather as a reasonable response to unclear expectations about proactive engagement. This also highlights the importance of creating relational spaces where norms and expectations are made clear, helping doctoral students learn when proactive engagement is accepted and effective, and feel more confident to take action.

In this regard, informal networks play a particularly important role. Through everyday interactions with peers, mentors, and colleagues, doctoral students often gain practical guidance on how to ask questions, interpret expectations, seek feedback, and recognise opportunities in ways that feel socially acceptable. These informal exchanges therefore function as key relational spaces in which agency is gradually developed and enacted (Elliot et al., 2023). By contrast, those who face linguistic challenges, cultural unfamiliarity, or limited institutional support may find it much harder to engage proactively, even when such behaviours are implicitly encouraged within doctoral environments.

From an equity perspective, this raises important concerns. When universities emphasise autonomy and proactivity but do not provide equal support or opportunities for all students to develop and exercise agency, the burden of success is effectively placed on individuals rather than on institutions.

As Stanley (2023) argues, proactivity may function as a protective factor for doctoral students—but only within environments that actively recognise, support, and legitimise students’ agency. Without this kind of institutional support, expectations around being proactive are likely to reinforce existing inequalities, benefiting students who already have stronger cultural familiarity, language confidence, or insider knowledge of the doctoral hidden curriculum (Elliot et al., 2016; Stanley, 2023).

Taken together, this body of literature suggests that proactivity should be understood not merely as an individual trait or learning strategy, but as a form of doctoral agency that is relationally enacted and structurally mediated. For Chinese international doctoral students, the capacity to act proactively emerges through the dynamic interplay between personal motivation, access to informal networks, and institutional arrangements that either enable or constrain meaningful participation. Recognising this interplay shifts analytical attention away from deficit-based explanations of “passive” learners and towards a more critical examination of how doctoral environments distribute opportunities for agency, learning, and career development.

3.3.6 Summary and Implications

This review demonstrates that Chinese international doctoral students’ transitions are not best understood as a series of isolated academic, linguistic, or social challenges, but as an interconnected and structurally situated process shaped by institutional norms and relational conditions. Across the literature, core expectations within UK doctoral education—such as autonomy, critical engagement, and proactive participation—emerge as largely implicit rather than formally taught, requiring students to navigate opaque institutional cultures.

A central insight identified from this synthesis is that doctoral transitions are mediated through the hidden curriculum, within which valued forms of

participation are learned informally through everyday interactions in supervisory relationships, feedback practices, and peer networks. In this process, doctoral agency is not a fixed personal attribute but a relationally enacted and structurally shaped capacity, contingent upon access to responsive supervision, inclusive networks, and legitimising institutional environments. Importantly, this relational and structural configuration carries significant equity implications: when autonomy and initiative are valorised without explicit institutional scaffolding, doctoral systems tend to privilege those with greater cultural familiarity, linguistic confidence, and insider knowledge of academic norms. For Chinese international doctoral students in particular, uncertainty surrounding the legitimacy of proactive engagement reflects structural opacity rather than personal deficiency, contributing to uneven experiences of participation and development.

These insights generate three implications for the present study. First, they justify an analytical focus on interactional and contextual mechanisms—how doctoral students come to “learn the rules” of academic participation through supervision, feedback, and peer relations—rather than treating challenges as isolated domains. Second, they highlight the importance of examining visibility and access: which employability-related opportunities are formally provided versus informally circulated, and how Chinese international doctoral students navigate or are excluded from these channels. Third, the literature points to a critical gap: although institutional supports, immigration regimes, and cultural-academic structures (e.g., Shimen networks) are widely acknowledged as shaping doctoral trajectories, we still know relatively little about how Chinese international doctoral students actively negotiate these layered constraints in their employability transitions—particularly when informal resources and legitimising spaces are unevenly available.

Addressing this gap, the current research explores how Chinese international doctoral students make sense of, access, and strategically respond to these intersecting influences, thereby offering a more nuanced account of doctoral agency as relationally enacted and structurally mediated across institutional, cultural, and temporal contexts.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm represents a comprehensive framework of philosophical assumptions that guide how researchers perceive reality, construct knowledge, and interpret social phenomena (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). It provides the worldview that informs every stage of the research process – from formulating questions and designing methods to analysing data and drawing conclusions. In other words, a paradigm defines what researchers consider to be valid knowledge and how it can be acquired, thereby shaping the methodological and theoretical choices that follow (Clark, Foster, Sloan, & Bryman, 2021). Understanding the research paradigm is therefore fundamental, as it ensures coherence between a study's philosophical orientation and its practical procedures (Arthur, Waring, Coe, & Hedges, 2012).

In social science research, several paradigms are commonly recognised, including positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, and pragmatism (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2016). These paradigms differ in their assumptions about reality and knowledge. Positivism assumes that reality is objective, stable, and measurable, and that knowledge can be generated through observation and logical reasoning. Interpretivism, by contrast, assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through individuals' meanings, experiences, and interactions. Critical theory emphasises the influence of power and inequality on knowledge production, while pragmatism focuses on solving practical problems and adopts whatever methods are most effective for addressing a given research question.

This thesis is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which is particularly appropriate given its focus on understanding how Chinese international doctoral students in the UK experience and make sense of multiple transitions throughout

their doctoral journeys. Both studies seek to explore participants' subjective interpretations of their experiences rather than to establish causal relationships or generate universally generalisable findings. From an interpretivist perspective, reality is understood as socially constructed and shaped by individuals' interactions with their academic, social, cultural, and professional environments.

Consistent with interpretivist assumptions, both studies adopted an inductive approach to data analysis, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than being imposed by pre-existing theoretical categories. Knowledge is therefore understood as co-constructed between researcher and participants through dialogue and interpretation. In this way, the interpretivist paradigm provides the overarching philosophical foundation for the qualitative and inductive design of both studies presented in this thesis.

4.2 The Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is concerned with exploring and understanding the meanings that individuals or groups assign to social or human phenomena (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than approaching inquiry from a detached position, qualitative researchers frequently work in close proximity to participants' worlds, sometimes even adopting an insider stance when describing social settings and interactions (Finlay, 2002; Marecek et al., 1998). As Creswell (2014) notes, qualitative inquiry directs attention to the meanings embedded in people's experiences within particular contexts, as well as those conveyed through language, text, images and other forms of expression. Through analysing participants' accounts, qualitative researchers seek to generate interpretive insights, recognising that multiple subjective understandings may coexist rather than a single objective truth (Creswell, 2014; Lichtman, 2017). This approach is therefore well suited to studies that aim to explore complex processes, subjective experiences and context-dependent reasoning, especially when the

goal is to understand meaning rather than to measure frequency or predict outcomes.

The present thesis fits squarely within this orientation. Both studies seek to understand how Chinese international doctoral students in the UK experience and make sense of significant aspects of their doctoral journeys. Study 1 explores how doctoral students navigate multiple academic, social, cultural and career-related transitions, while Study 2 examines the factors shaping employability development and career-related transitions during doctoral study. These experiences are not discrete phenomena that can be objectively measured; rather, they are interpreted through participants' personal histories, social contexts, and future aspirations. A qualitative approach is therefore particularly appropriate, as it enables the researcher to access participants' reflective accounts of how they understand and respond to these experiences.

Furthermore, qualitative research is inherently compatible with inductive logic. Rather than applying theory deductively, both studies allowed analytic categories to develop from the data itself through iterative engagement with participants' narratives. In this sense, the analytic process resembled what Creswell (2014) describes as a detective-like approach: the researcher moved back and forth between identified patterns and the raw data, weighing possible interpretations and examining whether the evidence sufficiently supported them before allowing a theme to stand. This bottom-up approach affords sensitivity to unanticipated insights – an important feature given the limited prior research on the successful navigation of doctoral transitions and employability experiences among Chinese doctoral students. Flexibility is also a recognised strength of qualitative inquiry: research instruments can be refined as understanding deepens, and analytic interpretation evolves in dialogue with the data (Creswell, 2014; Lichtman, 2017). Such adaptability was essential in this

study, where interview prompts were adjusted to better elicit rich, reflective accounts once early patterns began to surface.

Although both quantitative and mixed-methods designs are widely used in social science research, they are not appropriate for the purposes of the present study. Quantitative approaches are most effective for addressing pre-determined questions such as “how many?” and “who?” and for testing hypotheses using standardised measures to generate generalisable patterns (Lichtman, 2017). However, the phenomena investigated in this thesis are not externally observable events that can be meaningfully reduced to variables. Both studies focus on subjective, context-dependent experiences that are interpreted and narrated through participants’ own meaning-making processes. A quantitative design would therefore risk overlooking the complexity, nuance and experiential dimensions that are central to the research questions.

Mixed-methods research is sometimes employed to compensate for the limitations of single-method designs (Yoshikawa et al., 2013), yet adopting it here would have shifted the analytic focus away from depth and interpretation toward breadth and comparison. Because both studies were concerned with understanding how participants interpret and make sense of their experiences rather than measuring prevalence or testing causal relationships, a qualitative-only design provided the most coherent and methodologically appropriate approach.

Taken together, the adoption of a qualitative, inductive and single-method design was not simply a matter of methodological preference but a logical consequence of the aims of this thesis. Given the emphasis on understanding subjective experiences, meaning-making processes, and contextually situated transitions, qualitative inquiry provided the most appropriate framework for both studies.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout both studies to ensure that participants' rights, dignity, wellbeing, and privacy were protected at every stage of the research process. As Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014) observe, ethical dilemmas are inevitable in educational research due to the involvement of human participants, while Bryman and Bell (2015) emphasise the importance of avoiding harm, ensuring informed consent, safeguarding confidentiality, maintaining privacy, and preventing deception. Although the two studies involved different participant groups and research foci, both explored personal experiences and perceptions, requiring careful attention to ethical considerations throughout the research process.

Ethical approval was obtained separately for the two studies from the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Study 1 was approved under Application ID: 400220252, while Study 2 was approved under Application ID: 400230196. In accordance with the approved procedures for each study, all participants received a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form outlining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw, and the measures taken to protect anonymity and personal data.

Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through several safeguards. Participants were informed that no identifying information, including names, institutional affiliations, supervisors, or other potentially identifiable details, would appear in transcripts, presentations, publications, or the final thesis. Pseudonyms were used throughout the research process, and participants were offered the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms to maintain a degree of agency over their representation. Participants were also informed that withdrawing from the research would result in the deletion of all associated data. Contact details for the researcher and supervisory team were provided

should participants wish to raise questions or concerns during or after participation.

All research data were handled in accordance with University of Glasgow data protection policies and GDPR requirements. Audio recordings, consent forms, transcripts, translated texts, and related research materials were stored securely within the University of Glasgow OneDrive server, which is institutionally managed, encrypted, and access restricted. Personal identifiers were stored separately from anonymised datasets to minimise the risk of re-identification. In accordance with university policy, all research data will be retained securely for ten years before being permanently deleted.

In sum, ethical safeguards across both studies encompassed informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity protection, participants' right to withdraw, and secure data management. These measures protected participants' rights and wellbeing while enhancing the transparency, credibility, and trustworthiness of the research.

4.4 Researcher Positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher plays an active role in the co-construction of knowledge, making it important to reflect on how personal background, experiences, and social position may influence the research process (Finlay, 2002). Across both Study 1 and Study 2, I occupied a partial insider position as a Chinese doctoral student studying in the UK and researching the experiences of Chinese international doctoral students and graduates.

This shared cultural, linguistic, and educational background facilitated access to participants and helped establish rapport during recruitment and interviews. Participants were often able to discuss their experiences using culturally specific concepts and assumptions without extensive explanation, enabling richer and more nuanced accounts of doctoral experiences,

employability development, and career trajectories. My familiarity with both Chinese and UK higher education contexts also supported the interpretation of participants' narratives, particularly when discussing issues such as supervisory relationships, academic expectations, cultural adaptation, employability pressures, and career development.

However, my position was not that of a complete insider. In Study 1, participants had already completed their doctoral studies and secured academic positions, whereas I had not yet made this transition at the time of data collection. In Study 2, although I shared similar experiences as a current doctoral student, it remained important not to assume that participants' perspectives mirrored my own. These distinctions highlighted the need to remain open to alternative interpretations and attentive to participants' individual experiences.

To minimise the influence of personal assumptions on the research process, several reflexive strategies were employed. First, I drew on Srivastava and Hopwood's (2009, 2018) iterative framework, using their three orienting questions—What are the data telling me? What is it that I want to know? How do these two interact?—to guide the analytic process and critically examine my interpretations. Second, I maintained detailed reflective memos throughout the analysis to document and monitor my assumptions. Third, regular supervisory debriefing sessions provided opportunities to challenge initial interpretations and consider alternative explanations.

For example, in Study 1, I initially interpreted participants' references to Shimen as part of broader discussions of social support and professional networks. Through discussions with my supervisors, this was re-examined as a distinct cultural influence shaping access to opportunities and career development, prompting me to revisit the data with greater attention to its significance. Similarly, in Study 2, a participant's reference to a "grey area" in academic employment was initially treated as a minor observation but was later

recognised, through supervisory discussion, as an important insight into implicit rules and uncertainties within academic recruitment processes.

These strategies enabled me to benefit from the advantages of insider understanding while maintaining sufficient critical distance to ensure that participants' perspectives, rather than my own assumptions, remained central to the interpretation of the findings.

Having outlined the overall research paradigm, methodological approach, and researcher positionality, the following section introduces Study 1 and presents its research design and methodological approach.

4.5 Study 1: Introduction and Methodology

4.5.1 Introduction for Study 1

Study 1 was designed to address critical gaps in the existing literature on Chinese international doctoral students in the UK. While much prior research has examined challenges such as language barriers, academic adjustment, or social isolation, these studies often treat transitions as separate and predominantly focus on negative experiences (Cao et al., 2021; Geng & Yu, 2024; Quan et al., 2016). Few have considered how doctoral students experience multiple, overlapping transitions simultaneously, or how some students manage to complete their PhDs within the expected timeframe and progress into academic employment.

The purpose of Study 1 was to explore how Chinese international doctoral students in the UK navigate multiple, overlapping transitions, with particular attention to the factors and strategies that may enable them to navigate their PhD journey more effectively. Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the Four Stages of Learning framework served as sensitising lenses to help interpret how students respond to change and mobilise personal and contextual resources

across different phases of the doctoral trajectory. Practically, the study aimed to generate insights that may inform institutional practices and doctoral support structures for international students.

Guided by the above rationale, Study 1 addressed the following research questions:

a) How do successful Chinese international doctoral students in the UK navigate academic, social, and cultural transitions within the UK education system?

b) What key factors and forms of support enable these students to navigate academic, social and cultural transitions more effectively during their doctoral journey?

4.5.2 Methodology for Study 1

This section outlines the methodological approach adopted in Study 1 and explains how the research design, sampling strategy, and data collection and analysis procedures were aligned with the study's aim of examining Chinese international doctoral students' transition experiences in the UK. The methodological choices are situated within the study's interpretivist orientation and justified in relation to the nature of the research questions and the characteristics of the participant group.

4.5.2.1 The Research Design

Study 1 was designed to examine how Chinese international doctoral students navigated multiple transitions from the Chinese to the UK higher education context. In keeping with the interpretivist and qualitative orientation of the study, the research design prioritised access to participants' reflective, meaning-laden accounts rather than externally observable indicators. This section outlines the overall design, which integrated in-depth semi-structured

interviews supplemented by a visual elicitation activity (the River of Experience; Reavey, 2011), followed by the sampling strategy and procedures for data collection.

Semi-structured interviews were adopted as the principal method of data generation. This format provided a guiding structure while allowing participants to elaborate on aspects of their transitions that they considered personally salient. Such flexibility was essential for facilitating dialogic and reflective accounts of multiple transitions, which are highly individualised and cannot be meaningfully examined through fixed-response instruments. Details of the interview procedures are described later in Section 4.4.2.3.

To enhance narrative depth and support recall, the River of Experience technique was incorporated as a supplementary elicitation tool rather than as a second method of data generation. The river metaphor was particularly appropriate for this study because doctoral transitions are rarely smooth or linear experiences. Like a river, the doctoral journey involves periods of challenge and uncertainty as well as moments of achievement, growth, and stability. Participants were invited to view the source of the river as representing the beginning of their doctoral studies, while the end of the river symbolised the completion of the PhD and the transition into a new stage of life and career. Features such as bends, obstacles, and changes in the flow of the river enabled participants to represent significant challenges, turning points, sources of support, and important achievements encountered along the way. The analogy therefore encouraged participants to reflect on their doctoral experiences as an evolving journey rather than as a series of isolated events, helping them to consider how different transitions unfolded and interacted over time.

Derived from the “snake” method (Day et al., 1990), this visual activity invited participants to depict their doctoral journey as a flowing river in which

bends represented significant influences, disruptions or turning points (Reavey, 2011). Participants completed the drawing in advance of the interview to prompt reflection on challenges, resources, coping strategies and key achievements. The drawings were subsequently photographed and used during the interview to facilitate elaboration and thematic exploration.

During the interviews, the river drawings served as entry points into conversation rather than as stand-alone data. Participants were asked to talk through their representations, while follow-up prompts (e.g., “*What does this bend represent?*” or “*Why was this moment significant for you?*”) were used to deepen interpretation. This combined approach enabled participants to externalise tacit dimensions of experience and to articulate transitions in a temporally coherent and holistic manner, which may not have been achieved through verbal questioning alone.

In practice, participants varied considerably in the level of detail included in their drawings, with some producing highly detailed visual representations and others relying more heavily on verbal explanation. As a researcher, I found that the drawings functioned primarily as prompts for discussion rather than as independent sources of data. Interestingly, several participants depicted the river dividing into multiple branches towards the end of their drawings, explaining that completing a PhD opened up multiple possible future pathways rather than leading to a single predetermined destination. This highlighted the value of the river metaphor in encouraging reflection on both past experiences and future transitions.

The integration of a visual scaffold within a semi-structured interview design strengthened the methodological rigour of the study. It helped participants recall experiences more clearly, situate their reflections within specific stages of their doctoral journey, and generate rich, context-specific insights while allowing them to express meanings freely. Taken together, this

design ensured conceptual alignment with the interpretivist stance of the study and provided a coherent and defensible strategy for capturing the depth and complexity of doctoral transition trajectories.

4.5.2.2 Sampling Strategy and Participants

In line with the qualitative and interpretivist approach of this study, the sampling strategy did not aim to achieve statistical representativeness. Instead, participants were selected to provide rich and detailed accounts that could help illuminate the research questions. The sampling was therefore guided by theoretical considerations, focusing on individuals whose experiences offered strong analytical value for understanding doctoral transitions.

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to recruit participants whose experiences were directly relevant to the study aims. Purposive sampling enables researchers to intentionally select individuals who can provide rich and contextually grounded insights rather than relying on probability-based assumptions (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Marshall, 1996). Within this approach, snowball sampling was employed to access additional eligible participants beyond the researcher's immediate network (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Volunteer-based purposive sampling was operationalised through online recruitment posts circulated in postgraduate research communities on MS Teams, LinkedIn and WeChat. This approach was adopted to avoid restricting the sample to a single institution or geographic location, as the target group – Chinese international doctoral graduates who had completed their doctorates – may be dispersed across different countries. The recruitment post included a brief description of the study, eligibility criteria, a Qualtrics link, and the researcher's contact details.

Before any data were collected, interested individuals accessed the Qualtrics form, where they were provided with detailed study information and

asked to give informed consent. Only after consent was obtained were basic demographic details (e.g., gender, age range, and contact information) and screening items collected to confirm eligibility. Once suitable participants were identified, they were invited to take part and were additionally asked to refer others with comparable backgrounds and experiences who might be willing to participate.

To understand the experiences of Chinese international doctoral students' multiple transitions, I applied several criteria. Firstly, the study aimed to recruit participants graduated in social sciences and humanities. Devine and Hunter (2016) surveyed 186 doctoral students using mixed methods and found students in social sciences and humanities normally experience isolation during their PhD journey. In contrast, doctoral students in laboratory sciences shown the low levels of attrition because they can have more interaction with their team members and advisors in the lab, which may reduce the emotional exhaustion (Devine & Hunter, 2016). Therefore, we mainly focused on students from social science and humanities in order to get in-detailed and meaningful understanding. Second, the participants complete their PhD in 4 years, because this study aimed to explore positive doctoral transitions and the shorter time the participants took for their PhD, the more possibilities to provide positive experiences about academic transitions of their doctoral journey. Third, the interviewee found a job in a reputable institution that includes the QS top 200 universities (QS World University Rankings, 2022) and / or top 500 enterprises (Times Higher Education World University Rankings, 2022). These criteria do not define success in absolute terms but serve to identify analytically rich cases from which transferable insights may be generated.

In qualitative research, the emphasis is placed on the depth and richness of the data rather than on statistical generalisability (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Creswell, 2014). Accordingly, appropriate sample size is determined by

informational adequacy and feasibility of access rather than numerical representativeness (Marshall, 1996). Although an initial plan was set to recruit twelve participants, recruitment proved more challenging than originally anticipated because the target population was highly specialised and difficult to access. Although volunteer-based recruitment posts were circulated through postgraduate research communities on MS Teams, LinkedIn and WeChat, these generated relatively few responses from eligible participants. Many potential participants had already graduated and relocated to different institutions or countries, making them difficult to identify and contact. In addition, most eligible graduates had already begun demanding professional careers, limiting both their availability and their willingness to participate in research interviews.

Recruitment was also influenced by the researcher's position. As a current doctoral researcher, I had limited access to the professional networks through which eligible graduates were most readily reached. Consequently, snowball sampling gradually became the principal recruitment strategy. Participants who completed the interview were invited to recommend other graduates who met the study's eligibility criteria, enabling access to individuals beyond my immediate network. This approach proved considerably more effective than open online recruitment and ultimately became the primary means of identifying participants. Flexibility in scheduling interviews and offering interviews in Chinese also helped accommodate participants' professional commitments and facilitated participation. Although recruitment extended over approximately nine months, the original sampling criteria were retained rather than broadened in order to preserve the information-rich nature of the sample. Ultimately, eight participants were recruited, providing sufficient depth and diversity to address the research questions.

To contextualise the sample and support the interpretability of the findings, key participant characteristics are summarised in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Participant Profile of Study 1

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Disciplines	Interview Length
Winter	Female	30-35	Social Science	53 mins
Teddy	Male	36-39	Social Science	62 mins
Ding	Female	30-35	Social Science	52 mins
Wade	Male	36-39	Humanities	55 mins
Fanta	Female	30-35	Social Science	46 mins
Yulia	Female	36-39	Social Science	58 mins
Jessy	Female	30-35	Social Science	48 mins
Holly	Female	30-35	Social Science	53 mins

4.5.2.3 Data Collection

Preparation

Data collection was conducted between May 2023 and February 2024. Prior to commencement, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee (Application ID: 400220252). Participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form, which outlined the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any stage, and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. All participants gave informed consent before taking part.

Before the main data collection commenced, two pilot interviews were conducted. These participants were not fully aligned with the inclusion criteria, as they were not from the social sciences or humanities, but they met the other conditions such as completing their PhDs in the UK within four years and securing employment after graduation. Given that the purpose of the pilot was not to generate formal data but to refine the research instruments and procedures,

their participation was considered appropriate (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Janghorban et al., 2014)). The pilot aimed to test the clarity of the interview schedule, assess the appropriateness of language choice, and evaluate the usability of the River of Experience instruction document. As the pilot interviews were conducted solely for refinement purposes, the pilot data were excluded from the final analysis.

Feedback from the pilot confirmed that the questions were generally clear and engaging, though several were slightly rephrased to encourage more open-ended responses. Participants also noted that a few questions could be considered uncomfortable or inappropriate within a Chinese cultural context. For example, one of the initial ice-breaker questions – “*What motivated you to pursue a doctoral degree in the UK?*” – was perceived as potentially awkward, as it could be interpreted as probing into personal or family-related decisions. In response to this feedback, such questions were removed to ensure that the final interview schedule was culturally sensitive and fostered a more open and trusting atmosphere. The pilot also demonstrated the value of providing the River of Experience instructions in advance, as this allowed participants to reflect more effectively on their doctoral journeys and prepare meaningful drawings. Insights from the pilot informed minor adjustments to the interview guide and procedures, which were then consistently applied in the main study.

In addition, participants received an instruction document for the *River of Experience* exercise in advance of their interviews. This document contained written guidance and illustrative examples to help participants understand the task and prepare their drawings. The aim was to ensure that participants felt confident in approaching the exercise and had sufficient time to reflect on their doctoral journeys before the interview.

Interview Process

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method, as they provide a balance between pre-determined guiding questions and flexibility to explore issues raised by participants. This approach created a conversational environment in which participants could elaborate on areas most meaningful to them while also allowing the researcher to probe identified themes.

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, depending on participants' preferences and availability. To create a comfortable environment, participants were given the option of being interviewed in either Chinese or English, as both languages were spoken fluently by the researcher (Cortazzi, Pilcher, & Jin, 2011). Each interview was initially scheduled for approximately 45 minutes. However, in practice, participants were highly engaged, and most interviews extended well beyond this timeframe, typically lasting over one hour. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. To ensure accuracy, participants were also invited to review and verify their transcripts.

River of Experience

As a supplementary tool, the *River of Experience* technique (Reavey, 2011) was incorporated into the interviews. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to draw a river representing their doctoral journey, beginning at the start of their PhD and ending with graduation. Bends in the river symbolised key turning points, such as academic challenges, sources of support, or positive outcomes. Participants could prepare their drawings in advance or complete them during the interview. The drawings were photographed and referred to during the interviews as prompts to facilitate deeper reflection and discussion.

All participants completed the exercise, and their drawings varied considerably in form: some depicted a single continuous river, others illustrated

branching streams, while a few represented their journey as a straight line. This diversity reflected participants' individual ways of conceptualising their doctoral experiences and provided rich material to prompt further discussion during the interviews.

Data Management

Although participants were given the option to be interviewed in either Chinese or English, all interviews were ultimately conducted in Chinese. Accordingly, all recordings were first transcribed in Chinese by the researcher. The initial translation into English was then undertaken by the researcher to ensure close engagement with the data and to preserve contextual and cultural meanings. During this process, AI-based tools (ChatGPT) were consulted in a limited and supportive capacity, primarily to assist with checking the accuracy of specific words or expressions where uncertainty arose regarding academic or idiomatic English usage.

Prior to any such consultation, all transcripts were fully anonymised through the removal of names, institutional affiliations, supervisors, geographical references and other potentially identifying details. The translated texts were subsequently reviewed and refined in full by the researcher, who retained sole responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation and representation of the data. To enhance credibility and ethical integrity, participants were invited to review their translated transcripts to confirm accuracy and to indicate any content they preferred not to be included in the final analysis or reporting. Any minor clarifications or requested removals were incorporated accordingly. The final English versions were used to support data familiarisation and coding, and selected translated extracts are reported in the thesis.

4.5.2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), following Braun and Clarke (2021). Although Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was initially considered, a preliminary review of the transcripts indicated that the data contained substantial cross-case patterns and a wide range of transition experiences. While IPA is particularly suited to in-depth idiographic analysis of relatively homogeneous samples (Smith & Nizza, 2022), the present study required an approach capable of synthesising themes across diverse narratives. RTA therefore provided a more appropriate framework for identifying shared patterns and variations while retaining sensitivity to individual meaning-making. In addition, the River of Experience was used as a reflective elicitation tool during interviews, which enriched participants' narratives and further supported the use of thematic synthesis.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. First, I familiarised myself with the data through repeated readings of the interview transcripts and review of the River of Experience drawings. Second, initial codes were generated through open coding, identifying key concepts and patterns across the dataset. Third, codes were collated into potential categories, which were then developed into overarching themes. Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined in relation to the coded data and the dataset as a whole. Fifth, the themes were defined and named, capturing both their analytical scope and their connection to the research questions. Finally, the findings were written up, with attention given to illustrating themes through participants' narratives and visual data. NVivo software was employed to facilitate coding and data organisation. Throughout the analytic process, analytic notes were kept to track developing interpretations, support sense-making across interview and visual data, and document key analytic decisions as themes were progressively refined.

A reflexive orientation was maintained throughout the analysis. Themes were not identified on the basis of frequency but through their interpretive relevance to the research questions and their potential to illuminate participants' experiences of transition and learning. The role of researcher reflexivity and positionality is discussed further in Section 4.4.2.5.

By applying RTA, the analysis generated five key themes that capture how Chinese international doctoral students experienced and made sense of their multiple transitions within the UK doctoral context.

4.6 Study 2: Introduction and Methodology

4.6.1 Introduction

Study 1 examined the multiple transitions experienced by Chinese international doctoral graduates in the UK, including academic, social and cultural dimensions. Although employability was not an explicit initial focus, it identified as a salient and often anxiety-related theme through the analysis. Many participants voiced concerns about entering the job market during the later stages of their doctoral journey, both in the UK and in China. Several participants characterised their career outcomes as partly a matter of being “lucky”. However, their accounts suggest that such outcomes identified from the interaction between structural opportunity conditions and individual agency, including resilience, proactive engagement, and the strategic use of available opportunities.

The findings of Study 1 also emphasised that these transitions are deeply interconnected and cannot be fully separated in practice. The decision to focus specifically on employability in Study 2 therefore does not contradict this holistic perspective; rather, it builds on it. Employability was the most salient and anxiety-provoking dimension, closely entangled with academic demands,

personal circumstances, and sociocultural expectations. Study 2 thus adopts a more focused lens, examining employability as a critical site where multiple transitions converge.

Another motivation for Study 2 relates to perspective. Study 1 participants were all doctoral graduates who had successfully secured academic positions. Their reflections provided valuable insights into employability, but they were inevitably shaped by hindsight. Rather than constituting a limitation, the retrospective perspective of Study 1 offers valuable insight into how employability trajectories are retrospectively interpreted and consolidated following successful academic transition. By contrast, the employability experiences of current doctoral students are unfolding in real time, as students actively negotiate publishing pressures, career planning, and personal decision-making alongside the demands of doctoral study. Investigating current doctoral students therefore offers a more immediate perspective on the challenges and strategies associated with employability development. It also allows for a deeper understanding of how institutional structures and cultural expectations shape career trajectories while students are still in the process of forming them, rather than after outcomes have already been achieved.

Importantly, findings from Study 1 also revealed that concerns about employability were widespread even among highly successful doctoral graduates who had completed their PhDs efficiently and secured academic positions. Participants frequently described experiencing significant uncertainty and anxiety about career prospects during their doctoral studies, despite their strong academic performance and eventual success. This suggests that employability concerns are not confined to less successful or marginalised doctoral students, but represent a broader and structurally embedded challenge within doctoral education. If such concerns are prevalent among those who ultimately achieve successful academic outcomes, they are likely to be even more pronounced

among current doctoral students navigating the same system without the reassurance of hindsight. This further underscores the importance of examining employability experiences as they unfold during doctoral study, forming a central motivation for Study 2.

Despite growing attention to international students' academic and social adaptation, comparatively little is known about how employability is experienced and navigated by Chinese international doctoral students within the specific context of UK doctoral study (Wang et al., 2024). This gap is particularly significant given that employability considerations increasingly shape international doctoral students' academic decision-making, mobility intentions, and engagement with professional development opportunities, yet remain weakly theorised and empirically examined within doctoral education research (Zhao et al., 2024). Building on the insights from Study 1, Study 2 was therefore designed to explore, in greater detail, the factors that shape the employability experiences of Chinese international doctoral students in UK universities. Rather than examining multiple types of transition simultaneously, this study narrows the focus to employability as a critical domain of transition, influenced by personal aspirations, institutional opportunities and constraints, and wider cultural and structural conditions. In doing so, it contributes both to a deeper understanding of international doctoral students' career development and to wider discussions about doctoral education and labour market integration.

Guided by insights from Study 1, Study 2 focuses explicitly on how employability development unfolds as part of the doctoral transition experience. It is driven by the following two research questions:

a) How do Chinese international doctoral students perceive and navigate employability development as an ongoing transitional process during their doctoral studies in the UK?

b) What personal, institutional, and structural factors shape their employability development across academic, social and cultural transitions?

The remainder of this chapter outlines the methodological design of Study 2. Section 6.2 introduces the research context, followed by details of the participants in Section 6.3. Data collection procedures are described in Section 6.4, and the approach to data analysis in Section 6.5. Ethical considerations are addressed in Section 6.6, before the chapter concludes with a brief summary in Section 6.7.

4.6.2 Research Context

This study was conducted within the distinctive institutional and policy environment of UK doctoral education and the wider employment systems that shape the experiences of Chinese international doctoral students. Understanding this context is important for interpreting participants' accounts of employability, as their reflections are situated within specific structural, cultural, and policy conditions.

In the UK, full-time doctoral programmes are normally expected to take three to four years, particularly within the social sciences, reflecting the relatively short and intensive nature of doctoral education compared with many other systems (UKRI, 2023; University of Cambridge, n.d.). For international students, including Chinese doctoral students, full-time enrolment is required under UK Student Route visa regulations, and doctoral study is capped at a maximum of five years; part-time study is not permitted under this visa category (Home Office, n.d.). This restriction not only intensifies the pace of doctoral study but also shapes how international students approach employability development, as limited time and visa constraints often reduce their capacity to pursue professional or networking opportunities alongside research.

These temporal and regulatory constraints align with the overall design of UK doctoral education, which is characterised by intensity and autonomy (Elliot et al., 2023; QAA, 2020). Compared with other higher education systems, such as China, where doctoral programmes may include longer periods of coursework and structured training components, the UK model is distinctive for its relatively short duration and its emphasis on independent research (Bao et al., 2018). From the outset, doctoral programmes in the UK are generally structured around expectations of independent research, academic autonomy, high scholarly standards, and timely completion, although the extent to which individual postgraduate researchers are able to meet and enact these expectations varies considerably (Elliot, 2023; Kadioglu & Valli, 2025). While this system encourages autonomy and academic independence, it can also pose adjustment challenges for international doctoral students. For Chinese doctoral students in particular, adapting to a highly self-directed and time-pressured doctoral model may require considerable time and effort, as it contrasts sharply with the more structured and supervisor-led approaches that often characterise doctoral study in China.

As a result, employability development is often temporally deferred, as early-stage doctoral students prioritise academic socialisation, progression requirements, and adjustment to independent research expectations. For example, students are often required to concentrate on confirming their research proposal, preparing for formal progression or confirmation reviews, and adapting to expectations of independent academic writing and critical engagement. These demands can absorb substantial time and effort in the initial phase of study, with employability development often postponed until students feel more academically settled.

In recent decades, employability has been framed as a key outcome of doctoral study, with universities and research councils emphasising the need for

students to develop transferable skills, produce high-quality publications, and engage in dissemination activities such as conferences and public engagement (Hasgall et al., 2019; QAA, 2020). Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) roles and structured training programmes are frequently promoted as key avenues for developing employability-related competencies, although the extent and quality of such opportunities vary considerably across institutions and disciplines (Rao et al., 2021). This disparity is especially evident within the social sciences, where employability-related opportunities—particularly GTA roles or research collaborations—tend to be more limited compared with laboratory-based disciplines. For Chinese international doctoral students, these constraints are further intensified by linguistic and cultural barriers, which may contribute to hesitation, uncertainty, or a lack of confidence when seeking such opportunities. This, in turn, can limit their engagement in professional development activities and further constrain the enhancement of employability within the social sciences context.

While employability has been increasingly emphasised in UK doctoral policy and institutional strategies (QAA, 2020; UKRI, 2023), the actual implementation of employability development remains relatively flexible, as participation in career training, teaching roles, publication planning, and other professional development activities is rarely formally required or systematically monitored. As a result, doctoral students are typically granted considerable discretion in deciding how and when to engage with employability-related opportunities alongside their research.

More broadly, doctoral training is typically less prescriptive than in some other systems, granting students considerable autonomy in how they balance research, publication, and professional development activities (QAA, 2020). This flexibility is also reflected in publication expectations. Unlike some doctoral systems where publication during candidature is mandatory, UK doctoral

programmes based on the monograph thesis format typically do not require students to publish as a condition of award. Although PhD by publication models is increasingly adopted within the social sciences, publication is not universally mandated across UK doctoral pathways. While this flexibility allows candidates to focus on producing an original and substantial thesis, it also places greater responsibility on individual students to develop their own publication record and professional profile. Consequently, the extent to which doctoral students engage in dissemination and scholarly communication often depends on personal initiative, supervisory encouragement, and institutional support.

In contrast, the Chinese doctoral system tends to adopt a more prescriptive and output-oriented approach, where publishing several papers—often in recognised or indexed journals—is a formal requirement for graduation (Bao et al., 2018; Yuan, 2021). Within the Chinese academic labour market, publication output functions as a powerful indicator of research productivity and a key criterion for hiring and promotion (Yuan, 2021). This publication-centred culture provides doctoral students with a clearer, externally defined trajectory towards employability. However, when Chinese doctoral students enter the UK system, the absence of explicit publication requirements and the emphasis on self-directed professional development can create uncertainty. For those planning to return to China for academic employment, this difference can be particularly disadvantageous, as the lack of a strong publication record may significantly reduce their competitiveness in the Chinese job market.

In summary, the UK doctoral system's emphasis on autonomy and flexibility contrasts with China's publication-oriented approach, shaping how Chinese doctoral students perceive and pursue employability. These contextual dynamics underscore the need to examine how multiple structural, institutional, and personal factors influence their employability development. To address this aim,

Study 2 adopts a qualitative approach to explore Chinese doctoral students' employability experiences within the UK doctoral context.

4.6.3 Methodology for Study2

This study seeks to explore how structural, institutional, and personal factors influence the employability development of Chinese international doctoral students in UK universities. Given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the study's focus on participants' experiences and perspectives, a qualitative design was adopted. Rather than examining measurable variables or generalisable trends, the study aimed to understand how participants interpreted and navigated employability-related experiences within their doctoral journeys.

Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary method of data collection. This approach offers a balance between structure and flexibility, enabling participants to articulate their experiences in their own words while allowing the researcher to probe for clarification and deeper insight (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The interviews encouraged reflective engagement, allowing participants to articulate how academic, institutional, and personal factors intersected in shaping their employability development. The specific procedures for conducting the interviews, including practical arrangements and ethical protocols, are discussed in Section 4.4.3.2.

Overall, the research design provided a suitable framework for exploring how Chinese international doctoral students experience and conceptualise employability within the UK doctoral context while ensuring that participants' perspectives remained central to the study.

4.6.3.1 Sampling Strategy and Participants

Choosing an appropriate sampling strategy is essential in qualitative research, as it allows the selection of participants who can offer rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the phenomenon under study (Marshall, 1996; Patton, 2015). Given the exploratory nature of this research, purposive sampling was adopted to identify Chinese international doctoral students in the UK who could reflect on their employability development within their doctoral journeys. This strategy was particularly suitable for ensuring that participants had direct and meaningful experiences related to the research focus (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Recruitment began with purposive sampling via online posts and invitations shared in doctoral student community groups and on social media platforms such as MS Teams, LinkedIn, and WeChat. These posts outlined the study's aims, eligibility criteria, and provided contact details for the researcher. Prospective participants who met the criteria contacted the researcher directly to learn more and arrange an interview.

After the initial cohort was recruited through purposive sampling, a snowball sampling strategy was subsequently utilized (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Early participants were encouraged to share information about the study with other eligible doctoral students in their networks. In this way, new participants were identified through referrals from existing participants, enabling the sample to expand further and ensuring a diversity of perspectives. This sequential use of purposive followed by snowball sampling helped to access a broad yet well-defined participant group, enhancing both the relevance and depth needed for the study's exploratory aims.

The inclusion criteria required that participants (a) were Chinese nationals currently enrolled as doctoral students in UK universities; (b) were studying within the broad discipline of social sciences or humanities; and (c) represented

different stages of doctoral study, a criterion that was deliberately included to explore how employability development may vary across the PhD journey.

These criteria were established for several reasons. First, focusing on Chinese nationals allowed the study to examine employability experiences within a shared cultural and educational background, enabling a deeper exploration of how cultural norms and expectations influence career development in the UK context. Second, participants from the social sciences and humanities were selected because employability pathways in these disciplines are often less structured and more individually driven than those in STEM fields, making them particularly relevant for understanding how students actively construct employability in diverse institutional environments (Devine & Hunter, 2016).

Third, including doctoral students at different stages of doctoral study ensured a dynamic perspective on employability development – capturing early-stage expectations, mid-stage adjustments, and late-stage reflections on career preparedness. Together, these inclusion criteria enabled a nuanced understanding of how Chinese international doctoral students develop employability-related competencies and navigate academic, institutional, and cultural challenges within the UK doctoral context.

In total, twelve participants (eight females and four males) took part in the study. They were all enrolled in social science-related doctoral programmes across several UK universities and represented different stages of doctoral progression, from the first to the fourth year. The sample size was considered adequate to achieve data saturation, as prior qualitative research indicates that saturation is often reached between six and twelve in-depth interviews, particularly when the participant group is relatively homogeneous and no new themes are identified from the data (Guest et al., 2006; Marshall, 1996). This enabled an in-depth exploration of diverse yet comparable experiences.

Table 4.2 summarises the demographic characteristics of the participants, including pseudonyms, gender, age range, year of study, and interview duration.

Table 4.2 Participant Profile of Study 2

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Year of Study	Interview Length
Rose	Female	21-25	Year 1	75 mins
Jason	Male	26-30	Year 1	50 mins
Zizi	Female	31-35	Year 2	48 mins
Wendy	Female	26-30	Year 2	58 mins
Hailey	Female	26-30	Year 2	60 mins
Ka	Male	26-30	Year 2	45 mins
Qing	Female	26-30	Year 3	41 mins
Helen	Female	31-35	Year 3	75 mins
Di	Male	26-30	Year 3	74 mins
Yett	Female	26-30	Year 3	68 mins
Daisy	Female	31-35	Year 4	61 mins
William	Male	31-35	Year 4	47 mins

Note. All participants were Chinese international doctoral students enrolled in the College of Social Sciences across different UK universities.

4.6.3.2 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted following ethical approval from the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow (Application No. 400230196). Before the main phase, two pilot interviews were conducted. The pilot stage was used to refine the interview protocol, with only minor adjustments made — primarily reordering questions to improve flow rather than altering the substantive content (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Janghorban et al., 2014). The pilot data were used solely for refinement purposes and were not included

in the final analysis. The main data were collected between May and September 2024.

Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary method of data collection. After confirming eligibility, interviews were scheduled individually with participants and conducted online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Participants were offered the choice of using either Chinese or English, depending on their linguistic comfort and preference. Although each interview was initially planned to last approximately 45 minutes, most extended well beyond this timeframe due to the depth of discussion and the high level of participant engagement.

In line with the flexible and dialogic nature of semi-structured interviewing, the researcher occasionally shared relevant reflections on the career development experiences of doctoral graduates. These brief contributions were not intended to introduce new information to participants, but to prompt deeper reflection and to normalise open discussion of employability concerns. This form of reflexive exchange often encouraged participants – who were still enroute to graduation – to elaborate more fully on their own experiences and perspectives. Such reciprocal interaction is consistent with the logic of semi-structured interviewing, where meaning is co-constructed rather than generated through a one-directional question-response format (Galletta, 2012; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

All interviews were first transcribed in Chinese. To maintain close engagement with the original Chinese data and preserve contextual and cultural meanings, the researcher undertook the initial translation of the transcripts into English. As a non-native English speaker, the researcher occasionally used AI-based tools (ChatGPT) in a limited and supportive capacity, specifically to check or refine individual words or expressions where idiomatic or academic English usage was uncertain.

Importantly, no original audio files or raw data were uploaded to AI tools, and all transcripts had been fully de-identified prior to any AI-assisted consultation. The translated texts were researcher-led, manually reviewed, and revised in full, with the researcher retaining full responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation, and representation of the data. The final English versions used for data familiarisation, coding, and reporting were therefore the outcome of the researcher's own translation and interpretive judgement, with AI used only as a linguistic support tool rather than as a primary translator.

Following researcher-led translation of the interview transcripts from Chinese into English, each translated transcript was sent back to the corresponding participant for member checking. Participants were asked to confirm the accuracy and appropriateness of the translation, with particular attention to whether their intended meanings had been faithfully represented. Any feedback or suggested revisions were carefully considered and incorporated by the researcher. Only after participants confirmed their satisfaction with the translated transcripts were these data used for coding and analysis. All research data were managed and stored in accordance with University policy and will be retained for ten years before being permanently deleted.

4.6.3.3 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). This analytic approach was particularly suitable for the present study, which sought to explore how multiple structural, institutional, and personal factors interact to shape Chinese international doctoral students' employability development within UK universities. The flexibility of RTA enabled a nuanced examination of participants' accounts, while an inductive, data-driven approach ensured that themes were grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than pre-existing theoretical assumptions.

The analytic process followed Braun and Clarke's six interrelated phases in an iterative and reflexive manner (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I first engaged in repeated readings of the interview transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data and to capture preliminary ideas relevant to employability-related transitions. Initial open coding was then conducted line by line, identifying key patterns, meanings, and concepts within participants' narratives. These codes were subsequently organised into conceptually related clusters and progressively refined through constant comparison within and across cases. These categories were then developed into candidate themes, which were repeatedly reviewed against the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure internal coherence, distinction, and analytical relevance. Once the themes were clearly defined and named, they were integrated into a cohesive thematic structure and illustrated with representative quotations in the Findings chapter. NVivo software facilitated the organisation and management of the dataset throughout this process.

Throughout the analytic process, a reflexive orientation was maintained to ensure that themes were developed in relation to their interpretive relevance to the research questions and participants' experiences rather than on the basis of frequency alone.

5. Study 1: Findings and Discussion

5.1 Findings of Study 1

This section presents the findings of Study 1, which explored how Chinese international doctoral students navigated multiple transitions during their PhD journeys in the UK. Table 5.1 provides an overview of the five key themes, their corresponding sub-themes and analytical code categories. The analysis revealed five interrelated themes that together capture the challenges, strategies, and growth trajectories experienced by the participants.

Table 5.1 Key Themes and Analytical Categories in Study 1

Theme	Sub-Theme	Description of Theme	Code Categories
1. Academic Pressure and Growth	<i>a. Sources of Academic Pressure</i> <i>b. Strategies for Overcoming Academic Pressure</i> <i>c. Growth in Skills, Confidence, and Academic Maturity</i>	<i>This theme explores how Chinese doctoral students navigate academic pressure during their doctoral studies, turning challenges into opportunities for growth.</i>	• Challenges from academic • Psychological aspects • Gain from challenges
2. Social Support and Community Belonging	<i>a. Sources of Social Support</i> <i>b. Strategies for Building Community Belonging</i> <i>c. Outcomes of Social Integration</i>	<i>This theme examines how Chinese doctoral students harnessed social support and a sense of community to overcome the challenges of their doctoral studies.</i>	• Supervisory relationship • Support system
3. Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Diverse Experiences	<i>a. Challenges in Cross-Cultural Adaptation</i> <i>b. Proactive Approach to Adaptation</i>	<i>This theme examines how Chinese doctoral students navigated cross-cultural challenges during their doctoral studies in the UK.</i>	• Culture differences • Doctoral research
4. Career Preparation and Employability Development	<i>a. Leveraging Academic Opportunities</i> <i>b. Exploring Professional Growth Through Work and Volunteering</i> <i>c. Building Employability Skills and Confidence</i>	<i>This theme explores how Chinese doctoral students enhanced their career readiness</i>	• Efficient management of resources • Job experiences • Employability development
5. Practical Advice and Reflections for Navigating the PhD Journey	<i>a. Prioritizing Academic Excellence and Clear Goals</i> <i>b. Exploring Career-Oriented Activities</i> <i>c. Adapting to Supervisory Relationships and Academic Cultures</i> <i>d. Balancing Opportunities with Personal Well-Being</i> <i>e. Building Language and Cultural Competence</i>	<i>This theme encapsulates actionable guidance and reflective insights for both current and future doctoral students</i>	• Advice for PhD life • Advice for career development • Advice for transition • Advice for emotional issues

The first theme, Academic Pressure and Growth, examines how students managed academic demands and transformed pressure into opportunities for skill development and personal resilience. The second theme, Social Support and Community Belonging, highlights the critical role of supervisory, peer, and community relationships in fostering a sense of belonging and supporting academic persistence. The third theme, Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Diverse Experiences, explores the participants' adjustment to new academic cultures, language environments, and critical thinking expectations. The fourth theme, Career Preparation and Employability Development, illustrates how participants actively engaged in academic, professional, and extracurricular activities to enhance their career prospects. Finally, the fifth theme, Practical Advice and Reflections for Navigating the PhD Journey, captures participants' accumulated insights and strategies for successfully managing the complex demands of doctoral study.

Together, these findings offer a nuanced understanding of the multiple transitions encountered by Chinese international doctoral students and the ways in which they fostered academic, personal, and professional growth throughout their PhD journeys. The following subsections provide a detailed account of each theme supported by illustrative quotes.

5.1.1 Academic Pressure and Growth

This theme explores how Chinese doctoral students navigate academic pressure during their doctoral studies, turning challenges into opportunities for growth. Divided into three sub-themes: (a) Sources of Academic Pressure, (b) Strategies for Overcoming Academic Pressure, and (c) Growth in Skills, Confidence and Academic Maturity, it highlights their journey of recognizing obstacles, adopting effective coping strategies, and achieving substantial personal and academic progress.

5.1.1.1. Sources of Academic Pressure

Participants frequently identified challenges such as uncertainty about research direction, difficulty with academic writing, and the intensified pressures during the writing-up phase, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. These pressures were particularly pronounced during the initial and final stages of their doctoral studies. During the initial stage, participants initially struggled to define their research focus but viewed this process as an opportunity for growth. Supervisor guidance and literature reviews were essential tools for clarifying research goals, such as:

“In the first year, I kept changing my topic because I wasn’t sure what my supervisor expected. After several discussions, I finally settled on a feasible plan.” (Wade)

“The first year was extremely stressful because I wasn’t entirely sure if I was on the right track. I felt uncertain, but not completely lost—more like unsure whether what I was doing was correct. My supervisor telling me, ‘You know what you are doing,’ marked a turning point for me.”
(Winter)

As participants progressed to the writing-up phase, the challenges shifted, with many reporting heightened academic and emotional pressures. These difficulties were compounded by the isolation and uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted traditional academic routines. Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrated adaptability by finding creative solutions to maintain focus and productivity. Both Holly and Fanta offered examples of how they adapted to these challenges by finding solutions and maintaining focus despite difficult circumstances:

“The writing-up phase was very difficult. I had to study in my dorm, but the walls were not soundproof, and my neighbor, who studied music, had

his own assignments to work on. It was hard to focus. Eventually, we worked out a schedule that worked for both of us, but it was still a very tough time.” (Holly)

“During the last year, we were in the writing-up stage, but with COVID-19, it became even harder. We couldn’t meet in person, and the stress of isolation made focusing on the thesis even more challenging. Working together online with peers helped, but it was still very difficult.” (Fanta)

Overall, doctoral transition involves stage-specific challenges, with early uncertainty and later intensified pressures shaping development. Across these stages, participants transformed difficulties into growth through the interplay of personal agency and relational support, demonstrating that resilience is dynamically co-constructed.

5.1.1.2 Strategies for Overcoming Academic Pressure

Participants noted that balancing research and deadlines helped them develop stronger organizational skills. They highlighted that time-blocking, prioritization, and goal setting were critical techniques to manage competing demands effectively. Time management emerged as a key competency that extended beyond academic success, contributing to participants’ personal and professional development.

“Every time after meeting with my supervisor, I received feedback and resolved some of my confusion. I would immediately move on to the next stage of study. I know some people take a break for a few days, but I prefer to finish tasks first and rest later.” (Jessy)

Winter reflected on her strategy of exceeding expectations as a way to stay motivated and maintain high standards:

“I always aimed to go beyond the target. If my supervisor asked for 10, I would aim for 15. At the time, I didn’t feel I was overachieving; I just felt I was doing what my supervisor required. Later, when my supervisor evaluated my work after graduation, I realized this had made a significant impression. But during my PhD, my focus was simply on completing tasks thoroughly and to the best of my ability.” (Winter)

These examples illustrate how effective time management and exceeding expectations not only contributed to participants’ academic success but also fostered resilience and a strong work ethic, qualities that extended into their personal and professional development.

Participants recognized that improving their academic skills, particularly in writing and research, was foundational to effectively navigating the pressures of doctoral studies. Wade highlighted this point, emphasizing that the quality of one’s work often determined the level of stress associated with academic demands:

“The pressure from academic presentations comes down to how well your paper is written. Instead of worrying about how to present it better, just focus on writing a better paper.” (Wade)

Similarly, Holly also stressed the importance of prioritizing one’s doctoral research, noting the need to balance commitments carefully:

“We must prioritize completing the PhD thesis. It’s essential to assess our energy and time to determine what we can manage. Sometimes, I want to encourage my students to participate in more workshops or opportunities, but I worry they might overextend themselves. Ultimately, the focus must remain on finishing the thesis.” (Holly)

This shared emphasis on academic rigor and prioritization highlights the proactive mindset participants adopted to manage their workloads and reduce stress. These reflections underscore the importance of honing core academic skills and maintaining a clear focus on doctoral objectives to successfully navigate the challenges of the PhD journey.

Regular discussions with supervisors played a crucial role in helping participants address challenges, maintain motivation, and navigate their doctoral journeys with greater clarity. These meetings were described as pivotal moments for gaining direction, refining research methodologies, and receiving feedback that fostered confidence and independence. Jessy and Ding shared:

“I always looked forward to meetings because discussing with my supervisor was an excellent way to solve the issues I was facing at that moment. Every meeting felt like a precious opportunity to solve my problem.” (Jessy)

“I think supervision meeting was really helpful—both of my supervisors gave me a lot of freedom. I could basically explore what I wanted to do, as long as I could present my ideas and justify my decisions. This freedom was really valuable for my research exploration and for learning more.”
(Ding)

Peer discussions were also cited as instrumental in relieving stress and generating new ideas. By sharing experiences and strategies with fellow researchers, participants developed a sense of camaraderie and a shared purpose. Fanta noted, “Talking to my peers helped me realize that many of us face similar struggles, and their advice often gave me new ways to approach my challenges.”

In summary, participants utilized various strategies, such as effective time management, prioritization, and skill development, to overcome the pressures

of doctoral studies. By focusing on improving their academic work and maintaining clear goals, they built resilience and fostered a proactive mindset. Regular discussions with supervisors and peers further bolstered their confidence, motivation, and problem-solving abilities, enabling them to navigate challenges collaboratively and successfully.

5.1.1.3 Growth in Skills, Confidence, and Academic Maturity

Participants reported significant growth in both academic and personal domains as a result of navigating academic challenges. Participants demonstrated notable improvement in research and writing skills, successfully refining their abilities to design research, analyse data, and articulate findings with clarity and precision.

“I kept revisiting those key authors’ books and kept writing over and over again. One day, I finally received my supervisor’s feedback saying, ‘This is exactly what I expected.’ Now, I can even publish papers without needing proofreading.” (Yulia)

In addition to skill development, participants emphasized the resilience and problem-solving abilities, as their experiences of overcoming academic challenges fostered adaptability and determination—qualities they believed would significantly benefit their future careers. Winter shared:

“The most important thing I’ve gained over these years is resilience. You build this inner strength, and you realize your potential. Resilience is something that stays with you for life. When you face future challenges, you’ll think, ‘It’s fine, I’ve been through worse.’ It makes you calmer and more at peace with yourself. You also come to see how much potential you have and that you should keep pushing your boundaries.” (Winter)

Building on this resilience, many participants reported that deeply engaging with their academic work not only enhanced their research capabilities but also led to unexpected personal growth and efficiency. Holly reflected on how this commitment to her academic tasks contributed to her development:

“When you fully commit yourself to academia, even though it can feel like tedious work, the experience is transformative. It’s time-consuming, but throughout the process, you reflect and think deeply. For example, when I was doing transcription, my mind was already processing the data analysis, which made the actual analysis phase much faster.” (Holly)

Moreover, participants expressed that boosted confidence in academic competence stemmed from achieving key milestones, such as publishing papers and receiving positive feedback from peers and supervisors, which significantly enhanced their self-assurance. Several participants emphasized that achieving small milestones reinforced their belief in their academic capabilities and motivated them to tackle more ambitious goals. These successes were often cited as pivotal moments that validated their decision to pursue doctoral studies.

“Once I published my first paper, I felt much more confident in my research abilities.” (Teddy)

“When I started my PhD, I set a goal for myself to publish not a large number of papers but to ensure their quality. I aimed to publish one paper each year while attending more conferences to showcase my research. By the time I graduated, I successfully achieved these goals and find the job.” (Wade)

Success in academic endeavours also improved participants’ ability to network with peers and mentors, further enhancing their integration into the academic community.

In summary, participants experienced significant academic and personal growth through their doctoral journeys. They developed advanced skills, resilience, and confidence, with milestones like publishing papers validating their capabilities. These experiences prepared them for future challenges, fostering both maturity and professional readiness.

5.1.2 Social Support and Community Belonging

This theme examines how Chinese doctoral students harnessed social support and a sense of community to overcome the challenges of their doctoral studies. Divided into three sub-themes: (a) Sources of Social Support, (b) Strategies for Building Community Belonging, and (c) Outcomes of Social Integration, it highlights their efforts to cultivate meaningful connections, combat isolation, and foster both academic and personal development.

5.1.2.1 Sources of Social Support

Participants emphasized the significant role of supportive relationships, particularly with their supervisors, in navigating the challenges of their doctoral studies. Supervisors were frequently cited as key figures who provided both academic guidance and emotional encouragement. Yulia provided a tangible example of how a supervisor's consistent encouragement and belief in their student's potential could transform self-doubt into perseverance:

"I told my supervisor that I was worried and doubted whether I could do it. I thought I might not be good enough. Every time, he would sincerely tell me, 'Believe yourself,' and he pointed out my potential. He convinced me. My main supervisor encouraged me throughout my PhD. Looking back, without his encouragement, I might not have been able to finish." (Yulia)

Fanta also underscored the critical role of supervisory support, but from a different perspective:

“My relationship with my supervisors is strictly a student-teacher relationship, but I feel like I haven’t offered them anything—it’s always been their support for me. Their professional and emotional support was a key factor in my ability to graduate with a PhD.” (Fanta)

These reflections highlight how supervisors’ encouragement, belief in students’ abilities, and consistent support were indispensable in helping participants persevere. Such relationships were not just academic but were foundational to their overall success and personal growth during their doctoral journeys.

Participants also highlighted the importance of peer support in navigating the challenges of their doctoral studies. While supervisory guidance was often pivotal, peers provided a different but equally valuable form of support, fostering a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose throughout the PhD journey. Yulia shared how her research centre fostered close connections with other doctoral students:

“In the whole research centre, there were only two affiliated doctoral students, so we developed a sense of mutual reliance. We supported each other and had many academic and personal exchanges, which were incredibly helpful both academically and emotionally.” (Yulia)

Beyond academic circles, participants sought social connections within their local communities. Activities like volunteering, joining sports clubs, and attending cultural events provided opportunities to interact with diverse groups of people. These experiences not only helped participants feel more integrated but also exposed them to new perspectives and ideas.

5.1.2.2 Strategies for Building Community Belonging

Participants actively sought ways to create a sense of belonging in their academic and social environments. Many emphasized the importance of taking initiative to form or join supportive networks. Ding shared how she addressed the isolation and difficulties of studying at home during the pandemic by organizing a virtual writing retreat with a group of peers:

“During the pandemic, everything was online, and I found studying at home very challenging. So, I organized a small group of peers, and we created an online writing retreat. It was incredibly helpful.” (Ding)

Beyond self-initiated efforts, participants leveraged institutional resources to expand their networks. University-led workshops and student organizations provided platforms for academic and social engagement. Holly, for example, highlighted the benefits of attending diverse workshops across faculties:

“I frequently attended various workshops organized by the university. I didn’t just participate in activities from my own school; I also joined events from other faculties. This broadened my perspective and helped me build connections beyond my immediate academic circle.” (Holly)

In addition to formal resources, informal gatherings played a significant role in fostering community. Participants found that local clubs and departmental events provided a space for both academic and social interactions. Wade shared his experience of joining a local tennis club as a way to better integrate into the local culture:

“I tried joining student clubs, but they often talked about drinking, which wasn’t something I was interested in. To better immerse myself in the local life, I joined a local tennis club and interacted more with local adults. It helped me understand the culture and traditions here. It was

also a world outside the academic circle—exercising and relaxing gave me a mental reset and helped me focus better on my studies.” (Wade)

This example highlights how engaging in local activities beyond the academic environment not only provided participants with social and cultural insights but also supported their well-being and academic performance.

In summary, participants employed diverse strategies to foster a sense of belonging and community during their doctoral journeys. Whether through creating virtual retreats, leveraging institutional resources like workshops, or joining local clubs for cultural and social integration, these efforts significantly enhanced their academic and personal experiences. By actively seeking or creating supportive networks, participants not only mitigated feelings of isolation but also built resilience and strengthened their overall well-being, enabling them to navigate the challenges of their PhD journeys more effectively.

5.1.2.3 Outcomes of Social Integration

The effort participants put into building support systems yielded significant benefits, both academically and personally. One key outcome was improved motivation and emotional well-being. Having a trusted circle of supervisors, peers, and friends made the challenges of doctoral studies feel less overwhelming.

Academically, participants highlighted that collaboration with peers and supervisors significantly enhanced the quality of their work. Fanta shared how maintaining strong communication and cooperation with her peers throughout her PhD provided ongoing support and ultimately proved invaluable during the critical writing-up stage:

“When we were close to submitting our dissertations, my peers and I worked together to review and edit each other’s work. The feedback I

received from them helped me improve my writing in different ways, which was invaluable for completing my thesis.” (Fanta)

Wade emphasized the importance of having a clear and supportive relationship with his supervisor, which provided him with timely academic guidance:

“The relationship with my supervisor was clear and straightforward. As long as I completed my academic plans, my supervisor was always very supportive. For instance, when I needed to submit a paper, I would send it to my supervisor, and they would provide timely feedback.” (Wade)

Holly, on the other hand, emphasized the benefits of networking through university activities:

“Through continuously attending different university events, I met many people. Some recognized my abilities and offered me job opportunities. This not only enriched my work experience but also provided some additional income, which was helpful.” (Holly)

Socially, these connections fostered a stronger sense of belonging and reduced feelings of isolation. By participating in community activities and forming meaningful relationships, participants felt more integrated into their surroundings, which contributed to their overall satisfaction with their doctoral experience. Wade shared how his experience at a local tennis club evolved over time:

“When I first joined the tennis club, my skills weren’t very good, so people weren’t keen to play with me or talk to me much. But I worked hard to improve my skills, and as my technique improved, more and more people started playing with me and chatting. Eventually, I even represented the club in competitions and won a trophy.” (Wade)

In summary, the participants' efforts to build and engage with support systems, both academically and socially, yielded profound benefits. Collaboration with peers and supervisors enhanced the quality of their work and bolstered their confidence, while networking and participating in community activities fostered a sense of belonging and emotional well-being. These experiences not only enriched their doctoral journeys but also contributed to their personal and professional growth, preparing them for future challenges and opportunities.

5.1.3 Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Diverse Experiences

This theme examines how Chinese doctoral students navigated cross-cultural challenges during their doctoral studies in the UK. Organized into two sub-themes, (a) Challenges in Cross-Cultural Adaptation and (b) Proactive Approaches to Adaptation, it highlights their struggles with language, critical thinking, and academic practices, as well as their strategies to overcome these hurdles and achieve growth.

5.1.3.1 Challenges in Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Participants highlighted the challenges of adjusting to the distinct academic culture in the UK, particularly in areas such as language, critical thinking, academic atmosphere, and supervisory practices. The transition from an academic environment conducted entirely in Chinese to one requiring fluency in English added an extra layer of difficulty, particularly for those transitioning from a non-English academic background. Yulia and Wade, both of whom completed their master's degrees in China before coming to the UK for their doctoral studies, provide a tangible example of how this transition impacted their experiences:

“Language was a significant challenge at the beginning. Before coming to the UK, the only English training I had was for the Chinese college entrance exam, where we wrote essays of about 200 words.” (Yulia)

“In my first year, I struggled to discuss my research with others. My limited English proficiency made it difficult to articulate my ideas.” (Wade)

Beyond language, participants noted the difficulty of adapting to the UK's emphasis on critical thinking. For many, transitioning from a more structured and hierarchical academic environment in China to the self-directed and interactive expectations of UK institutions was a major adjustment.

“In China, we were rarely required to question or challenge established ideas. When I started my PhD here, I realized that critical thinking wasn't just encouraged—it was expected. At first, I didn't know how to approach it.” (Yulia)

Another prominent difference was the contrasting approach to academic publishing. Participants observed that while the UK system focuses on the process and quality of research, the Chinese system emphasizes publication quantity, often leading to contrasting expectations and pressures.

“In China, the academic culture places great emphasis on publication quantity. When I went to Hong Kong for an exchange program, people constantly asked about my publication plans. However, my UK supervisor advised me to focus on completing a high-quality thesis first, saying publication would naturally follow.” (Yulia)

Supervisory relationships also revealed stark contrasts between the two education systems. Participants noted that PhD supervision in China often

involves hierarchical and bureaucratic dynamics, which stood in sharp contrast to the more egalitarian and collaborative approach in the UK.

“In China, PhD supervisors often dominate and exploit students to some extent, forming bureaucratic networks. Here in the UK, the relationship is much more equal.” (Jessy)

This disparity was closely tied to the Shimen culture in China, characterized by close-knit relationships and mutual assistance within an academic lineage. Wade has a different perspective on this Shimen culture:

“The benefit of Shimen is the mutual support. For example, if your senior is a journal editor, they might help with your submissions. Or if they’re in a leadership role, your job application could be easier. But here in the UK, even if you and another student share the same supervisor, there’s rarely that sense of connection.” (Wade)

In summary, participants faced multifaceted challenges in adapting to the UK’s academic culture. These challenges included language barriers, the emphasis on critical thinking, and differences in publishing norms and supervisory dynamics. However, through resilience and adaptability, participants turned these difficulties into opportunities for personal and academic growth, highlighting their capacity to navigate cross-cultural transitions effectively.

5.1.3.2 Proactive Approach to Adaptation

Participants actively and proactively faced cross-cultural challenges and worked to address them positively. Regarding language barriers, participants practiced improving their English skills through real-life application. For example, they “attended various activities with the goal of enhancing their English proficiency” (Wade), “engaged in extensive reading and writing” (Yulia),

and “immersed myself in English-speaking environments to refine the skills” (Holly).

“Joining the tennis club gave me the chance to listen to British accents regularly and engage with locals. This helped improve my English proficiency and boosted my confidence in speaking.” (Wade)

Publishing expectations varied significantly for participants pursuing their doctoral studies in the UK, particularly when considering future career prospects in their home countries. Faced with these differing requirements, participants adopted either a focused or proactive approach to manage their goals effectively.

Yulia offered an example of how she managed these expectations by prioritizing her supervisor’s guidance over external pressures:

“I completely followed my supervisor’s advice at the time. I focused solely on my research, staying undistracted by any external voices.”
(Yulia)

Other participants took a more proactive approach to meet these differing expectations. Wade reflected:

“I knew that publishing papers would be essential for finding a job back in China. I discussed this with my supervisor and took the initiative to complete my work. Once I finished, I sent the draft to my supervisor, who provided feedback, and together, we got it published.” (Wade)

Participants also approached Shimen culture with a positive mindset, viewing it as a challenge rather than an insurmountable barrier. Wade reflected on its implications for international students pursuing PhDs abroad and intending to return to China for academic positions:

“Shimen culture in China does pose a challenge for students who earn their PhDs abroad and plan to return home for job opportunities. However, in the face of solid academic achievements, this isn’t a real obstacle. If you’ve published several papers internationally, universities will recognize that. So, I believe that having strong academic capabilities is what truly matters.” (Wade)

Interestingly, some participants elaborated further on the nuanced functioning of Shimen culture by identifying both its advantages and potential drawbacks. Within such networks, more senior Shimen members are often referred to as *shige* (senior brother) or *shijie* (senior sister), reflecting a familial hierarchy akin to sibling relationships within an extended academic family. This sense of belonging and mutual obligation can facilitate meaningful support in academic and career development. As Wade explained:

“If the Shimen group is closely connected and mutually supportive, it can be a significant asset. For example, if a senior Shimen member holds a leadership position at a university or works for a journal or funding body, they may offer valuable support with job applications, publications, or grants. So, when a Shimen functions in a united and cooperative way, it can be very helpful. The downside, however, is that if there are internal conflicts within the Shimen, it can be problematic. But in most cases, Shimen groups tend to be cohesive.” (Wade)

He also reflected on the cultural contrast:

“In the UK, for instance, I once had the same supervisor as a foreign student, but we only referred to each other by name—there was no such connection at all.” (Wade)

This contrast highlights how culturally embedded academic relationships shape the nature and availability of peer support in different educational systems.

In summary, participants actively tackled cross-cultural challenges with determination and a proactive mindset. By addressing language barriers through immersive experiences, targeted practice, and academic engagement, they successfully enhanced their English proficiency. Participants also adapted to differing publishing expectations by focusing on their research goals or taking proactive steps to align their achievements with future career opportunities. Furthermore, they viewed Shimen culture as a challenge to overcome with strong academic capabilities, emphasizing that excellence and hard work were key to navigating these cultural complexities and achieving their professional aspirations.

5.1.4 Career Preparation and Employability Development

This theme explores how participants enhanced their career readiness through three subthemes: (a) Leveraging Academic Opportunities, (b) Exploring Professional Growth Through Work and Volunteering, and (c) Building Employability Skills and Confidence. These subthemes highlight the diverse ways participants developed transferable skills, gained practical experience, and clarified their career aspirations, preparing them for success in both academic and non-academic contexts.

5.1.4.1 Leveraging Academic Opportunities

Participants actively embraced academic projects and leadership roles, using these opportunities to develop transferable skills, gain practical experience, and build networks essential for career growth. Organizing academic events, participating in funded research projects, and taking on leadership roles

allowed them to deepen their understanding of academia while enhancing their professional competencies.

Ding, for instance, reflected on her experience organizing summer schools. The process—from applying for funding to writing summary reports— “not only sharpened my project management skills but also provided valuable exposure to diverse teaching methods and methodological discussions” (Ding).

Similarly, Holly recounted leading an international conference during her PhD:

“Leading an international conference during my PhD was a transformative experience. It not only improved my organizational skills but also helped me better understand how academia works in the UK.”
(Holly)

By leveraging these opportunities, participants gained critical skills and experiences that extended beyond academic achievement, preparing them for future challenges in both academic and non-academic contexts. Notably, many participants retrospectively described their access to these academic opportunities as a matter of being “lucky”, particularly in relation to encountering supportive supervisors who encouraged participation in projects, conferences, and leadership roles. While participants acknowledged their own effort and initiative, they frequently framed their relatively smooth academic progression as contingent upon favourable supervisory relationships. This perception highlights how key opportunities were often experienced as relationally mediated rather than institutionally guaranteed.

5.1.4.2 Exploring Professional Growth Through Work and Volunteering

Participants actively sought opportunities beyond traditional academic work to broaden their career perspectives. Through part-time jobs, volunteering, and cross-disciplinary projects, they gained transferable skills, diversified their experiences, and clarified their professional aspirations. Jessy offered an example of how she valued volunteering as a means to enhance her personal and professional development:

“Teaching Chinese culture to foreign students wasn’t just a volunteering activity—it gave me confidence in my communication skills and helped me navigate cross-cultural environments better.” (Jessy)

This example illustrates how informal activities outside formal doctoral training contributed to participants’ professional development, reflecting the role of the hidden curriculum in doctoral education.

Fanta reflected on her part-time roles in various industries during her PhD. These experiences helped her step out of the academic bubble, providing her with broader insights into different fields and enriching her career outlook:

“During my PhD, I worked part-time in different industries. It allowed me to step out of academic immersion and gain diverse experiences.” (Fanta)

Participants with research assistant (RA) experience emphasized how these roles were instrumental in preparing them for diverse career paths. These hands-on opportunities provided practical insights into academic work while equipping them with transferable skills for non-academic environments.

“Working as an RA gave me valuable insights into academic environments and helped me prepare for both academic and non-academic career paths.” (Holly)

These varied experiences collectively illustrate the powerful influence of the hidden curriculum in doctoral education. While formal training prioritizes academic specialization, professional identity is frequently forged through these informal activities. However, the fact that such transformative growth is often relationally mediated—dependent on personal initiative and “lucky” encounters—rather than being institutionally guaranteed, underscores a systemic inequality in opportunity distribution. Ultimately, students who lack the social capital or specific circumstances to navigate these unwritten paths may remain structurally disadvantaged, missing out on the critical skills necessary for their future professional readiness.

5.1.4.3 Building Employability Skills and Confidence

Through academic and professional engagements, participants significantly enhanced their employability by cultivating critical skills such as communication, leadership, and collaboration. These experiences not only bolstered their confidence but also helped clarify their career trajectories and professional goals.

One key theme identified from participants’ reflections was their ability to balance multiple academic and professional responsibilities during their PhD. This balancing act not only “equipped me with valuable skills for future roles” (Ding) but also “helped me develop a proactive and adaptable mindset” (Fanta). For instance, Holly highlighted how these experiences shaped her professional abilities:

“My colleagues were impressed by how efficiently I managed complex tasks and adapted to new situations. These skills, developed during my PhD, made me more confident in navigating professional environments.”
(Holly)

In addition to managing responsibilities, participants expressed gratitude for the diverse opportunities their PhD journeys provided. These experiences extended beyond traditional scholarly activities, offering a platform to engage in impactful projects that combined academic research with practical applications. Such initiatives not only honed transferable skills but also instilled a deeper sense of purpose and direction. Ding reflected on this dual impact:

“I feel like I can handle any job in the future. During the project, we focused not only on academic publishing but also on organizing activities and creating resources that could benefit practitioners and students. These experiences were invaluable, and I’m truly grateful for the opportunity. It gave me confidence and a sense of purpose.” (Ding)

Ultimately, participants leveraged their doctoral journeys to prepare for future careers through a variety of engagements, including academic projects, volunteering, and professional collaborations. These activities enabled them to build confidence, develop transferable skills, and establish networks across diverse fields. Despite the challenges they encountered, participants appreciated how these opportunities enriched their professional and personal growth, positioning them for success in academia and beyond.

Across these accounts, an important pattern was identified regarding participants’ perceptions of employability over time. Although participants described substantial skill development and growing confidence through academic and professional engagement, many also reported heightened anxiety during the later stages of their doctoral journey, particularly in relation to post-PhD employment. This anxiety was often linked to the anticipation of becoming fully independent, as doctoral completion was perceived as marking the end of supervisory and institutional protection and the beginning of individual responsibility for career outcomes. Notably, such concerns were expressed even by participants who ultimately achieved successful academic trajectories,

suggesting that employability anxiety represents a widespread and structurally embedded aspect of doctoral experience rather than an issue confined to less successful students.

5.1.5 Practical Advice and Reflections for Navigating the PhD Journey

This theme captures the collective wisdom and retrospective reflections of participants on their doctoral journeys, organised into five subthemes: (a) Prioritising Academic Excellence and Clear Goals, (b) Exploring Career-Oriented Activities, (c) Adapting to Supervisory Relationships and Academic Cultures, (d) Balancing Opportunities with Personal Well-Being, and (e) Building Language and Cultural Competence. Together, these subthemes show how participants themselves make sense of the practices and orientations that they believe enabled their successful navigation of the PhD, rather than constituting researcher-generated recommendations.

5.1.5.1 Prioritizing Academic Excellence and Clear Goals

Participants stressed the need to prioritize research quality and maintain clarity of purpose throughout the PhD journey. They highlighted the importance of aligning academic pursuits with long-term aspirations and avoiding distractions. They advised students to “study diligently and actively pursue opportunities” (Ding) while “maintaining strong time management skills” (Holly).

Many participants emphasized that the most critical aspect of success is producing high-quality research:

“Be someone whose work stands out. Focus on being an excellent researcher that others will want to collaborate with or learn from.”

(Yulia)

5.1.5.2 Exploring Career-Oriented Activities

Participants described the importance of engaging in activities aligned with their career aspirations, such as attending conferences, networking, and pursuing skill-building opportunities. These career-oriented efforts were seen as critical for expanding professional networks and identifying future pathways. Teddy highlighted the transformative potential of academic conferences, sharing how such events can lead to unexpected opportunities:

“I attended an international conference and connected with a professor from a university in China. After I graduated, he offered me a postdoctoral position. It also laid the foundation for my future career path.” (Teddy)

Holly reflected on the value of exploring different roles to gain a deeper understanding of personal interests and career goals:

“Explore opportunities to learn and grow, but ensure they align with your long-term career plans. Don’t overextend yourself.” (Holly)

5.1.5.3 Adapting to Supervisory Relationships and Academic Cultures

Adjusting to different supervisory styles and cultural expectations was a recurring theme. Participants noted that PhD supervision requires a shift in mindset compared to earlier educational experiences. Ding highlighted this shift:

“PhD meetings aren’t about answers; they’re about guiding the knowledge construction process. You must learn to justify your arguments and treat supervisors as reviewers, not providers of solutions.” (Ding)

Participants who had completed their master’s studies in China before pursuing their PhDs in the UK highlighted key differences between the academic

environments of the two countries. They emphasized the importance of adapting to these differences, particularly in supervision styles and academic writing.

“Supervision in the UK is different from China; it requires students to focus on building independent research capabilities and needs students to adapt this transition as soon as possible.” (Wade)

In addition to supervision, participants highlighted the transition required in academic writing, particularly in understanding and applying critical thinking. They advised future students to “familiarize themselves with the expectations of UK academic writing early on” (Yulia).

Participants also highlighted the need to manage expectations with supervisors, noting that supervisors often juggle multiple responsibilities:

“Don’t expect your supervisor to remember everything. Take the initiative to communicate clearly and take charge of your own progress, fostering your independence.” (Ding)

5.1.5.4 Balancing Opportunities with Personal Well-Being

Engaging in extracurricular activities and professional opportunities can significantly enrich the PhD journey, but participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a balance to avoid overextending oneself.

“Participating in different activities is valuable, but you must manage your time and energy wisely. Prioritize your thesis, as graduating is the foundation for future opportunities.” (Holly)

Winter underscored the importance of mental health and resilience, advocating for self-reflection and focusing on what truly matters:

“PhDs come with ups and downs. Learn to reconcile with yourself and focus on what truly matters without letting external pressures take away your joy.” (Winter)

Fanta and Ding echoed the significance of prioritizing mental health, reminding students that a PhD is not the sole measure of success. They advised students not to push themselves too hard and to consider stepping back if the pressure becomes overwhelming. Ding noted that “life offers many meaningful pursuits beyond academia, including relationships and family” (Ding), which often hold greater importance. Fanta added that if continuing the PhD journey feels impossible, it’s okay to step away, as “another path may lead to an even more beautiful view” (Fanta).

5.1.5.5 Building Language and Cultural Competence

Language proficiency and cultural adaptation were identified as critical for navigating academic and professional environments, both during the PhD and in postdoctoral career opportunities. Jessy highlighted the importance of strong English skills, noting their impact on various aspects of her academic and personal journey:

“Good English skills make a difference in interviews, conferences, and other professional settings. During my PhD, my TA job interviews, interactions with my local boyfriend, and later job interviews were relatively smooth. Looking back, I believe my English skills played a significant role because the language proficiency of international PhD students can vary greatly” (Jessy)

Beyond language proficiency, participants underscored the value of immersing oneself in local cultures to enhance adaptability and cross-cultural communication. These efforts not only facilitated smoother integration into academic and social contexts but also prepared participants to excel in diverse

professional environments after graduation. Holly reflected on the advantages of cultural competence, saying:

“Engaging with local customs and practices helped me build stronger relationships and gain a deeper understanding of the professional landscape. It’s not just about speaking the language but understanding the context behind it, which makes a huge difference.” (Holly)

Participants’ advice underscores the multifaceted nature of the PhD journey, emphasizing the importance of clear goals, adaptability, and balance. By prioritizing research excellence, embracing diverse opportunities, and maintaining well-being, students can navigate the complexities of doctoral studies effectively. These accounts illustrate how participants retrospectively interpreted their own doctoral practices and priorities.

In summary, the findings of study 1 reveal a multifaceted journey of resilience, adaptability, and growth for Chinese doctoral students navigating doctoral studies in the UK. Participants transformed academic pressures into opportunities for skill development, leveraged social support and community belonging to combat isolation, and embraced cross-cultural challenges to enhance their academic and professional competencies. They strategically engaged in career-oriented activities, balancing these opportunities with personal well-being, and emphasized the importance of clear goals, proactive mindsets, and cultural competence. At the same time, participants’ narratives indicate that success was not only individually achieved but also structurally conditioned. Opportunities to gain insider knowledge, build networks, and access developmental resources—often through the hidden curriculum of doctoral education—were unevenly distributed, meaning that those with greater supervisory support and social capital were better positioned to thrive.

5.2 Discussion of Study 1

This section discusses the key theoretical and practical contributions of Study 1, followed by a critical reflection on the strengths and limitations of the research. The theoretical contribution advances Schlossberg's Transition Theory by integrating its Move In - Move Through - Move Out transitional stages and the 4S framework (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies) with the Four Stages of Learning (FSL), offering a comprehensive and developmental understanding of how Chinese international doctoral students navigate academic, social, and cultural transitions in the UK context. The practical contributions translate the findings into stage-sensitive recommendations for doctoral students, supervisors, and higher education institutions (HEIs), highlighting ways to enhance institutional support, foster students' proactive engagement, and promote well-being and professional development throughout the doctoral journey.

5.2.1 Theoretical Contributions of Study 1

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution by integrating Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the Four Stages of Learning Framework to conceptualise how Chinese international doctoral students navigate the UK doctoral system as a developmental transition process. While recent scholarship increasingly recognises educational experiences as involving multiple and interconnected transitions (Jindal-Snape, 2023), empirical research on international doctoral students has often foregrounded discrete challenges such as cultural adaptation difficulties, language barriers and social isolation (e.g., Geng & Yu, 2024; Yang & MacCallum, 2022b), providing important insights into the difficulties students face. In contrast, this study illuminates how highly successful doctoral students actively engage with transitional demands and develop researcher independence over time.

While transition theories have been widely applied in higher education research, they are often used in the context of undergraduate or taught postgraduate students, with limited application to the doctoral experience (Agbaje & Sehoole, 2022; Arafeh, 2020; Krsmanovic, 2022). However, doctoral education involves a complex and multifaceted process of adaptation, requiring students to navigate academic independence, evolving professional identity, and socio-cultural integration over an extended period. Existing transition models often focus on linear or stage-based frameworks, which may not fully capture the interplay between external challenges and internal development that characterizes doctoral adaptation, particularly for international students managing both academic and cross-cultural transitions (Bethel et al., 2020; Pham, 2022a; Van Tienoven et al., 2024).

Furthermore, previous studies on international student transitions have focused primarily on external factors such as institutional support and cultural adjustment, with comparatively less attention paid to the internal cognitive and behavioural processes through which doctoral students develop academic competence, professional identity and resilience (Agbaje & Sehoole, 2022; Hyden & Coryell, 2023; Zhou et al., 2008). Yet, doctoral education requires more than external adaptation; it entails a progressive transformation in academic skills, professional competencies, and personal resilience. To address this gap, this study integrates Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the Four Stages of Learning Framework (see Section 2.1) into a comprehensive model that captures both the external influences on doctoral adaptation and the internal learning processes students undergo.

As illustrated in Figure 5.1, responding to the conceptual limitations identified in existing research, this study proposes a spiral, process-oriented transition model that integrates Schlossberg's Move In-Move Through-Move Out framework and 4S model (Situation, Self, Support, Strategies; see Section 2.1)

with the Four Stages of Learning (FSL) model (Unconscious Incompetence, where learners are unaware of what they do not know; Conscious Incompetence, where they begin to recognise their limitations; Conscious Competence, where they deliberately apply new skills with effort; and Unconscious Competence, where those skills become automatic). Rather than viewing doctoral transition as a linear progression, the model represents development as an iterative spiral process, in which students repeatedly encounter academic, social and cultural challenges while gradually increasing their competence, confidence and autonomy over time. In this model, Move Out is conceptualised not as a fixed endpoint at doctoral completion, but as a transitional phase in which doctoral competence is progressively consolidated through entry into professional academic roles.

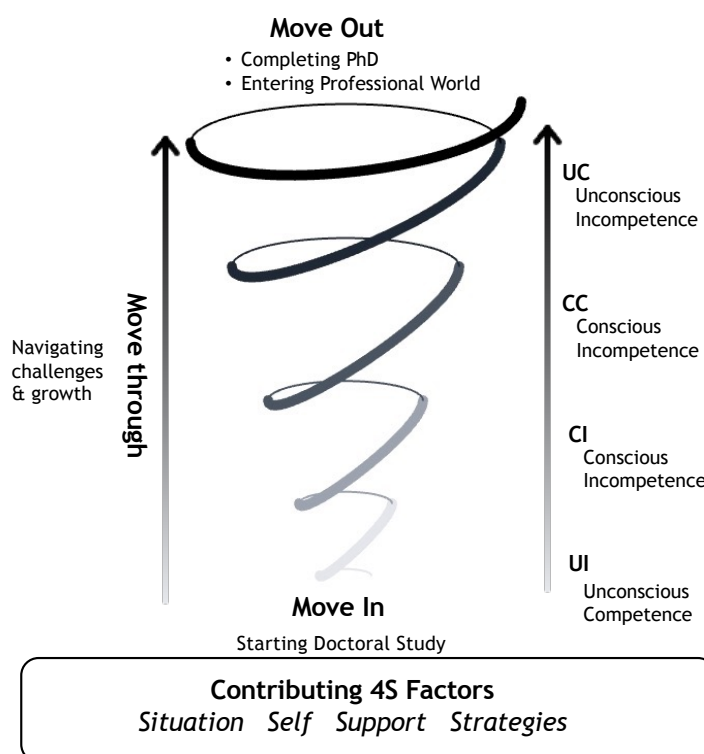


Figure 5.1 A Spiral Transition Model for Chinese Doctoral Students: Integrating Schlossberg's Transition Stages, 4S Framework, and FSL

The integration of Transition Theory and FSL enables the model to capture both the contextual conditions shaping doctoral transitions and the internal learning processes through which students develop as independent researchers. While the Move In-Move Through-Move Out framework provides a temporal structure for understanding stages of transition, the FSL model explains how students' awareness and competence evolve across these stages. Throughout this process, the 4S dimensions operate as a foundational set of influences that underpin students' transition experiences across stages. Situation and Support tend to exert stronger influence in the early phases, as students encounter unfamiliar academic and cultural contexts, while Strategies and Self become increasingly prominent as students develop confidence, agency and independence.

The spiral form of the model reflects the non-linear and cumulative nature of doctoral transitions, highlighting that challenges are not simply resolved and left behind but are revisited with increasing skill and understanding as students progress. The use of gradient colouring further symbolises this developmental trajectory, with lighter and less defined tones representing early uncertainty and limited awareness, and progressively deeper colours indicating growing clarity, competence and internalisation of academic practices over time.

To further illustrate how this spiral transition process unfolds in practice, the following sections examine each stage of the model in turn, beginning with the Move In phase and progressing through Move Through and Move Out.

5.2.1.1 Move In: Entering the Doctoral Journey with Unconscious Incompetence

The Move In stage represents the initial phase of international doctoral students' transition, during which they enter a new academic, social, and cultural environment that requires them to navigate unfamiliar expectations,

norms, and interactions (Krsmanovic, 2022; Yang & MacCallum, 2022b). At this stage, students are in Unconscious Incompetence (FSL), meaning they are unaware of the specific challenges they will face. Many start with enthusiasm and confidence, assuming that their prior education has adequately prepared them for doctoral study (McCulloch & Bastalich, 2023). However, as they engage with academic tasks and broader university life, they gradually recognize the differences between their previous experiences and the demands of the UK doctoral system.

This realization extends beyond academic challenges, as students also encounter new ways of forming professional relationships, adjusting to social expectations, and adapting to cultural norms within an international academic setting. For instance, some students were surprised by the expectation to actively voice opinions in seminars and engage in casual yet professional interactions with academic staff, which differed from the more formal and authority-oriented relationships they were accustomed to in China.

In line with this transitional process, findings indicate that while students were not yet fully aware of the challenges they would face, they enthusiastically participated in academic activities, engaged with supervisors, and initiated their research projects. This early engagement suggests that even in the Unconscious Incompetence phase (FSL), students were not passive recipients of their new academic environment but were actively immersing themselves in their doctoral journey, which played a crucial role in facilitating their progression into the next stage of adaptation (Brownlow et al., 2023; Cao et al., 2024). Because of this increasing engagement, they began to recognize the complexities of academic writing, independent research, and professional networking—marking the transition to the Move Through phase.

While these findings align with existing research on doctoral student adaptation, this study adds to the literature by highlighting the agency of

students in actively shaping their early transition experiences, contrasting with deficit-focused narratives often found in international student research (Deuchar, 2023; Zeegers & Barron, 2008). In addition to academic adjustments, many students also actively sought opportunities to engage with the social and cultural dimensions of their doctoral experience, such as developing peer relationships and navigating cross-cultural interactions within local communities (Elliot et al., 2016; Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Zheng & Ishii, 2023).

In the Move In stage, Situation (see Section 2.1.1.3) plays a dominant role in shaping students' early experiences, aligning with Schlossberg's Transition Theory. As international doctoral students enter the UK academic system, they must adjust to new institutional structures, unfamiliar academic expectations, and different cultural norms in research environments (Cao et al., 2024; Geng & Yu, 2024; Lu et al., 2025). The transition to self-directed learning, unstructured supervisor relationships, and the expectation of independent research creates both academic and social uncertainty.

Given these challenges, Support becomes a crucial factor in helping students navigate their initial transition. Without adequate guidance, students may struggle to interpret academic expectations, engage with their supervisors effectively, or establish meaningful social and professional connections. Institutional resources, such as doctoral induction programs, academic writing workshops, and peer mentoring schemes, play a key role in reducing uncertainty and facilitating adjustment (Hyden & Coryell, 2023; San & Guo, 2023). However, building on previous research that highlights the availability of institutional support, this study demonstrates that the effectiveness of such support is strongly shaped by students' own engagement with these resources. Students who proactively sought guidance and participated in academic and social activities were better positioned to identify areas for growth, accelerate their awareness of doctoral expectations, and progress more smoothly in their

transition. This highlights the emerging role of Self in the Move In stage, as personal initiative, openness to learning, and early agency interacted with available support structures to shape students' early adaptation (McCulloch & Bastalich, 2023).

While Strategies is not yet fully developed at this stage, its foundation is being formed. Students who actively engaged with support systems began experimenting with different learning approaches, such as adjusting their study routines, seeking structured feedback, and exploring professional development opportunities. Although these strategies were not yet fully refined, this early experimentation laid the groundwork for more deliberate strategic adaptation in the Move Through phase.

Thus, the Move In stage is primarily characterized by Situation-driven challenges, which in turn heighten the importance of both Support and Self. Early doctoral transition is shaped not only by institutional and situational conditions but also by students' active efforts to engage, seek support, and begin developing adaptive strategies. Furthermore, although Strategies is still evolving at this stage, early attempts already begin to shape students' capacity to navigate their doctoral experience and progress into the Move Through phase.

5.2.1.2 Move Through: From Awareness to Competence - Navigating Challenges with 4S

The Move Through stage represents a critical period of transition, during which international doctoral students move beyond their initial enthusiasm and confront the realities of academic, social, and cultural adaptation. This stage encompasses two key phases in the Four Stages of Learning (FSL) (Howell, 1982): Conscious Incompetence and Conscious Competence.

In the Conscious Incompetence phase, students become increasingly aware of the gaps in their academic and professional skills but struggle to effectively

address them. They begin to recognise the high standard of academic writing, the challenges of conducting independent research, and the unspoken norms of professional networking. However, this realization often leads to feelings of uncertainty, frustration, and self-doubt, as they find themselves unable to meet expectations despite their growing awareness (Geng & Yu, 2024; Sverdluk et al., 2018). Many students initially encounter difficulties in interpreting feedback, structuring their research, and adapting to new academic expectations, which can create a sense of stagnation.

Findings indicate that participants at this stage acknowledged their limitations in several key areas but approached these challenges with a proactive mindset, seeking ways to improve and adapt. Many students reported difficulties in understanding doctoral-level writing conventions, particularly in structuring arguments, engaging with literature critically, and developing an academic voice (Geng & Yu, 2024; Jiang et al., 2024). However, rather than being discouraged, they actively sought guidance from supervisors, writing workshops, and peer feedback to refine their academic writing skills. Socially, while some students struggled with networking and establishing professional relationships, they gradually learned to navigate research collaborations by observing peers, participating in academic events, and reaching out to mentors.

Culturally, language barriers emerged as a major challenge, affecting both academic and social interactions (Ma, 2020). Many students found it difficult to follow fast-paced academic discussions, articulate complex research ideas in English, or engage confidently in informal conversations with peers and faculty. However, rather than perceiving these differences as insurmountable barriers, students actively adapted by seeking out opportunities to enhance their English proficiency and immersing themselves in English-speaking environments. They engaged in academic writing workshops, joined discussion groups, and deliberately placed themselves in settings that required frequent communication

in English. Their willingness to engage with challenges, experiment with new strategies, and seek available resources played a crucial role in their ability to transition toward greater competence and confidence in the Move Through phase.

At this stage, students' progression is increasingly shaped by the dynamic interaction between Support, Strategies and Self (see Section 2.1.1.3). Access to supervisors, peers and institutional resources enabled students to interpret feedback, refine academic skills and navigate emerging challenges (Geng & Yu, 2024). However, it was students' proactive engagement with these resources that determined their effectiveness. Through experimenting with learning approaches, seeking targeted feedback, and strategically participating in academic and professional activities, students gradually developed more effective coping strategies and greater ownership of their adaptation process (Rui et al., 2024; San & Guo, 2023). In this process, Self identified as a defining influence, as resilience, confidence and initiative enabled students to persist through setbacks and translate support into meaningful learning gains. This interaction marked a shift from passive adjustment to active self-directed development, reinforcing that successful doctoral transition requires both accessible support structures and strong personal agency.

By contrast, Situation becomes less significant in this phase. While external academic, social, and cultural expectations still shape students' environment, the key determinant of progress is not simply the challenges they face but rather how they respond to them. Unlike in the early stages, where students primarily react to new expectations, in Conscious Incompetence, they begin to take control of their adaptation process through strategic engagement with resources and self-directed learning. Thus, while external conditions remain influential, students' ability to utilize Support, develop Strategy, and cultivate Self plays a more defining role in shaping their transition.

Through the dynamic interaction between 4S (Support, Strategies, Self and Situation), students gradually moved from recognising their limitations to developing increasing competence in navigating doctoral demands.

The Conscious Competence stage marks a significant shift in students' doctoral journeys as they begin to develop confidence in their academic, social, and cultural adaptation. While challenges remain, students now possess the skills and strategies to address them more effectively. This stage is characterized by increased autonomy, deliberate practice, and the refinement of strategic approaches to learning, research, and professional networking. Unlike the previous stage, where uncertainty and self-doubt often dominated, students in Conscious Competence demonstrate a growing sense of agency over their academic and social integration.

Findings indicate that at this stage, students begin to apply structured approaches to key doctoral tasks. Academically, students refine their research methodologies, improve their academic writing, and engage in scholarly discussions with greater confidence. Many participants highlighted how developing systematic research approaches and effectively managing their academic workload and research proposals contributed to their academic growth (Van Tienoven et al., 2024). Socially, they developed stronger professional relationships, actively networking with peers and academics at conferences, seminars, and collaborative projects. Culturally, students exhibited greater adaptability in navigating professional hierarchies and communication norms, demonstrating increased confidence in expressing themselves and engaging in cross-cultural interactions within academic and social settings (Nguyen & Hartz, 2020).

At this stage, Strategies and Self emerge as dominant influences, jointly enabling students to navigate the doctoral environment with increasing competence. Through refining learning techniques, experimenting with

academic writing structures, and actively managing research projects, students strategically enhanced their academic performance. At the same time, the development of resilience, confidence and a stronger academic identity empowered them to take greater ownership of their learning and professional growth (Kapikiran & Acun-Kapikiran, 2016). Those who engaged proactively in academic communities and sought development opportunities progressed more smoothly, whereas limited confidence or hesitancy to assert oneself was often associated with continued uncertainty and imposter feelings (Inouye, 2021).

Although Support remains relevant, its role shifts from providing direct guidance to facilitating independent learning and professional engagement. Rather than relying primarily on structured institutional support, students increasingly draw on mentorship, peer collaboration and informal learning networks. Meanwhile, the influence of Situation evolves across this stage. While academic and cultural adjustment challenges become less prominent as students adapt to the doctoral environment, new situational factors related to career development—such as employment structures, competition and visa conditions—begin to emerge. This shift reflects students’ growing competence and agency, through which internal capacities increasingly shape how external conditions are navigated.

Thus, the Move Through stage, particularly the transition into Conscious Competence, represents a crucial period of consolidation and refinement, during which students move from uncertainty to increasing competence. Beyond documenting the challenges commonly reported in existing studies, this study demonstrates how international doctoral students actively navigate these challenges through strategic learning, proactive support-seeking, and self-directed engagement across transition stages. Students not only develop essential academic skills but also learn to manage the psychological and emotional aspects of doctoral study (Creaton & Gower, 2024).

5.2.1.3 Move Out: From Competence towards Independence and Professional Consolidation

The Move Out stage represents an advanced phase of doctoral transition in which students approach Unconscious Competence (FSL) and increasingly internalise the skills and confidence required for academic and professional practice. At this stage, many of the strategies and adaptations that previously required conscious effort become more automatic and integrated into everyday scholarly work. Rather than concentrating on overcoming specific doctoral challenges, students increasingly function as independent scholars, embedding research management, publication and collaboration into routine academic practice. Through sustained engagement in academic roles, many consolidate their professional identities by securing funding, collaborating with colleagues and developing clearer research trajectories.

Importantly, for many participants in this study, completing PhD also signifies the beginning of a new transition—moving beyond the doctoral journey and entering the job market or postdoctoral positions. While they have developed a strong academic foundation, the uncertainty of career prospects introduces a new layer of pressure (Fakunle, 2021). Several participants expressed concerns about navigating employment opportunities, particularly within academia, where competition for postdoctoral and faculty positions is intense. The transition from being a doctoral student to securing a stable academic or industry role often brings renewed challenges related to job applications, networking, and career planning (Willson, 2019).

At this stage, Situation shifts from challenges related to adapting to the academic and cultural environment to emerging demands associated with career transition. Students increasingly navigate institutional hiring processes, funding structures, and job market expectations by applying the competencies they have developed within new professional contexts. Self continues to play a central

role, as students draw on growing resilience, adaptability, and professional confidence to manage uncertainty and career-related pressures. Strategies also becomes increasingly prominent, with students actively engaging in career planning, preparing job applications, participating in professional networking, and positioning themselves within their respective fields. The ability to leverage academic achievements, research outputs, and professional connections becomes critical in shaping career trajectories. Although Support becomes less central in routine academic work, it remains important in the form of professional mentorship, alumni networks, and career guidance, which assist students in navigating postdoctoral and employment transitions. Together, these shifting situational demands interact with students' evolving self-capacities, strategic responses, and reconfigured support networks, shaping how doctoral competence is progressively consolidated within professional academic roles.

Overall, Study 1 advances transition theory within doctoral education by conceptualising international doctoral students' experiences as a dynamic, developmental and non-linear process. Through integrating Schlossberg's Transition Theory with the Four Stages of Learning framework, the spiral transition model captures both the evolving contextual conditions of doctoral study and the internal learning trajectories through which students progressively develop academic competence, professional identity and independence. Rather than portraying transition as a sequence of discrete challenges or linear stages, the model highlights the cumulative and iterative nature of doctoral development, in which students repeatedly encounter and renegotiate academic, social and cultural demands at increasing levels of capability.

Across the Move In, Move Through and Move Out stages, the dynamic interaction of the 4S dimensions (Situation, Support, Strategies and Self) provides a nuanced theoretical lens for understanding how external structures and personal agency jointly shape doctoral transitions over time. By

foregrounding students' active engagement, strategic learning and identity development, this study extends existing transition scholarship beyond deficit-oriented and context-focused accounts, offering a more holistic and process-oriented explanation of how highly successful international doctoral students navigate complex educational transitions.

Building on these theoretical insights, the following section turns to the practical contributions of Study 1, translating the model's implications into recommendations for doctoral students, supervisors and higher education institutions.

5.2.2 Practical Contributions

The practical contributions of this study are grounded in the experiences of high-achieving Chinese international doctoral graduates who successfully navigated multiple academic, social, and cultural transitions within the UK context. While acknowledging the potential success bias associated with this accomplished participant group, the findings also demonstrate that participants encountered substantial and commonly shared challenges throughout their doctoral journeys. Their success stemmed not from the absence of difficulties but from proactive and strategic responses to these challenges.

Although situated in the UK, the transitional processes identified are likely to be relevant across similar Western higher education contexts where international doctoral students encounter comparable challenges in academic adjustment, social integration, and longer-term development. Building on these insights, the practical contributions are structured into three levels of recommendations: doctoral students, supervisors, and higher education institutions (HEIs).

5.2.2.1 Recommendations for Doctoral Students

Adopting proactive strategies to manage academic demands and foster personal growth

Drawing on participants' experiences of navigating academic pressure, doctoral students are encouraged to adopt proactive approaches to managing research challenges across different stages of the PhD. This includes developing effective time management practices, setting clear academic goals, and prioritising core research tasks, particularly during critical phases such as topic development and the writing-up period.

Rather than perceiving academic pressure solely as a source of stress, students may benefit from reframing challenges as opportunities for developing resilience, problem-solving abilities, and academic maturity. Participants' accounts suggest that actively engaging with demanding tasks, seeking feedback, and maintaining focus on research quality supported both academic progress and long-term personal growth.

Actively cultivating social support networks and a sense of community belonging

Doctoral students are encouraged to actively build and sustain supportive academic and social networks throughout their doctoral journey. Regular communication with supervisors can facilitate academic clarity, motivation, and emotional reassurance, while engagement with peer communities offers opportunities for collaborative learning, shared problem-solving, and mutual encouragement. Beyond the academic environment, participation in local clubs, volunteering, and social activities may further enhance students' sense of belonging and cultural integration.

By proactively cultivating diverse sources of social support, doctoral students can mitigate feelings of isolation, strengthen emotional resilience, and enhance both academic and personal experiences during the PhD.

Developing cross-cultural competence to support academic and professional adjustment

Given the challenges associated with transitions into the UK academic environment, doctoral students are encouraged to engage actively in developing both language proficiency and cross-cultural understanding. This may involve participating in academic discussions, attending workshops, seeking feedback on academic writing, and immersing themselves in English-speaking environments.

Adapting to different academic expectations, such as critical thinking practices, independent research culture, and supervisory relationships, is also essential for successful doctoral progression. Participants' experiences suggest that viewing these cultural differences as learning opportunities, rather than obstacles, can facilitate smoother adjustment and foster academic confidence.

Strengthening cross-cultural competence not only supports academic success but also enhances students' preparedness for diverse professional contexts beyond the PhD.

Engaging strategically in career-oriented and experiential learning opportunities

Doctoral students are encouraged to engage strategically in opportunities that align with their long-term professional goals. Such engagement may include participating in research projects, organising academic events, gaining teaching experience, and exploring work or volunteering experiences beyond academia. These activities contribute to the development of communication,

organisational, and collaboration skills, while also expanding professional networks and enhancing career readiness.

At the same time, students should balance career-oriented engagement with academic priorities, ensuring that employability development complements rather than undermines doctoral progress.

Maintaining a balanced approach to wellbeing and academic progression

Doctoral students are encouraged to remain attentive to their mental and emotional health, recognising that sustained productivity is closely linked to maintaining balance and resilience. This may involve setting realistic expectations, taking breaks when necessary, and seeking support during periods of heightened pressure. Developing self-awareness and reflective practices can further support students in navigating setbacks and maintaining motivation throughout the doctoral journey.

By balancing academic ambition with self-care, doctoral students may be better positioned to sustain long-term engagement, personal growth, and successful completion of the PhD.

5.2.2.2 Recommendations for Supervisors

Providing structured guidance across key stages of doctoral study

Based on participants' experiences of uncertainty during topic exploration and heightened pressure during the writing-up phase, supervisors are encouraged to adopt a more structured approach at key stages of the doctoral journey. For example, supervisors can help students break long-term goals into manageable weekly or monthly tasks, clearly outline next steps and priorities at the end of each supervision meeting, and provide focused guidance on refining research scope, research questions, and writing priorities.

Such clear and structured guidance can reduce the trial-and-error process that often increases stress, and support students in maintaining research momentum and a sense of control during high-pressure periods.

Making academic expectations explicit through focused feedback

Supervisors are encouraged to clarify academic expectations by providing concrete examples of effective writing, such as sample paragraphs that illustrate strong argumentation and critical analysis. Feedback can be directed towards a few key areas, including argument development, engagement with literature, and methodological clarity, with explanations of why changes are needed.

Making academic standards more explicit helps students better understand how to improve their work, reduces uncertainty, and supports their progression towards greater academic independence.

Balancing support and autonomy to foster independent research skills

Participants' positive experiences indicate that having space to explore ideas independently, while being expected to justify and explain their academic decisions, supported the development of strong research independence. Based on these findings, supervisors are encouraged to clarify which aspects of the research process can be student-led (such as analytical approaches or chapter organisation) and which require closer supervisory oversight (such as research ethics and methodological rigour).

Supervisors may also encourage students to come to supervision meetings with clear rationales for their decisions, rather than presenting only problems or uncertainties. This balanced approach can reduce over-reliance on supervisors while avoiding the confusion that may arise from insufficient guidance, thereby supporting students' confidence and academic maturity.

Actively connecting students with opportunities while avoiding excessive workload

The findings show that engagement in opportunities such as conferences, research projects, academic events, and RA/TA roles contributed positively to students' career development, while excessive involvement sometimes created pressure and disrupted thesis progress.

Based on these experiences, supervisors are encouraged to prioritise opportunities that align closely with students' research topics, skill development needs, and future career goals. Before recommending additional activities, supervisors may work with students to assess time commitments and capacity, and reduce non-essential tasks during intensive writing phases. This balanced approach allows students to benefit from meaningful experiential learning while minimising the pressure and disruption caused by excessive workload.

Attending to students' sense of belonging and lowering communication barriers

The findings show that regular encouragement and consistent communication can effectively reduce self-doubt and isolation among doctoral students, especially during uncertain periods. Supervisors are encouraged to establish simple but consistent support practices, such as holding brief meetings at regular intervals, offering specific positive feedback on students' progress (for example, highlighting what has been done well), and focusing on adjusting strategies when students experience difficulties rather than only emphasising productivity.

Such approaches can help sustain students' motivation, emotional well-being, and resilience, which in turn supports their ability to persist through demanding stages of doctoral study and complete key academic tasks effectively.

5.2.2.3 Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Providing structured academic support at key doctoral stages

Higher education institutions could offer more structured academic support at these critical points of the doctoral journey. This may include targeted workshops on research design and topic refinement in the early stages, as well as writing retreats, structured thesis writing programmes, and peer writing groups during the later stages. By aligning institutional support with key transitional phases, universities can help students maintain academic momentum and reduce the accumulation of stress during high-pressure periods.

Creating accessible and sustainable peer support spaces

HEIs could strengthen formal and informal peer support structures, such as interdisciplinary doctoral networks, writing groups, mentoring schemes between senior and junior doctoral students, and online communities during periods of remote study. Rather than relying solely on individual initiative, institutional support for peer connection can help reduce isolation, promote knowledge exchange, and foster a stronger sense of belonging among international doctoral students.

Promoting wellbeing-oriented doctoral environments

HEIs could reduce isolation and sustain motivation by building predictable, low-cost support routines during high-pressure periods (especially writing-up and disrupted phases). This may include scheduled short check-ins, online co-writing sessions, and clearly signposted routes to timely support when students become stuck, rather than relying on students to self-refer only when problems escalate.

Overall, these practical recommendations highlight the importance of aligning individual effort, supervisory practices, and institutional structures with key transitional stages of doctoral study. By providing clearer guidance,

accessible support networks, and stage-sensitive resources, universities can better support international doctoral students in sustaining academic progress, well-being, and long-term development.

5.2.3 Strengths and Limitations

This study offers several key strengths that enhance its contribution to understanding the transition experiences of Chinese international doctoral students. First, it integrates Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the Four Stages of Learning (FSL), offering a dynamic and developmental lens to examine students' academic, cultural, and career-related transitions. This theoretical integration not only captures the complexity of transitional experiences but also highlights the iterative, non-linear nature of students' personal and professional growth.

Second, this study intentionally focused on high-achieving Chinese international doctoral graduates in order to gain in-depth insight into successful transition processes and the development of academic independence. By examining participants who successfully completed their PhDs within four years and secured academic employment in globally ranked top 200 universities, the study was able to explore in detail the strategies, resources and personal capacities associated with effective adaptation. This purposive sampling approach provided rich, process-oriented understanding of how doctoral competence is progressively developed across transition stages.

Third, the combination of semi-structured interviews and visual "River of Experience" drawings allowed participants to reflect deeply on their PhD journey and articulate nuanced transitions across time and context. This multimodal approach enriched the depth and clarity of the findings, capturing both emotional and structural dimensions of their experiences.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the findings are primarily based on the experiences of high-achieving Chinese international doctoral graduates, which capture pathways of successful adaptation but may not fully represent the diverse trajectories of doctoral students who encounter prolonged difficulties or non-completion. Future research could incorporate a wider range of experiences to further refine and extend the proposed transition model.

Second, the study relied on retrospective self-reported data, which may be subject to participants' reinterpretation of past experiences. Nevertheless, the combination of in-depth interviews and visual "River of Experience" drawings helped to support recall and enhance the richness of longitudinal reflection. Finally, while the spiral transition model provides a theoretically integrated framework, its transferability across different disciplinary and national contexts warrants further investigation.

6. Study 2: Findings and Discussion

6.1 Findings of Study 2

This section presents the findings of Study 2, which examined how Chinese international doctoral students navigate employability development during their PhD journeys in the UK. Table 7.1 summarises the seven key themes, associated sub-themes and analytical code categories, illustrating the personal, relational, institutional and cultural forces that shape students' career development.

Table 6.1 Key Themes and Analytical Categories in Study 2

Theme	Sub-Theme	Description	Code Categories
1. Meaning-Making of Employability Challenges	a. Challenges as Obstacles b. Challenges as Opportunities	<i>This theme explores how Chinese doctoral students perceive and navigate challenges related to employability at UK universities.</i>	a. Challenges in advancing project b. Challenges for publishing c. Seeking alternatives and solutions
2. Supervisory Mediation of Employability Development	a. Supervisor Responsiveness and Communication b. Supervisor and Doctoral Student Emotional Dynamics c. Supervisors' Role in Career Guidance	<i>This theme examines how supervisory practices influence Chinese doctoral students' sense of competence and readiness for employability.</i>	a. Supervisory relationship b. Psychological and emotional aspects
3. Peer Mediation of Employability Development	a. Peer Information and Resource Sharing b. Insights into Job Markets via "Grey Area" c. Dual Impact of Peer Support on Wellbeing	<i>This theme examines how peer relationships simultaneously inspire and challenge Chinese doctoral students in their career progression.</i>	a. Awareness of employment landscape b. Influence of peer and family expectation
4. Relationally Embedded Career Decision-Making	a. Location Preferences and Family Considerations b. Career Guidance and Expectations from Family	<i>This theme explores how close relationships shape Chinese doctoral students' career planning and decision-making processes.</i>	a. Influence of peer and family expectation b. Job market career aspirations
5. Institutional and Structural Conditioning of Employability	a. The Role of Institutional Environment b. Navigating UK Work Visas and Employability Challenges c. Influences of Shimen Culture	<i>This theme examines how systemic and institutional factors intersect with Chinese doctoral students' personal strategies to influence career outcomes.</i>	a. Perception of university support mechanisms b. Job market realities and preparations c. Perceived barriers
6. Cultural and Lifestyle Adaptation	a. Navigating the UK Academic and Professional Communication Context b. Adapting Lifestyle and Social Preferences	<i>This theme explores how the process of adapting to UK cultural norms and lifestyle affects Chinese doctoral students' feelings of inclusion and shapes their confidence and professional relationships.</i>	a. Difference between UK and China b. Employment confidence
7. Temporal Shifts in Employability Orientation	a. Initial Adjustment and Role Transition b. Reflections and Regrets in Later Stages c. Balancing PhD Progress for Employability Development	<i>This theme examines how Chinese doctoral students adapt their approaches to career development and skill acquisition over the course of their doctoral journey</i>	a. Initiative in enhancing employability b. Personal development and reflection

The first theme, *Meaning-Making of Employability Challenges*, explores how participants interpreted employability barriers both as obstacles and as opportunities that motivated strategic action. The second theme, *Supervisory Mediation of Employability Development*, highlights how supervisory support — including responsiveness, emotional attunement, and career guidance — influences students' confidence and career readiness. The third theme, *Peer Mediation of Employability Development*, reveals the dual role of peers as sources of valuable employment information and as triggers of competitive pressure and wellbeing concerns. The fourth theme, *Relationally Embedded Career Decision-Making*, demonstrates how career decision-making is entangled with family expectations, partner relationships and geographical preferences. The fifth theme, *Institutional and Structural Conditioning of Employability*, shows how visa policies, labour-market access, university support systems and Chinese academic evaluation structures shape students' plans and strategies. The sixth theme, *Cultural and Lifestyle Adaptation*, explains how adapting to UK academic norms and everyday life influences students' confidence and employability aspirations. Finally, the seventh theme, *Temporal Shifts in Employability Orientation*, captures how students continuously reassess their goals and adjust their approaches to skill acquisition as their doctoral journey unfolds.

Together, these seven themes reveal employability development as a dynamic, uncertain, and multi-systemic process. Rather than being driven by skills acquisition alone, employability for Chinese doctoral students is constructed through the interplay of personal agency, relational support, and structural constraints across both the UK and Chinese contexts. The following subsections provide a detailed account of each theme supported by illustrative quotes.

6.1.1 Meaning-Making of Employability Challenges

This theme explores how Chinese international doctoral students perceive and navigate employability-related challenges during their PhD studies in the UK. It is organised into two sub-themes: (a) Challenges as Obstacles, and (b) Challenges as Opportunities.

Across participants' accounts, a key tension was identified in how employability-related challenges were understood and responded to. While some participants described these challenges as barriers that constrained their engagement with employability activities, others framed similar experiences as opportunities for personal and professional development. These contrasting interpretations were reflected in differences in confidence, motivation, and patterns of engagement across stages of doctoral study.

6.1.1.1 Challenges as Obstacles

One of the most prominent challenges was the struggle to publish academic papers, which was “critical for building a competitive profile” (Helen). Many participants found it difficult to allocate time and resources for publishing due to the demands of their thesis work, and the pressure to publish while managing other academic responsibilities often became overwhelming:

“It feels like there is never enough time. Between finishing my thesis and preparing papers for submission, I constantly feel like I’m falling behind.” (Zizi)

“I know I need publications for future job prospects, but right now, the thesis takes all my time, and I keep postponing my publishing goals.” (Yett)

“There’s just too much to do. Writing and revising papers while focusing on my thesis is exhausting, and it often feels like I have to choose one over the other.” (William)

In addition to the challenges of publishing, balancing career development with academic responsibilities proved to be a significant challenge for many students. Many participants found that their thesis work took precedence, leaving little time for activities such as tutoring or exploring job opportunities:

“I know I should have taken on some tutoring jobs, but I kept putting it off. Now, there’s no time left because my thesis has to come first.” (Yett)

“I’m always worried about my thesis and have no time to think about job opportunities.” (Ka)

Beyond time constraints, language barriers also complicated career engagement. A lack of confidence in their language skills often made participants hesitant to pursue opportunities requiring strong communication abilities. William and Hailey shared:

“Language is a big problem when it comes to career planning here. I worry that my language skills aren’t strong enough to tutor other students.” (William)

“The biggest barrier to working in the UK is the language issue. I’m afraid that communication problems will affect my work efficiency.” (Hailey)

In addition to these practical challenges, some participants experienced reluctance and avoidance towards career development, driven by fear and uncertainty:

“I am very unwilling to face this issue. It is difficult to accept the change in status and fearing quitting or leaving a familiar environment.”
(Rose)

“I would rather graduate later to delay dealing with the pressures of job hunting.” (Daisy)

“I had never attended any career events.” (Qing)

Taken together, these accounts highlight how employability challenges were experienced not only as practical constraints but also as emotionally taxing pressures that reduced some participants’ capacity to engage proactively with career preparation alongside doctoral demands.

6.1.1.2 Challenges as Opportunities

While some participants described employability-related challenges as constraining, others reported actively reframing similar difficulties as opportunities for development. These participants described engaging with academic, linguistic, and cultural challenges in ways that they believed supported their longer-term career preparation.

Several participants viewed academic publishing not only as a requirement but also as an opportunity to develop research skills and enhance employability. Publishing was frequently described as a deliberate strategy for strengthening academic profiles, particularly among students approaching the later stages of their doctoral studies. This reframing is illustrated by Di, who reflected:

“I started viewing each paper submission as a chance to learn and improve. Even if it’s challenging, I know it’s worth the effort and good for my career.” (Di)

Di described an initial sense of pressure and uncertainty around publishing, but over time reported a change in how he approached this challenge. He explained that repeated engagement with the submission process helped him become more confident and more focused on developing his research skills, and he began to see publishing as an integral part of his doctoral and career development.

Participants consistently highlighted that “academic publications are a crucial requirement for securing postdoctoral or academic positions, both in China and abroad” (Yett). This focus on publishing became particularly evident in the final two years, as students began actively preparing their work for submission:

“Publishing isn’t just a requirement; it’s an opportunity to showcase my research to a wider audience and build my credibility in the field.”

(Wendy)

“I’ve been working with friends from domestic universities to co-publish papers, which I believe will enhance my academic portfolio.” (Helen)

In a similar way, participants who initially experienced language barriers described using these challenges as motivation to engage more actively in development opportunities. Several reported deliberately participating in conferences, networking events, and part-time work to improve their communication skills and build confidence in professional settings.

“At first, I was nervous about speaking at conferences, but now I see it as a way to improve my language skills and make meaningful connections.”

(Daisy)

“Networking and presenting my research in English felt daunting, but I knew it was important for my future career, so I kept pushing myself.”

(Di)

Participants also reported engaging in internships, teaching roles, and part-time employment as a way to gain experience and better understand professional expectations in the UK context. These roles were described as providing exposure to workplace communication styles, academic expectations, and informal practices that were not always explicitly addressed within doctoral training. For example, Di noted, “Working as an associate tutor at the university, I’ve learned a lot about how academic expectations here differ from what I was used to. Supervising master’s dissertations also helped me understand the communication style expected in this environment.”

In summary, participants described different ways of understanding employability challenges, which were linked to how they engaged with employability-related activities over the course of their PhD. For some doctoral students, these challenges coincided with delayed or limited engagement in employability-related activities, while for others they were accompanied by more sustained involvement, skill development, and growing confidence over time.

6.1.2 Supervisory Mediation of Employability Development

This theme explores how supervisory engagement and communication shape Chinese doctoral students’ academic confidence, emotional wellbeing, and employability development. It is organised into three sub-themes: (a) Supervisor Responsiveness and Communication, (b) Supervisor-Doctoral Student Emotional Dynamics, and (c) Supervisors’ Role in Career Guidance. These sub-themes describe variation in supervisory engagement and communication, and how

participants experienced this variation in relation to academic progress, emotional support, and employability-related preparation.

6.1.2.1 Supervisor Responsiveness and Communication

Participants described supervisor communication and responsiveness as an important factor shaping their academic progress and sense of direction during the PhD. Some participants cited delays in feedback and unclear communication as factors that impeded their ability to make steady progress in their research and adequately prepare for post-PhD employment opportunities. This inconsistency was described as frustrating and was experienced as making it more difficult to focus on broader goals such as career planning. Both Zizi and Qing offered examples of how the lack of timely feedback disrupted their ability to maintain momentum in their research.

“My supervisor’s feedback is always delayed, sometimes for weeks, and this slows down my entire research process.” (Zizi)

“The delay in my supervisor’s response makes it hard to maintain a steady pace, and I feel like I’m always playing catch-up.” (Qing)

This issue extended beyond academic challenges, affecting broader aspects of students’ career development and future planning. Participants voiced frustration over their supervisors’ inconsistent feedback, which not only “disrupted the research progress” (Ka) but also “made it difficult for them to focus on planning their careers effectively” (Helen).

“My supervisor frequently doesn’t give me feedback in time. Even when I follow up, there’s no response, making it impossible for me to concentrate on planning my career.” (Zizi)

The lack of clear communication between supervisors and students was identified as a significant obstacle to academic progress. Students frequently

expressed uncertainty about how to navigate these interactions, which contributed to prolonged delays in receiving feedback and hindered their research advancement. For instance, Zizi voiced frustration over her inability to request timely feedback effectively: “I want to push my supervisor, but I don't know how to communicate in a way that prevents delays.” Similarly, Helen shared her concerns regarding her supervisor’s infrequent attendance at meetings, which led to confusion and slowed her progress: “My primary supervisor hardly ever attends supervision meetings, and when he does, he raises questions that leave me feeling more confused.”

However, not all participants had negative experiences with supervisor communication. Some highlighted instances where timely and supportive feedback from supervisors positively impacted their progress and confidence. For example, Jason shared how his supervisor’s responsiveness helped him stay on track and feel more assured in his decisions:

“Whenever I send my drafts, my supervisor responds quickly with constructive feedback, which keeps me motivated and clear on what to do next. It’s made a big difference in reducing my stress and helping me feel more confident about my progress.” (Jason)

Taken together, these accounts reflect variation in doctoral students’ experiences of supervisory communication. While some supervisors were proactive, responsive, and instrumental in fostering their students’ academic and career development, others fell short in providing adequate guidance, leaving students feeling frustrated and unsupported. The tension between these experiences illustrates that supervisory relationships are highly variable, and the quality of this interaction can either empower students to thrive or hinder their progress and career planning.

6.1.2.2 Supervisor and Doctoral Student Emotional Dynamics

Participants described supervisors as playing an important role in shaping their emotional experiences during the PhD, particularly in relation to stress, motivation, and overall well-being. While the majority of interactions with supervisors were positive and supportive, some participants did encounter challenges that added a layer of emotional strain.

Many participants who received emotional support and reassurance from their supervisors reported a significantly more positive experience. Supervisors' support not only alleviated feelings of isolation but also promoted a healthier balance between academic pressure and social interaction, fostering a sense of security that allowed students to focus on their research without being overwhelmed by stress and anxiety. Jason and Rose offered examples of such positive experience:

"I'm a sensitive person, and in the past, I needed to see a psychologist. My supervisor encouraged me to participate in more activities, which helped me manage my emotions better." (Jason)

"I tend to isolate myself, and there are times when I feel really down while working on my thesis. My supervisor was always understanding, never pushing me too hard, and he encouraged me to collaborate more with my peers, which helped me feel less isolated." (Rose)

Participants also noted that their supervisors' emotional support played a crucial role in boosting their confidence and managing work-related stress. Di shared how his supervisor's encouragement helped him gain confidence in a part-time teaching role, remarking that the reassurance he received made him feel capable of managing the challenges: "My supervisor calmed me down and encouraged me, which gave me the confidence to handle the job" (Di).

While many participants found their supervisors' support invaluable, not all interactions were as positive. Negative experiences were described in different ways across participants. Ka expressed his frustration, noting that the lack of feedback from his supervisor not only "disrupted the research progress" but also "left him feeling overwhelmed and unsure of how to move forward" (Ka). Similarly, Helen highlighted the emotional burden of her supervisor's sporadic attendance at meetings, which she said, "created more stress than relief" and "made it difficult for her to focus on planning her career effectively" (Helen). Other participants, like Wendy, noted that their supervisor's expectations, such as participating in additional activities, sometimes felt overwhelming: "My supervisor regularly forces me to attend certain activities, which I know are helpful, but at times it just feels stressful."

In addition to these emotional challenges, some participants described turning to alternative sources of support when supervisory relationships felt insufficient. For instance, Helen, despite feeling stressed and unsupported by her supervisor's irregular attendance at meetings, "actively sought advice from other faculty members and peers" (Helen). These accounts reflect how some doctoral students sought support beyond the supervisory relationship during emotionally challenging periods of the PhD.

Taken together, participants described varied emotional experiences within supervisory relationships, ranging from reassurance and confidence to stress and emotional strain during the doctoral process.

6.1.2.3 Supervisors' Role in Career Guidance

Beyond academic support, many participants described supervisors as providing career-related guidance, particularly in relation to post-PhD pathways both within and outside academia. This guidance took multiple forms, "regular discussions about employability" (Di), "advice on skill development" (Hailey),

and “encouragement to participate in networking opportunities” (Helen). By offering insights into both academic and industry roles, supervisors helped students “broaden their career perspectives” (Wendy) and “make informed decisions about their future” (Daisy).

“My supervisor regularly discusses career options with me and provides guidance on what steps I need to take to improve my employability.”

(Wendy)

“My supervisor not only focuses on academic paths but also discusses roles outside academia, which has helped broaden my career options.”

(Di)

Participants described supervisors as supporting employability preparation by providing opportunities to develop relevant skills and gain access to academic networks. Jason expressed his gratitude for his supervisor's proactive involvement, stating:

“After my supervisor learned I was looking for job opportunities, he helped me secure an academic-related part-time job, which has been a great experience.” (Jason)

In addition to facilitating practical experiences, many participants noted that their supervisors helped them expand professional networks, which directly supported their job search and long-term career development. Hailey and Di provided illustrative examples:

“My supervisor always pushed me to attend conferences and network, which helped me meet people who may later offer me opportunities.”

(Hailey)

“My supervisor sometimes sends me the links related to academic events and encourage me to participate in.” (Di)

Taken together, participants' accounts suggest that supervisory relationships were experienced as an important context within which employability development was navigated during doctoral study. Variation in supervisors' responsiveness, emotional support, and career guidance coincided with differences in doctoral students' sense of momentum, wellbeing, and access to employability-related opportunities, highlighting the uneven nature of employability support across supervisory relationships.

6.1.3 Peer Mediation of Employability Development

This theme explores the role of peer relationships in shaping the employability development of Chinese doctoral students in the UK. It is organised into three sub-themes: (a) Peer Information Sharing and Resource Sharing, (b) Insights into Job Markets through the "grey area", and (c) The Dual Impact of Peer Support on Emotional Well-being. These sub-themes illustrate how peer relationships operated in informal and relational ways, providing access to employability-related information and support that was not always available through formal institutional channels, while also giving rise to comparison and pressure.

6.1.3.1 Peer Information and Resource Sharing

Participants described peers as an important source of practical information and resources that supported their academic progress and employability preparation. Peer interactions often provided timely, experience-based advice that complemented or substituted for formal institutional guidance.

Several participants reported that peers helped them navigate procedural or organisational challenges by sharing concrete strategies. For example, Zizi and Ka offered examples of how peer advice helped them navigate academic procedures and manage progress-related challenges.

“My peer suggested I ask my supervisor for feedback by a specific date, and when I asked if I could get feedback by Monday, I actually received it on time.” (Zizi)

“I’m almost at the end of my second year, and I still don’t have ethics approval. After chatting with a peer, I realized I had miscalculated the timeline, which made me feel more relaxed.” (Ka)

In addition to procedural guidance, participants highlighted that informal conversations with peers in shared workspaces often facilitated academic exchange and mutual learning. These interactions provided opportunities to discuss research ideas, methods, and relevant literature, helping participants refine their own work. Helen, for instance, noted:

“In the office, we sometimes discuss our research, and I realized one of my peers was working on a topic very similar to mine. She talked about her research methods, which gave me some new ideas. Afterward, we exchanged useful literature, and it was incredibly helpful.” (Helen)

6.1.3.2 Insights into Job Markets through the “Grey Area”

Beyond general information and resource sharing, participants frequently described peers as a key source of employability-related knowledge that was not openly accessible through formal institutional channels. Several participants referred to this form of information as the “grey area”, using the term to describe informal, privately shared insights about career pathways, job markets, and academic employment structures.

Participants reported that peer conversations provided access to up-to-date and experience-based knowledge about employment conditions, particularly in relation to academic labour markets in China. Di explained that discussions with

peers helped him become aware of perceived disadvantages faced by overseas-trained PhD graduates compared to domestically trained candidates:

“It was through conversations with my peers that I learned about certain job-related information that isn’t openly discussed, like grey area, such as the current employment situation for PhDs in China and the disadvantages overseas PhDs have compared to domestic ones. After learning this, I made targeted efforts to address those gaps.” (Di)

Similarly, William described peer interactions as a primary channel through which he learned about informal academic norms and expectations that were not available through official sources:

“A lot of my job-related information came from conversations with my peers. Many things can’t be found through online searches or openly discussed; they can only be obtained through private conversations. This so-called ‘grey area’ information includes things like the ‘Shimen culture’ in China.” (William)

In addition to structural insights, participants also reported that peers provided concrete information about recruitment requirements and career expectations in both academic and non-academic contexts. Jason, for example, noted that informal discussions with peers helped clarify the qualifications required for lecturer positions:

“I found out about the qualifications needed for lecturer positions through personal friends and office colleagues. We discussed job opportunities and the necessary qualifications.” (Jason)

Yett similarly reflected on how hearing about peers’ job-search experiences informed her own career preparation:

“Talking with others about their job-hunting experiences provided me with valuable insights for my own job search.” (Yett)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that peers were an important source through which doctoral students became aware of employability-related information that was not readily available through formal institutional channels. Through informal conversations and shared experiences, participants described gaining insights into job markets, recruitment expectations, and academic career structures that were otherwise difficult to access or articulate within official provision.

6.1.3.3 Dual Impact of Peer Support on Emotional Well-being

Participants described peer relationships as having a dual emotional impact during their doctoral journeys, functioning as a source of both encouragement and pressure. Peer interactions were frequently experienced as emotionally supportive, while also contributing to comparison and anxiety related to academic progress and employability.

Several participants reported that engaging with peers provided motivation and reassurance, particularly through shared experiences and mutual understanding. Daisy described feeling encouraged when interacting with peers working on similar topics, while Helen noted that informal office conversations motivated her to apply for conferences and remain engaged with professional activities:

“When I meet peers doing similar research, I feel more motivated to continue, and it gives me hope that I’m on the right track.” (Daisy)

“In the office, we sometimes chat about conferences, and my peers encourage me to apply for them together. This motivates me to work harder and keep up with everyone.” (Helen)

Peer relationships were also described as helping participants manage stress and regain focus during challenging periods. Yett reflected that spending time with friends helped her feel more capable of concentrating on her work, while Ka noted that conversations with peers provided clarity and renewed direction:

“When I feel down, I chat with friends or go on a short trip with them. After coming back, I feel more capable of focusing on my work.” (Yett)

“The PhD made me feel confused, and at that time I felt quite unsupported. But after talking with friends, I had new ideas, and putting them into practice made me feel like a new chapter of life had started.”
(Ka)

At the same time, participants also described experiencing pressure and self-doubt through comparison with peers. Several reported feelings of anxiety when observing peers’ academic achievements, such as publishing papers or participating in conferences. Ka and Helen shared:

“Sometimes, when I see that my officemates have already published several high-quality papers, I wonder if I am capable of reaching their level. This makes me feel frustrated and anxious, and I even question whether I am suited for academic research.” (Ka)

“We often discuss our research progress and published papers in the office. Although no one intends to compare, it inevitably makes me feel that I’m not doing well enough. This invisible pressure often makes me anxious.” (Helen)

Others described feeling left behind when peers appeared more actively engaged in employability-related activities. Yett reflected that observing friends’ involvement in internships and conferences heightened her anxiety and affected her academic planning:

“Whenever I see my friends busy with internships or attending various conferences, I feel like I’m falling behind, as if I need to do more to keep up. This feeling increases my anxiety and even affects my regular academic planning.” (Yett)

Taken together, participants’ accounts illustrate how peer relationships were experienced as emotionally complex. While peers provided encouragement, motivation, and a sense of shared experience, they also contributed to comparison, pressure, and anxiety during participants’ doctoral studies.

Across the three sub-themes, participants’ accounts indicate that peer relationships constituted an important part of doctoral students’ everyday employability-related experiences. Through peer interactions, participants described gaining access to practical information, informal insights, and emotional support, while also encountering comparison and pressure linked to academic progress and career preparation. These accounts highlight the relational and informal nature of peer influence during doctoral study, without suggesting uniform or consistently positive effects.

6.1.4 Relationally Embedded Career Decision-Making

This theme explores how family and partner relationships inform doctoral students’ employability planning and career decision-making. It is organised into two sub-themes: (a) Location Preferences and Family Considerations, and (b) Career Guidance and Expectations from Family. Together, these sub-themes describe how participants reported considering family and partner relationships when making decisions about career direction, location, and employability planning.

6.1.4.1 Location Preferences and Family Considerations

For many participants, decisions about where to pursue their careers were closely shaped by family and partner considerations. Participants described weighing factors such as proximity to family members, partners' employment locations, and perceived quality of life when reflecting on post-PhD career plans. As a result, several participants reported adjusting their longer-term career trajectories to accommodate relational and family-related priorities:

“My husband works in Chongqing, so I am also looking for a job near Chongqing after I finish my PhD.” (Helen)

“My family is in China, so I will most likely return there for work eventually. Working in the UK is just temporary to gain experience.” (Jason)

“My partner is Dutch and if we were to choose a comfortable place to live, I think the social welfare in the Netherlands would be much better than in the UK.” (Daisy)

Taken together, these accounts show that decisions about career location were often considered alongside family and partner-related priorities, rather than being shaped solely by employability considerations.

6.1.4.2 Career Guidance and Expectations from Family

Participants described family members as playing an influential role in shaping their career planning and employability decisions. This influence was experienced in different ways, ranging from following clearly defined family expectations to receiving guidance and information about employment opportunities.

Some participants reported that their family members had already made concrete arrangements regarding their future careers, which reduced the perceived need for active job preparation. Qing, for example, described her career planning as largely guided by her parents:

“I don’t need to prepare any job skills; my parents have already arranged everything. After I return to China, I already have a university position arranged, and I just need to follow their plan.” (Qing)

By contrast, other participants described family influence in less directive but still significant ways. Rose, for example, highlighted the expectations her father expressed regarding family priorities, which shaped how she approached career decision-making:

“My dad always says family is more important than career, so I might consider a partner first and then think about finding a job.” (Rose)

Other participants described family involvement as a source of practical guidance rather than direct decision-making. William, for instance, valued the career-related advice he received from his parents, both of whom had academic backgrounds and professional networks: “My parents are professors and know people who can share insights about the job market. I also learn a lot about employment opportunities from them.”

Taken together, participants’ accounts illustrate how career decision-making and employability planning were embedded within family and partner relationships. Decisions about career direction and location were described as being shaped not only by individual aspirations but also by relational considerations, including family expectations, partner circumstances, and access to familial advice and networks. While some participants followed clearly arranged or strongly guided family pathways, others navigated career planning through more indirect forms of familial influence, drawing on guidance and

information when evaluating employment options. These accounts highlight the relational context within which employability-related decisions were approached during doctoral study.

6.1.5 Institutional and Structural Conditioning of Employability

This theme explores how institutional contexts and employment systems shape the employability strategies of Chinese doctoral students. It is organised into three sub-themes: (a) The Role of Institutional Environment, (b) Navigating UK Work Visas and Employability Challenges, and (c) Influences of Shimen Culture. Together, these sub-themes highlight how structural and institutional conditions in both the UK and China shape students' perceptions of opportunity, constraint, and strategic planning.

6.1.5.1 The Role of Institutional Environment

A clear tension emerged in participants' accounts regarding institutional environments and access to employability-related support. Participants described uneven institutional provision, with some reporting structured academic guidance and accessible career resources, while others experienced organisational challenges that hindered both research progress and employability preparation.

Several participants perceived their institutional context as providing limited or inconsistent academic support. Ka, for example, described frustration with an unexpected supervisory assignment, which he felt significantly disrupted both his doctoral progress and his capacity to engage in career planning:

“My school assigned me a supervisor who wasn’t the one I interviewed with. This supervisor doesn’t want to guide me, but the school insisted.

Nearly two years in, and my research has hardly progressed; thinking about career planning seems impossible.” (Ka)

In contrast, other participants described their institutional environments as offering more visible and structured employability-related provision. These participants reported frequent access to career-focused activities, such as workshops, networking events, and employability communications, which contributed to a stronger sense of institutional support. Rose reflected on this experience:

“I often receive emails from the university about activities to improve employability skills. Although I haven’t participated yet, it feels like the university is doing a good job in this area, showing a focus on students’ career readiness.” (Rose)

Participants who perceived their institutions as offering fewer employability resources reported feeling disconnected from career development opportunities. Limited access to information and activities was described as constraining their ability to build employability skills and engage in networking:

“I feel like I’ve missed out on networking and skill-building events that seem more available to students at better-resourced universities.” (Ka)

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how participants experienced variation in institutional environments as shaping their access to academic guidance, career information, and employability-related opportunities. While some participants described institutional contexts that supported career readiness through structured provision, others reported organisational and informational gaps that left them feeling less prepared for the job market. These perceived institutional differences highlight the role of uneven structural support in shaping employability trajectories among Chinese doctoral students in the UK.

6.1.5.2 Navigating UK Work Visas and Employability Challenges

Participants described UK work visa regulations as a significant structural constraint shaping their employability planning. Several participants noted that only specific academic roles, such as Lecturer positions or certain Research Associate and Research Fellow posts, were perceived as meeting Skilled Worker visa requirements. This limited range of visa-eligible roles contributed to uncertainty and influenced participants' post-PhD career strategies.

Some participants interpreted recent changes in visa policies as reflecting a tightening of immigration regulations, which they experienced as reducing opportunities for international doctoral graduates to remain in the UK. Helen reflected on this perception:

“It feels like the UK government is making it harder for international students to stay, especially with the increasing requirements for work visas. This sentiment was particularly strong among students from non-STEM fields, where the pathway to visa-qualifying roles is more limited.”
(Helen)

In response to these constraints, participants emphasised the importance of understanding UK labour market expectations. Several described perceiving the UK job market as valuing a broad range of transferable skills in addition to academic credentials. This perception shaped how they approached employability development during the PhD. Di explained:

“From what I understand about employment in our field in the UK, I think it’s important to demonstrate well-rounded skills because academic achievements alone might not be enough to secure a position here. For example, you need to do a lot of part-time jobs, participate in workshops, or organize activities. I am trying to do more of these things this year to enrich my experiences.” (Di)

Participants expressed varied strategies when navigating the combined pressures of visa requirements and employment expectations. For some, remaining in the UK after graduation was described as conditional upon securing roles that met both visa eligibility and personal financial expectations. Jason, for example, explained his position:

“If I can’t find a Lecturer position after my PhD, I’ll go back to China. I’m getting older, and I don’t want to waste time. In the UK, if I’m not a lecturer, the salary isn’t worth it, especially as a man who needs to consider income.” (Jason)

Across the dataset, participants differed in how clearly they articulated post-PhD career plans and how proactively they engaged in employability preparation. Some participants described having well-defined career goals and actively seeking opportunities to strengthen their profiles, such as gaining work experience or expanding professional networks. Others reported greater uncertainty and adopted a more tentative approach to career planning. For example, Rose shared:

“I haven’t really thought about work yet. I don’t have any clear goals, and I’ll just see what job opportunities come up when the time comes.”
(Rose)

Participants also reported considering alternative or temporary visa pathways as part of their employability strategies. Several mentioned the Post-Study Work (PSW) visa as a short-term option that could provide UK work experience before returning to China. Yett explained:

“The PSW visa is a valuable short-term option, allowing me to gain UK work experience before returning to China.” (Yett)

Others described considering postdoctoral positions as a transitional strategy, even when long-term employment in the UK remained uncertain. Wendy reflected:

“I considered a postdoctoral position, recognising that while it may not guarantee long-term employment in the UK, it offers a valuable interim opportunity to gain field-specific experience.” (Wendy)

Taken together, participants’ accounts illustrate how UK visa regulations functioned as a central structural factor shaping employability planning. While some participants expressed willingness to return to China if suitable visa-qualifying roles were unavailable, others described adapting their strategies through skills diversification, short-term visas, or transitional academic positions. These responses highlight how employability development was shaped not only by individual aspirations, but also by perceived immigration constraints and labour market conditions.

6.1.5.3 Influences of Shimen Culture

In the context of Chinese academia, Shimen culture refers to a mentor-centred, family-like network structured around doctoral supervisors and their students (Zheng et al., 2018). This network often extends beyond direct supervision to include senior and junior students, facilitating long-term relational ties, information exchange, and professional support. Within such networks, access to employment opportunities, career endorsements, and influential contacts is frequently mediated through relational affiliation rather than formal recruitment processes.

For participants who completed their doctoral training entirely in the UK, this mentor-centred system was often described as unfamiliar or difficult to access. Several participants noted that Shimen culture could become a salient

factor when considering a return to China for academic employment. William, for example, reflected:

“In prestigious Chinese universities, many employment positions are often filled by individuals within the Shimen network, leaving fewer opportunities for overseas students like us. This is one of the challenges we face if we decide to return.” (William)

Awareness of Shimen culture influenced how some participants approached their longer-term career planning. For instance, Helen described considering a return to China via a postdoctoral position as a way to gradually build academic connections:

“Since I’m still relatively young, I’m considering returning to China to do a three-year postdoc, which could help me build connections and compensate for not having a Shimen by gradually integrating into the Chinese academic circle.” (Helen)

In contrast, other participants emphasised their intention to leverage their UK doctoral training as a distinctive asset rather than attempting to replicate Shimen-based pathways. Di and Rose, for example, expressed confidence in the value of their international research experience and independent academic profiles:

“I trust the level of doctoral education in the UK. With the research skills I’ve developed, I plan to pursue academic positions abroad and achieve some success before returning to China. This way, I can become a supervisor directly and establish my own Shimen.” (Di)

“I hope that by emphasizing my international perspective and independent research, I can still stand out, even if I don’t have the same network connections.” (Rose)

Taken together, participants' accounts suggest that while UK-educated Chinese doctoral students described limited access to established mentor-centred networks within Chinese academia, they were also highly aware of the role such networks play in academic employment. Participants reported adopting a range of strategies in response, including building alternative connections, pursuing international career trajectories, or drawing on the perceived value of overseas doctoral training.

Overall, participants' accounts indicate that employability planning unfolded within a broader institutional and structural context. Variations in institutional environments, immigration regulations, and culturally embedded employment systems shaped how participants understood and navigated employability opportunities during doctoral study. Taken together, these findings point to the importance of considering how structural conditions intersect with individual and relational factors in shaping employability-related experiences.

6.1.6 Cultural and Lifestyle Adaptation

This theme explores how cultural and lifestyle adaptation shaped participants' professional confidence, sense of belonging, and employability aspirations during doctoral study in the UK. It is organised into two sub-themes: (a) navigating the UK doctoral environment and communication styles, and (b) lifestyle adjustment in the UK. Together, these sub-themes describe how everyday cultural experiences informed participants' engagement with the UK context and their longer-term career considerations.

6.1.6.1 Navigating the UK Academic and Professional Communication Context

Participants described how their perceived fit with the UK's professional and academic communication context shaped their confidence in pursuing

employment within the UK. Some students felt that language and cultural communication differences posed challenges that limited their confidence in engaging fully in UK-based professional roles.

“I still feel that I’m better suited to work in China where I know the norms, language, and communication styles. Here, these differences sometimes make it hard to fully engage at work.” (Hailey)

In contrast, other participants described the UK academic environment as more transparent and easier to navigate, particularly in comparison with professional contexts in China. Rather than viewing communication differences as barriers, these participants perceived the UK’s academic culture as reducing interpersonal complexity, which supported their sense of professional comfort and confidence. Wendy and Yett reflected on this contrast:

“The academic environment here feels more open and easier to navigate. In China, there’s often an emphasis on interpersonal relationships, which can feel complex to manage.” (Wendy)

“I worry about dealing with complex relationships if I work in China; the academic environment in the UK feels more comfortable in that sense, so I really appreciate the UK’s more academic-focused environment.” (Yett)

Taken together, participants’ accounts indicate that perceptions of communication norms and professional culture shaped how they assessed their ability to function confidently within the UK academic environment. While some participants felt constrained by unfamiliar communication expectations, others viewed the relative openness of UK academia as making it a more manageable and attractive context for future employment.

6.1.6.2 Lifestyle Adjustment in the UK

Participants described a range of experiences adjusting to lifestyle differences in the UK, from food and weather to social interactions and personal routines. For some, adapting to the UK's climate and food was challenging. Those who did not enjoy British cuisine or lacked cooking skills found it difficult to maintain a balanced routine, making it harder to feel at ease in their new environment. Helen noted, "I'm still not used to the food here, and cooking doesn't come easily to me, so I often feel out of place."

In contrast, some participants embraced these challenges by finding practical ways to feel more comfortable. For example, students who could cook enjoyed preparing traditional meals, appreciating the health and cost benefits. Daisy shared:

"I may not enjoy Western food much, but cooking my own meals gives me comfort. It's hygienic, economical, and keeps me connected to home."

(Daisy)

For some students, developing close personal relationships in the UK further deepened their sense of belonging. Jason shared his experience of connecting with his partner's family as a way to integrate into local culture:

"My partner is British, and every Saturday we go to his parents' house, cook together, and have dinner. It feels like I'm really becoming part of the community, and it's a great opportunity for me to connect more with local people and understand them better." (Jason)

Together, these accounts illustrate the varied ways participants adjusted to everyday life in the UK, including food practices and social relationships. These experiences shaped participants' sense of comfort and belonging, which in turn

informed how they perceived the UK as a potential place for longer-term study, work, and settlement.

6.1.7 Temporal Shifts in Employability Orientation

This theme explores how doctoral students' perspectives on employability and career development evolve across different stages of the PhD. It is organised into three sub-themes: (a) Initial Adjustment and Emerging Role Awareness, (b) Reflections and Regrets in Later Stages, and (c) Reframing Doctoral Progress and Employability Development. Together, these sub-themes highlight the temporal nature of employability awareness, showing how priorities and strategies shift as students move through their doctoral journeys.

6.1.7.1 Initial Adjustment and Emerging Role Awareness

At the early stage of doctoral study, several participants described difficulties in adjusting to the demands of the PhD, alongside a sense of uncertainty about their emerging role as doctoral researchers and limited attention to employability-related concerns. Students who transitioned directly from master's programmes often felt unprepared for the PhD workload and unsure about both their academic identity and future career paths. Rose, a first-year PhD student, reflected:

"I hadn't even attended my master's graduation when I started my PhD in October. I had just finished my master's thesis, and I still feel so lost. I don't really feel like a PhD student yet, and it was hard to believe that I had already stepped into this new role. I am not confident about my PhD studies." (Rose)

Similarly, for students transitioning from non-traditional or arts-related backgrounds, adjusting to the academic and professional expectations of a PhD program can require an extended period of adaptation. Hailey shared:

“Coming from an arts background, transitioning to the role of a PhD student has been a significant shift. It’s not just about meeting academic demands, but also about redefining my identity within a research-focused academic environment.” (Hailey)

Taken together, these accounts indicate that the early phase of doctoral study involved not only academic adjustment but also a process of identity negotiation, as participants worked to internalise their new role as doctoral researchers. During this period, employability concerns were often secondary to the task of establishing academic confidence and a sense of role legitimacy within the PhD.

6.1.7.2 Reflections and Regrets in Later Stages

As participants progressed through their doctoral studies, many described a shift in how they understood employability and career preparation. Reflections on earlier stages were often accompanied by a sense of regret, particularly regarding time spent without sustained engagement in skill-building or employability-related activities.

“If I had this awareness in the first two years, I would have been willing to try more things that could improve my employability back then. Now, I feel overwhelmed by writing tasks. I always feel like I’m missing the right timing, but really, any time could be the right time. I kind of regret that I played too hard in the first two years. This year feels like it should be my first year of the PhD.” (Yett)

For some, this realization of missed opportunities has made them more aware of the importance of balancing academic responsibilities with skill development. William, now nearing his fourth year, noted, “I didn’t really take on GTA roles to enrich my CV earlier, and now it’s too late to realize it. I also

heard that our department doesn't offer this opportunity to fourth-year PhD students."

Taken together, these accounts suggest that awareness of employability considerations was often recognised retrospectively, as participants reassessed earlier stages of their doctoral journeys and reflected on opportunities that had not been taken up. Such reflections point to how the timing of employability engagement was shaped by doctoral workload, institutional structures, and shifting priorities across different stages of study, contributing to a heightened sense of regret and urgency in later stages.

6.1.7.3 Reframing Doctoral Progress and Employability Development

Some participants in the later stages reframed doctoral study not only as a route to degree completion, but as a period of longer-term professional development encompassing both academic and employability-related skills. They reflected on how doctoral progress could be understood in relation to longer-term professional development, rather than being driven solely by short-term milestones. This reframing was articulated by Daisy, who described a shift in how she understood the purpose and pace of doctoral study:

"My thoughts on this have changed over the years. I often meet new students who worry about how slowly things are progressing in their first year, and they stress about not having achieved this or that. Sometimes I tell them directly, 'Why the rush? You graduate, find a job, then what? You just keep chasing the next goal. Why not take a bit more time and enjoy the process?' I believe the PhD process should be about making the journey meaningful, utilizing the time for growth, rather than just being busy with graduating and finding a job." (Daisy)

Taken together, these three sub-themes demonstrate that doctoral students' orientations towards employability were temporally shaped, evolving

across different stages of the PhD rather than remaining fixed. Early stages were often characterised by uncertainty, role transition, and limited attention to employability, while later stages prompted reflection, regret, and a re-evaluation of earlier choices. For some participants, this led to a more balanced and reflective approach to professional development, in which academic progress and employability were considered in relation to one another rather than in isolation.

Overall, the findings of Study 2 show that employability development for Chinese international doctoral students in the UK is a dynamic and uneven process shaped by the interaction of personal agency, relational mediation, and structural conditions. Participants' engagement with employability was influenced not only by individual motivation and skill development, but also by supervisory practices, peer networks, family expectations, institutional support, visa regulations, and culturally embedded employment systems. Across the doctoral trajectory, students' orientations towards employability shifted over time, moving from early uncertainty and role adjustment to later reflection, regret, and strategic recalibration. Importantly, access to employability-related information, opportunities, and guidance was often mediated through informal and relational channels rather than formal provision, echoing elements of a hidden curriculum within doctoral education. Taken together, these findings highlight employability as a context-dependent and temporally situated process, shaped by both visible structures and less explicit forms of support and constraint across the UK and Chinese contexts.

6.2 Discussion of Study 2

This chapter synthesises the key findings of Study 2, situating them within relevant literature and drawing out implications for theory and practice. It is structured into three sections. Section 7.2.1 interprets the findings through Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, explaining how employability

development is shaped across ecological layers and over time. Section 7.2.2 translates the findings into practical recommendations for doctoral students, supervisors, and higher education institutions (HEIs). Section 7.2.3 reflects on the study's strengths and limitations.

6.2.1 Theoretical Contribution

The findings of this study are contextualized within Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, providing a comprehensive theoretical lens to understand the employability development of Chinese doctoral students. The theory's nested systems model—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—provides a dynamic lens through which the interconnected influences on employability can be understood (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This framework enables a nuanced examination of how relational, institutional, cultural, and temporal forces interact to shape the employability trajectories of Chinese doctoral students, addressing limitations in existing models that tend to treat these influences as separate or static (Fu et al., 2022; Park, 2022; Van Tienoven et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

To illustrate this theoretical integration, Figure 7.1 presents an integrated chrono-bioecological model that synthesises how employability development is shaped through the dynamic interaction of nested ecological systems over time. The model demonstrates how immediate relational environments, institutional and employment structures, and broader socio-cultural norms collectively influence doctoral students' employability trajectories, while also highlighting the temporal evolution of agency and structural conditions across the doctoral journey. By integrating contextual and temporal dimensions, the model extends Bronfenbrenner's framework to capture the complex, multi-layered, and developmental nature of employability in cross-national academic contexts. The following sections unpack each ecological layer in turn.

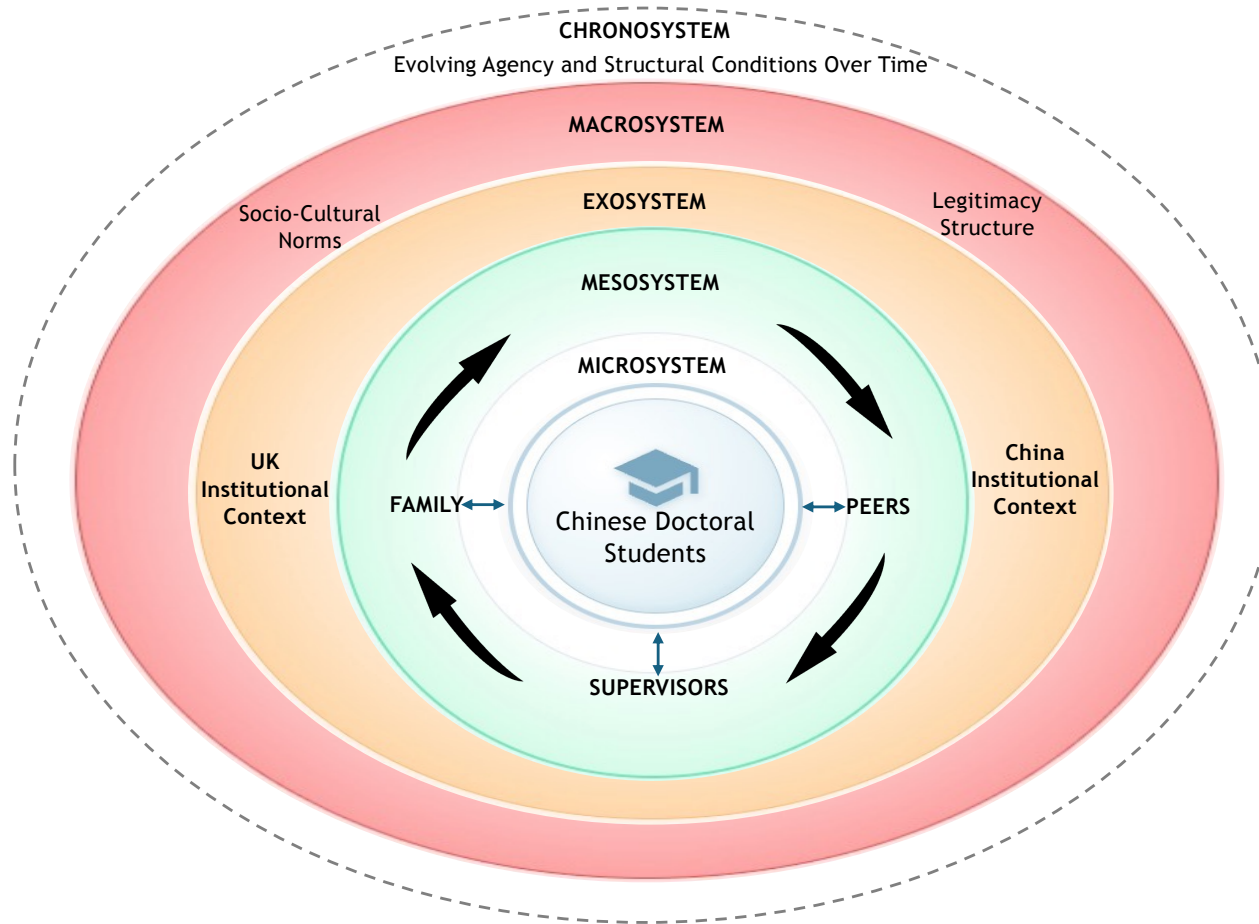


Figure 6.1 An Integrated Chrono-Ecological Model of Employability Development among Chinese Doctoral Students in the UK

6.2.1.1 Microsystem

As illustrated in Figure 7.1, the microsystem represents the immediate relational environments within which Chinese doctoral students' employability development unfolds. In Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, proximal processes refer to the regular, reciprocal interactions between individuals and significant others that drive development over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In this study, the microsystem is conceptualised as the site where proximal processes are enacted through students' sustained interactions with supervisors, peers, and family members—whose support, expectations, and communication patterns directly shape students' academic progress, career planning, and emotional well-being. These recurring interactions constitute the most immediate mechanisms through which employability-related competencies, motivations, and strategies are formed.

Within the microsystem, employability development is shaped through students' direct engagement with academic and professional challenges as mediated by their interactions with significant others. These proximal processes became particularly visible in the ways students navigated academic performance demands and professional expectations. Pressures related to publishing, language proficiency, and high achievement standards did not operate merely as individual difficulties; rather, they functioned as developmental sites in which competencies, professional identities, and strategic orientations were co-constructed. Consistent with Mantai (2015), active engagement in writing, presenting, and publishing contributes not only to academic progression but also to the construction of emerging professional identities. In this study, students' ability to reframe obstacles as opportunities for growth was not an individual disposition alone, but developed through sustained relational mediation.

These recurring relational exchanges illustrate how employability-related capacities are generated through proximal processes operating within the

microsystem. The microsystem thus demonstrates how employability is co-produced through sustained relational processes rather than residing solely within the individual.

Supervisors

Following the relational framing of the microsystem, supervisory relationships constitute one of the most institutionalised and structurally embedded forms of proximal processes within doctoral education. As sustained and formally organised interactions, supervision provides a structured arena in which academic expectations, professional norms, and career orientations are negotiated. The quality of supervisory engagement therefore regulates how effectively proximal processes contribute to students' employability development.

Consistent with existing research highlighting the academic and psychosocial dimensions of supervision (Geng & Yu, 2024; Janssen et al., 2021), supervisory interactions shape students' sense of competence, autonomy, and professional identity. When supervisors fulfil doctoral students' academic and psychological needs—through clear expectations, timely feedback, and emotional affirmation—they act as developmental enablers within the microsystem, strengthening self-efficacy and facilitating the translation of academic progress into employability-related competencies. However, this study advances existing work by conceptualising supervision not merely as a source of support, but as a conditionally enabling mechanism whose impact depends on interactional quality.

Conversely, inconsistent communication and misaligned expectations disrupt proximal processes, generating uncertainty and limiting students' capacity for proactive career planning. This variability demonstrates that the microsystem does not operate as a uniformly supportive environment; rather, the developmental impact of supervision depends on the clarity, reciprocity, and stability of interaction. Supervisory relationships therefore function as a

regulatory mechanism within the microsystem, either amplifying or constraining the formation of employability-related capacities.

Peers

In contrast to the vertically structured and institutionally embedded nature of supervision, peer relationships constitute a horizontally structured and comparatively informal form of proximal processes within the microsystem. Unlike supervisory interactions, which are institutionally embedded and hierarchically organised, peer engagement operates through reciprocal exchanges of information, emotional support, and shared experience. Through sustained interaction, peers mediate interpretations of academic expectations, performance standards, and career trajectories, thereby shaping students' developing professional identities and employability orientations.

Empirical evidence suggests that peer integration and sense of belonging function as important protective factors in doctoral education. Large-scale survey data indicate that stronger peer connection is associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression among doctoral students (Jones-White et al., 2022). Shared experiences and mutual understanding can mitigate isolation, reinforce confidence, and normalise the challenges inherent in doctoral study, thereby contributing positively to employability development.

However, peer dynamics do not operate uniformly as supportive mechanisms. Observing peers' achievements—such as publishing outputs, securing funding, or progressing more rapidly—can clarify professional benchmarks and stimulate motivation. Yet within performance-oriented academic cultures, such comparison processes may also intensify anxiety and self-doubt. Quantitative evidence demonstrates that perceived competition for academic recognition is positively associated with clinically significant anxiety symptoms among doctoral students (Jones-White et al., 2022). Similarly, research on academic career scripts shows that peer comparison can reinforce internalised expectations regarding productivity, timing, and success, thereby

heightening evaluative pressure (Horta & Li, 2024). Peer relationships thus function as dual-form proximal processes, simultaneously enabling growth and amplifying performance-related stress.

In addition to emotional and motivational dimensions, peer interaction serves as an important channel for accessing tacit knowledge regarding recruitment norms, publication expectations, and career progression pathways. Through informal exchange, students encounter and interpret elements of the hidden curriculum (Elliot et al., 2023), even though the broader legitimacy structures underpinning such norms originate beyond immediate relational contexts. In this sense, peers act as mediators of institutional and cultural expectations within the microsystem.

Taken together, peer relationships illustrate how employability development is co-produced through ongoing processes of collaboration, comparison, and emotional regulation. As with supervisory relationships, the developmental impact of peer interaction depends on how relational exchanges are interpreted and integrated into students' evolving sense of competence and legitimacy.

Family

Family relationships constitute a more stable and enduring form of proximal process within the microsystem. Unlike supervisory and peer interactions, which are embedded within academic settings, family and partner relationships extend beyond institutional boundaries and often precede doctoral enrolment, continuing to shape students' career orientations throughout the doctoral journey (Xu et al., 2025).

Participants' accounts indicate that family influence operates through both emotional support and normative expectation. For some students, family members provided encouragement, practical assistance, and explicit career guidance, reinforcing confidence and long-term planning. For others, parental

expectations regarding geographical return, occupational status, or life timing introduced pressure and constraint, particularly when these expectations conflicted with individual aspirations. These relational dynamics demonstrate that family relationships function as dual-form proximal processes within the microsystem. When expectations are aligned, family support stabilises decision-making and strengthens resilience; when misaligned, however, family expectations may complicate career planning and intensify emotional strain.

Importantly, while family operates within the microsystem through direct interaction, the values underpinning these expectations are shaped by broader socio-cultural norms, including collectivist orientations and filial responsibility (Xu et al., 2025). In this sense, family relationships act as a relational bridge through which macrosystem-level values are mediated within students' everyday employability decision-making processes.

Taken together, supervisory, peer, and family relationships demonstrate that the microsystem operates as a differentiated yet interdependent relational ecology through which employability development is enacted. Rather than functioning as uniformly supportive environments, these relational contexts regulate the quality and direction of proximal processes in distinct ways: supervision provides vertically structured academic regulation, peer interaction mediates horizontal comparison and informal knowledge exchange, and family relationships transmit enduring normative orientations shaped by broader socio-cultural values.

By conceptualising the microsystem as a layered configuration of conditionally enabling proximal processes, this study refines Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework. It demonstrates that employability development is not simply influenced by immediate environments, but is co-produced through the interactional quality, structural positioning, and normative orientation of multiple relational actors. In doing so, the study extends the microsystem beyond a descriptive category of "close relationships" and reconceptualises it as

a dynamic regulatory arena in which competence, legitimacy, and career direction are continuously negotiated.

6.2.1.2 Mesosystem

The mesosystem refers to the interconnections among different components of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), highlighting how relationships between supervisors, peers, and family members interact to shape employability development. While the microsystem captures the immediacy of face-to-face interactions, the mesosystem foregrounds how these relational contexts influence and condition one another over time.

In this study, employability development did not unfold within isolated relational domains. Instead, students' experiences were shaped by the alignment—or misalignment—between supervisory guidance, peer norms, and familial expectations (Cao et al.; 2024). For instance, supportive supervisory relationships often strengthened students' confidence to engage more actively with peers, thereby amplifying collaborative learning and information exchange. Conversely, tensions between family expectations and academic feedback created uncertainty in career planning, particularly when geographical mobility or occupational preferences conflicted across relational contexts.

The mesosystem also became visible in how access to employability-related knowledge circulated across relational networks. While supervisors provided formal academic guidance, peers frequently mediated informal insights regarding recruitment practices, publication expectations, and institutional norms. This circulation of information illustrates how proximal processes within one relational domain were reinforced or compensated for by interactions within another.

Importantly, these mesosystemic dynamics were not static. As students progressed through different doctoral stages, shifts in supervisory engagement, peer networks, or family influence altered how relational systems intersected.

Some students who experienced limited supervisory support strengthened peer networks that partially mitigated this gap, demonstrating the adaptive and compensatory nature of mesosystemic interaction.

This analysis highlights the bidirectional and cumulative influence of relationships within the mesosystem, showing how employability development is shaped through the interaction of multiple relational contexts. Positive cross-system alignment—such as cohesive supervisor-peer dynamics—was associated with greater confidence, resilience, and access to employability-related support. In contrast, conflicting messages from family and academic environments often generated tension, uncertainty, and emotional strain.

By conceptualising employability development as emerging from interconnected relational pathways rather than isolated relationships, the mesosystem provides a structural explanation for how support, expectations, and information move across linked social environments. In doing so, this study extends Bronfenbrenner’s framework by demonstrating that the developmental significance of proximal processes depends not only on interactional quality within relationships, but also on how relational systems align, conflict, or reinforce one another over time.

6.2.1.3 Exosystem

The exosystem comprises settings and structural arrangements that do not directly involve the individual as an active participant, yet within which events and decisions occur that influence processes in the individual’s immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In this study, employability development was shaped by such indirect structural forces operating across both UK and Chinese contexts, conditioning students’ perceived opportunity structures beyond their immediate relational environments.

Within the UK context, immigration regulations and skilled-worker requirements functioned as structural constraints shaping postdoctoral

transitions. Participants consistently described post-study work visas as time-sensitive pressures that narrowed or redirected employment strategies, often compelling them to prioritise roles aligned with visa eligibility criteria. These findings align with research demonstrating how immigration frameworks structure international graduates' employment options (Song & Kim, 2022). Although students did not directly participate in policymaking processes, these regulatory systems significantly shaped perceived feasibility, timing, and geographical mobility.

Beyond UK regulatory structures, participants' employability planning was also influenced by culturally embedded academic legitimacy systems rooted in Chinese higher education. Shimen culture, a mentor-centred academic tradition, operates as a relational mechanism conferring professional recognition and institutional legitimacy within Chinese academic labour markets (Dai & Elliot, 2023). While participants were not directly embedded in Shimen networks during their UK doctoral studies, their anticipated career trajectories—particularly in relation to potential return—were frequently evaluated against expectations of academic lineage, mentor affiliation, and institutional prestige. In this sense, Shimen functioned as an exosystemic cultural structure shaping employability imaginary without direct participation.

Instead of conceptualising the exosystem as a single national policy environment, this study reveals a cross-nationally layered exosystem in which doctoral students are simultaneously positioned within multiple evaluative regimes. The UK policy framework imposes temporal and regulatory constraints, while Chinese academic legitimacy structures generate prestige-based expectations concerning lineage and institutional affiliation. These regimes do not operate independently; rather, they intersect to produce compounded structural pressures that shape how employability is imagined, prioritised, and strategically navigated.

By theorising the exosystem as a cross-national configuration of regulatory and legitimacy architectures, this study extends Bronfenbrenner's framework beyond territorially bounded systems. Employability development is thus reconceptualised not merely as adaptation to a single structural context, but as negotiation across overlapping structural logics that operate cross-nationally and temporally.

6.2.1.4 Macrosystem

The macrosystem represents the overarching cultural belief systems, value orientations, and societal norms that characterise a given social context and shape developmental processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Within this broader layer, employability development is embedded in culturally situated definitions of success, legitimacy, and responsibility that define what is considered appropriate, desirable, and recognisable within academic and professional contexts.

At the level of socio-cultural norms, participants' accounts indicated that employability decision-making was not framed solely in terms of individual career advancement. Instead, career planning was frequently negotiated in relation to collective value orientations, including family expectations, relational obligations, and culturally embedded understandings of responsibility and success, which resonate with existing discussions of family-society interrelations in Chinese contexts (Xu, 2025). Decisions regarding geographical mobility, academic versus non-academic pathways, and timing of transition were frequently evaluated through intergenerational considerations and culturally embedded beliefs about family commitment. In this sense, employability was framed not only as a professional project, but also as a relational and moral undertaking.

Beyond value orientations, the macrosystem also operates through what this study conceptualises as legitimacy structures, referring to culturally embedded

norms that define what is recognised as credible, prestigious, and valuable within academic labour markets. Participants' narratives suggested that employability inequities were not primarily produced through explicit institutional exclusion, but through uneven access to these culturally embedded systems of recognition. These included implicit prestige hierarchies, expectations surrounding publication trajectories, institutional positioning, and affiliation networks that signal credibility and status within academic contexts.

Participants frequently described relying on peer networks to access what they referred to as “grey areas” of recruitment norms and career expectations. Such dynamics resonate with discussions of the hidden curriculum in doctoral education, where access to tacit rules and informal evaluative standards is unevenly distributed (Elliot et al., 2023). While this knowledge was often transmitted through microsystem interactions—particularly peer exchange—the underlying evaluative criteria were not generated within these immediate relationships. Rather, they were rooted in broader cultural logics that defined legitimacy, prestige, and recognition within academic labour markets. In this sense, the hidden curriculum operated as a macrosystemic influence, even when encountered through microsystem channels.

In this regard, Shimen culture can be understood as one culturally specific manifestation of this broader legitimacy structure, through which academic authority, lineage, and recognition are symbolically organised within Chinese higher education. Although Shimen networks operate relationally, the underlying prestige logic that structures their significance is rooted in macrosystem-level norms concerning academic lineage and institutional status.

Importantly, for overseas-trained Chinese doctoral students, navigating employability involved positioning themselves within overlapping normative frameworks across national contexts. The challenge was therefore not simply acquiring skills, but interpreting and negotiating culturally differentiated definitions of merit, legitimacy, and professional belonging.

By foregrounding socio-cultural norms and legitimacy structures, this study refines Bronfenbrenner's conceptualisation of the macrosystem by specifying how culturally embedded standards of recognition shape employability trajectories. The findings suggest that inequalities in cross-national academic labour markets are shaped not only by policy and institutional conditions discussed at the exosystem level, but also by culturally normalised definitions of credibility, prestige, and success. In this sense, the macrosystem operates not merely as a background cultural context, but as a value framework that structures how opportunity and recognition are distributed.

6.2.1.5 Chronosystem

The chronosystem represents the temporal dimension of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework, referring to the role of time, transitions, and cumulative experience in shaping developmental trajectories (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Rather than focusing solely on immediate relational environments (microsystem) or structural conditions (exosystem), the chronosystem foregrounds when and how developmental processes unfold across different stages. In this study, employability development is understood not as a static outcome, but as a temporally situated process shaped by shifting priorities, evolving self-understandings, and cumulative structural pressures throughout the doctoral journey.

A central finding of this study is that employability-related agency was not stable across the doctoral trajectory, but evolved over time. In the early stages of doctoral study, participants' efforts were primarily directed toward academic adjustment, identity formation, and mastering research expectations. Limited engagement with employability-related activities during this phase should therefore not be interpreted as passivity. Rather, it reflected a strategic prioritisation of immediate academic transitions. As students progressed toward the later stages of the PhD, however, their focus shifted. Growing awareness of labour market conditions, peer progress, and institutional timelines prompted a

reorientation of attention toward employability preparation. Agency thus moved from being primarily adjustment-oriented to becoming increasingly career-oriented.

This temporal shift suggests that proactivity is better understood as developmentally timed rather than as a fixed personal trait. Agency was not absent in earlier stages; it was differently directed. Employability-oriented action emerged when structural awareness and temporal proximity to transition made it salient.

Participants' reflections and expressions of regret functioned as significant temporal turning points within this developmental trajectory. Moments of realisation—such as recognising missed publication opportunities or delayed career planning—did not merely represent emotional reactions; they marked shifts in awareness and strategic recalibration. In this sense, regret operated as a form of temporal activation, transforming retrospective reflection into forward-looking agency.

From a chronosystem perspective, such moments illustrate how agency becomes more explicitly future-directed at particular temporal junctures. Proactivity did not function as a stable personal trait enacted uniformly across the doctoral journey. Instead, it intensified when shifting temporal conditions—such as approaching graduation or narrowing visa timelines—reshaped students' perceptions of urgency and opportunity. Regret thus signalled a reorientation from reflection on past inaction to deliberate future action.

Temporal dynamics were also shaped by external structural forces, particularly UK immigration policies. Visa regulations and skilled-worker requirements imposed clear time limits that narrowed students' perceived options as they approached the end of their doctoral studies. While visa regulations operate as structural constraints, participants' accounts suggest that their impact intensified over time. The closer students moved toward

completion, the more urgent and restrictive these regulations became, accelerating decision-making and reshaping career priorities.

From a chronosystem perspective, this finding highlights that time does not simply accompany structural conditions; it alters their perceived weight and consequence. Visa policies functioned not only as exosystem-level regulatory frameworks, but as temporal deadlines that reconfigured how students evaluated risk, mobility, and opportunity. As key transitions approached, structural constraints were experienced more acutely, illustrating how time can compress decision horizons and redirect employability strategies.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that employability development is fundamentally shaped by temporal dynamics. The chronosystem in this study does not merely capture life transitions or external events, but reveals how agency, awareness, and structural constraint become consequential at specific moments in time. Employability-related proactivity emerged not as a fixed personal disposition, but as a developmentally timed response to shifting academic priorities, cumulative experience, and intensifying structural pressures.

By conceptualising employability agency as temporally contingent and structurally intensified, this study extends Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem beyond the sequencing of life events to account for the developmental timing of proactivity and the temporal compression of opportunity horizons. In doing so, it foregrounds time as an active mechanism shaping how career strategies are formed, recalibrated, and enacted across the doctoral journey.

This study refines Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework by reconceptualising employability development as a relational, structural, cultural, and temporal process. First, employability is shown to be co-produced through conditionally enabling proximal processes within the microsystem and shaped by cross-system alignments within the mesosystem, rather than residing solely within individual capability.

Second, by distinguishing between regulatory structures (exosystem) and culturally embedded standards of legitimacy (macrosystem), the study clarifies how opportunity horizons are shaped not only by policy constraints but also by normative definitions of credibility, prestige, and success across national contexts. Third, by foregrounding the chronosystem, the study conceptualises employability agency as temporally contingent. Proactivity emerged in response to shifting academic priorities, cumulative experience, and intensifying structural pressures, rather than functioning as a fixed personal trait.

Overall, this integrated chrono-ecological model advances existing employability research by positioning career development as an ecological and developmental phenomenon, shaped by the interaction of nested systems over time.

6.2.2 Practical Contributions

Building on the chrono-ecological framework developed in this study, the following section translates the findings into practical recommendations that acknowledge employability development as a multi-systemic and temporally shaped process. The recommendations are organised across three levels, including doctoral students, supervisors, and higher education institutions (HEIs).

6.2.2.1 Recommendations for Doctoral Students

Adopting a stage-sensitive approach to employability planning across the doctoral journey

Doctoral students are encouraged to recognise that employability development evolves over time and should be aligned with different stages of the PhD. In the early stages, students may prioritise academic adjustment, research design, and data collection, while gradually building awareness of career pathways through low-intensity activities such as attending career talks or informal networking events. In later stages, more targeted engagement in

skill development, academic publishing, teaching opportunities, and job market preparation can be undertaken.

This phased approach reflects participants' experiences of shifting awareness and priorities over time and helps avoid both early overload and late-stage regret, supporting a more balanced integration of academic progress and career readiness.

Reframing employability-related challenges as opportunities for strategic development

Students are encouraged to actively engage with challenges such as academic publishing, language barriers, and professional communication, viewing them as opportunities for skill development rather than solely as obstacles. For example, participating in conferences, part-time teaching, and research collaboration can simultaneously strengthen academic profiles, improve language competence, and enhance professional confidence.

This proactive reframing, evident among participants who demonstrated higher employability engagement, supports sustained motivation and facilitates the development of competencies valued in both academic and non-academic labour markets.

Actively utilising supervisory and peer relationships as key employability resources

Doctoral students are advised to maintain open communication with supervisors regarding both academic progress and career aspirations, seeking guidance on publishing strategies, networking opportunities, and career pathways. Where supervisory support is limited, students may benefit from drawing on peer networks for information sharing, emotional support, and informal learning.

Participants' accounts highlight that peer communities often function as crucial channels for accessing practical employability knowledge, including insights into job markets, institutional procedures, and informal academic norms. Leveraging both supervisory and peer relationships can therefore enhance access to support and reduce feelings of isolation.

Engaging strategically with institutional resources while recognising structural constraints

Students are encouraged to proactively seek out institutional career services, mentoring schemes, employability workshops, and visa guidance to broaden career options and strengthen preparedness for post-PhD transitions. At the same time, developing awareness of structural factors such as visa regulations, labour market expectations, and disciplinary employment conditions can support more informed and realistic career planning.

By combining institutional support with strategic self-directed engagement, doctoral students can better navigate systemic constraints and identify feasible pathways aligned with their personal circumstances and professional goals.

6.2.2.2 Recommendations for Supervisors

Providing Timely and Clear Academic Feedback to Support Career Readiness

Supervisors are encouraged to establish clear expectations regarding feedback timelines and provide timely, specific, and actionable guidance on students' academic work. For example, supervisors can agree with doctoral students on regular supervision meetings and clear timelines for returning written feedback, which can help students plan their research more effectively and avoid prolonged delays.

Timely and transparent communication enables doctoral students to progress more efficiently in their research, alleviating delays that often intensify stress and limit their capacity to engage in employability-related activities. By

improving the consistency of feedback, supervisors can support both academic advancement and the effective integration of career preparation into doctoral trajectories.

Integrating Career Development Discussions into Supervision Practices

Supervisors should actively incorporate career-related conversations into regular supervision meetings, rather than focusing exclusively on thesis progress. This may include discussing potential career pathways within and beyond academia, identifying relevant skill development opportunities, and providing guidance on professional expectations in different employment contexts.

Such ongoing career-oriented dialogue can enhance doctoral students' awareness of employability requirements, clarify future goals, and encourage proactive engagement in activities such as publishing, networking, and professional training. Embedding career guidance within supervision supports students in aligning academic work with longer-term career aspirations.

Facilitating Access to Professional Networks and Career Opportunities

Supervisors can play an important role in connecting doctoral students with academic and professional resources by sharing information about conferences, collaborative projects, part-time teaching roles, and relevant employment opportunities. Where possible, introducing students to professional networks and encouraging participation in scholarly communities can further expand their career prospects.

Such proactive facilitation helps reduce inequalities in access to informal information and opportunities, which many students otherwise rely on peer networks to obtain. By bridging academic training and professional exposure, supervisors can enhance students' practical readiness for postdoctoral transitions.

6.2.2.3 Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Ensuring more consistent employability support across departments

Higher education institutions should work to reduce differences in employability provision between departments and colleges. The findings show that while some doctoral students had regular access to career workshops, networking opportunities, and employability-related information, others experienced limited institutional support.

To address this, universities could establish clearer and more consistent communication systems for doctoral employability activities, such as centralised mailing lists, online platforms, or designated staff responsible for disseminating career-related information within departments. Ensuring a minimum level of employability support for all doctoral students may help reduce inequalities in access to resources and better support career preparation.

Making tacit employability knowledge visible to reduce reliance on “grey area” information

The findings indicate that doctoral students relied heavily on peer networks to access informal employability knowledge, such as information about academic recruitment practices, labour market conditions, and culturally embedded systems such as Shimen culture in China. This knowledge was often described as residing in a “grey area” and was not provided through formal institutional channels.

Higher education institutions could respond by incorporating more transparent and context-specific career guidance into doctoral employability provision. For example, career services could invite academics, postdoctoral researchers, and alumni to share practical insights into academic career pathways in both the UK and China. Providing clearer information about

recruitment expectations, postdoctoral trajectories, and international academic labour markets may help reduce uncertainty and reliance on informal networks.

Providing differentiated and context-sensitive employability support

The findings suggest that doctoral students' employability planning was shaped by diverse factors, including visa restrictions, family and partner considerations, intended geographical mobility, and differing career aspirations within and beyond academia. These varied circumstances meant that students faced distinct constraints and opportunities when preparing for postdoctoral transitions.

Higher education institutions could therefore move beyond uniform employability provision and develop more tailored support for doctoral students. This may include targeted workshops for international students navigating visa-related employment pathways, guidance for those planning to return to China or pursue academic careers within different systems, and individualised career consultations that take personal circumstances into account.

Overall, these practical recommendations highlight the shared responsibility of doctoral students, supervisors, and higher education institutions in supporting employability development. The findings suggest that effective employability preparation requires not only individual proactivity, but also responsive supervisory practices and equitable institutional structures. By strengthening relational support, reducing reliance on informal information channels, and addressing systemic constraints, stakeholders can better support international doctoral students in navigating complex postdoctoral transitions.

6.2.3 Strengths and Limitations

This study offers several methodological and conceptual strengths that enhance its contribution to understanding the employability development of Chinese doctoral students in the UK. First, it integrates Bronfenbrenner's

Bioecological Systems Theory with culturally specific academic practices, such as Shimen culture, enabling a nuanced examination of how multi-level ecological forces shape employability development. By situating employability within a culturally embedded framework, the study extends longstanding distinctions between individual and institutional conceptualisations of employability (Harvey, 2001) and builds upon recent ecological analyses of doctoral employability (e.g., Wang et al., 2024). In doing so, it provides a contextually grounded account of how employability is negotiated within international doctoral trajectories.

Second, the study demonstrates practical relevance by engaging with real-world structural conditions, including visa regulations, institutional disparities, and cross-cultural adaptation. Rather than abstracting employability from its policy and institutional contexts, the findings demonstrate how doctoral students' career planning is shaped by constraints and opportunities embedded within broader structural environments. This, in turn, generates empirically grounded recommendations for doctoral students, supervisors, and higher education institutions.

Third, the focus on participants from the College of Social Sciences enables an in-depth exploration of discipline-specific employability challenges, a dimension that has received comparatively less attention within a literature that often prioritises STEM contexts. Although the study is disciplinary in scope, the inclusion of participants from multiple UK universities allows for the identification of recurring patterns across diverse institutional environments. These patterns generate analytical insights that may resonate with broader populations of international doctoral students, while remaining attentive to contextual specificity.

Finally, the study's explicit engagement with temporal dimensions—such as evolving immigration policies and shifts in employability awareness across doctoral stages—adds conceptual depth by foregrounding the chronosystem within doctoral employability development. By highlighting how employability

perceptions and strategies evolve over time, the study reinforces a process-oriented understanding of employability as embedded within ongoing doctoral transitions rather than as a fixed outcome at the point of graduation.

Despite these strengths, one limitation should be acknowledged. Although participants were drawn from different stages of doctoral study, the research adopts a cross-sectional design and does not follow the same individuals over time. Consequently, the study cannot directly examine how employability strategies and perceptions evolve within individuals across the doctoral trajectory.

Overall, while acknowledging the limitation, the study provides a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of international doctoral students' employability development.

7. General Discussion and Conclusion

This final chapter draws together the findings from Study 1 and Study 2 to offer an integrated interpretation of how Chinese international doctoral students in the UK navigate transitions within and beyond the doctoral journey – and how these transitions dynamically shape, and are shaped by, their employability development. Rather than reiterating empirical results, the discussion moves to a higher level of abstraction: it examines how the two studies, when read in relation to one another, collectively advance conceptual understanding, extend the theoretical lenses adopted in this thesis, and generate implications for policy, institutions, and individuals.

The chapter proceeds by first synthesising the two datasets through the theoretical perspectives that informed them, showing how doctoral transitions and employability development are co-constructed across multiple levels of influence, before outlining the theoretical and practical contributions of the research. It then reflects on methodological considerations, delineates the limitations and future directions, and concludes by offering a final conceptual statement on the nature of doctoral transitions and employability development for international students.

7.1 Synthesising Findings Across Studies 1 and 2: A Multilevel Analysis of Chinese International Doctoral Students' Transitions and Employability Development

This section synthesises the findings from Study 1 and Study 2 to develop a multilevel understanding of Chinese international doctoral students' transitions within the UK context. While Study 1 examined the completed trajectories of graduates who had successfully navigated multiple transitions and secured employment, Study 2 explored the ongoing experiences of current doctoral students managing employability-related challenges. Together, these studies

offer complementary temporal and contextual perspectives – revealing how transitions evolve from uncertainty to agency and from challenge to capability – and extend prior research that has often examined specific dimensions of doctoral experience in isolation (e.g., Beasy et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024; Wang & Liardét, 2025), by integrating cross-phase and multi-system perspectives on international doctoral transitions.

The synthesis adopts a multilevel analytical approach integrating insights across individual growth, relational dynamics, institutional contexts, and cultural adaptation. While this chapter draws on multiple frameworks, Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981) serves as the primary analytical lens, offering a process-oriented understanding of how Chinese international doctoral students navigate change and adaptation. In particular, the 4S system (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies) provides a basis for comparing how graduates and current doctoral students appraise and respond to transition challenges, while the three-phase model (Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving Out) maps their developmental stage differences across the doctoral journey.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) situates these individual and relational processes within wider nested structural and cultural systems. While Schlossberg's framework and the Four Stages of Learning illuminate how students experience and respond to transitions, the bioecological perspective highlights how these processes are shaped by broader institutional, regulatory, and sociocultural environments. In this thesis, such influences include culturally embedded academic norms, such as Shimen culture in China, as well as structural conditions within the UK context, including visa and immigration policies. The chronosystem further emphasises how evolving policy environments and shifting developmental stages interact over time, shaping doctoral transitions and employability trajectories. By foregrounding these multi-layered influences, the bioecological framework helps explain why

similar levels of effort or competence may result in different employability outcomes across contexts.

Integrating these perspectives, the synthesis bridges Study 1's retrospective narratives with Study 2's ongoing experiences, illustrating how doctoral transitions and employability development unfold within complex ecological contexts. To visually represent this integrated analysis, Figure 8.1 outlines a multilevel framework capturing how doctoral transitions and employability development unfold across four interconnected dimensions: individual development, relational dimensions, institutional and structural contexts, and cultural and identity adaptation.

The model also maps these dimensions onto the two theoretical lenses guiding this chapter – Schlossberg's Transition Theory on the left, highlighting the roles of Self, Situation, Support, and Strategies, and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory on the right, emphasising microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem influences. Together, the diagram illustrates how transitions are co-constructed through the interaction of person-level agency, proximal relationships, institutional structures, and broader cultural systems. Importantly, the four dimensions shown in the figure operate in reciprocal relation, dynamically shaping and reinforcing one another rather than functioning as separate domains. The following subsections unpack this synthesis across the four interrelated dimensions outlined above.

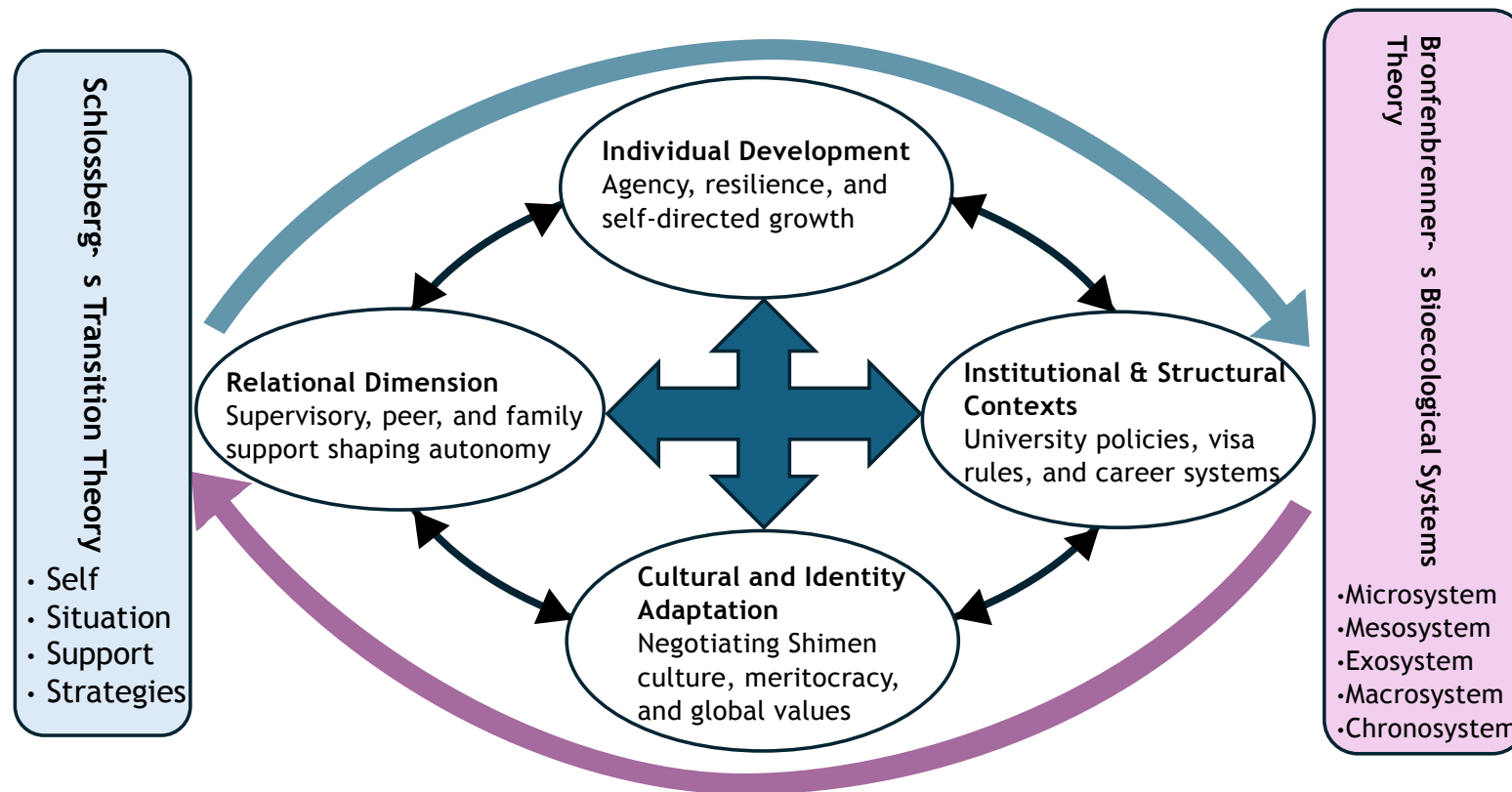


Figure 7.1 A Multilevel Integrative Framework of Chinese International Doctoral Students' Transitions and Employability Development

7.1.1 From Challenge to Growth: Individual Development

Across both studies, a central continuity lies in how students transformed challenges into drivers of development. In Study 1, graduates retrospectively described academic, social and cultural transitions as catalysts for self-regulation, perseverance, and confidence – skills that ultimately underpinned their employability. Similarly, in Study 2, current doctoral students reframed pressures related to publishing, language barriers, and time constraints as opportunities for professional growth. This transformation suggests that tension and discomfort, rather than being purely detrimental, can act as productive forces that stimulate reflection, self-regulation, and adaptive strategy-building (Naidoo, 2015).

However, the nature of these challenges differed in terms of controllability, which corresponds to Schlossberg's (1981) classification of transition types based on predictability and control (see Section 2.1.1.1 for a detailed discussion of this framework). Some were controllable, such as language barriers or academic writing difficulties, which could be addressed through individual effort (e.g., joining writing workshops, practicing academic communication) and proactive learning strategies. These experiences align with the theory's notion of "Anticipated Transitions"—predictable changes that can be prepared for and managed through planning and resource mobilisation. In contrast, uncontrollable challenges – such as abrupt changes in UK visa policies (e.g., adjustments to the Post-Study Work visa duration), unexpected supervisor turnover, or global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic – represent "Unanticipated Transitions". Such events cannot be resolved through direct problem-solving alone; they require students to mobilise adaptive resources (e.g., seeking alternative career pathways, building cross-institutional academic networks) and recalibrate their expectations in response to external constraints. These distinctions highlight that agency in transition is neither uniform nor static but contextually enacted

through a dynamic balance between personal initiative (for controllable challenges) and adaptive resilience (for unanticipated transitions).

Beyond the distinction between controllable and uncontrollable challenges, these adaptive processes were also shaped by the chronosystem – the temporal dimension of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory. Students’ capacity to navigate transitions did not emerge suddenly but accumulated over time, as repeated exposure to academic, linguistic, and interpersonal challenges gradually strengthened their self-regulation, confidence, and resilience. Early experiences with uncertainty or discomfort often acted as formative training grounds: the strategies developed to cope with initial academic or linguistic barriers later enabled students to respond more effectively to complex pressures such as publication demands or career-related uncertainty. In this sense, agency was a temporally layered achievement, deepening as students progressed through different phases of the doctorate.

Temporal context also shaped the specific challenges faced by each cohort. Participants in Study 1 completed their doctorates during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, contending with prolonged disruptions to supervision, mobility, networking and research plans. By contrast, most Study 2 participants began their PhDs when the pandemic had largely subsided; while some experienced residual effects, their transitions were more strongly shaped by post-pandemic structural conditions such as tightened visa rules and increased competition for academic positions. These differences illustrate how the timing of broader events intersects with the accumulation of individual experience to shape students’ adaptive trajectories.

Furthermore, the process of transforming challenges into growth was mediated by both individual predispositions and relational supports. When viewed across both studies, personality orientation and emotional resilience appeared to influence how effectively students mobilised strategies and resources during transition (Luo et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2021). Graduates in Study

1 generally demonstrated proactive, open, and confident dispositions that facilitated self-regulation and problem-solving, whereas participants in Study 2 displayed a wider range of tendencies – from highly self-driven to more reserved or hesitant – reflecting varied capacities for coping with uncertainty. Similarly, those with prior international experience tended to exhibit stronger adaptability when facing linguistic or supervisory challenges, while first-time international students often required longer adjustment periods and greater emotional reassurance. Yet, such agency was rarely developed in isolation – it was scaffolded by social, academic, and familial relationships that provided critical psychological and instrumental resources. Supervisory guidance offered intellectual direction and validation that helped students regain confidence during research uncertainty; peer interactions supplied emotional reassurance and a sense of belonging; and family or partner encouragement provided both financial stability and emotional security, enabling students to take professional risks such as participating in unpaid academic projects.

These differentiated forms of support demonstrate that agency in transition is relationally co-constructed rather than individually sustained. This pattern aligns closely with Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory – particularly the Self and Support dimensions within the 4S system (see section 2.1.1.3)– illustrating how internal psychological resources (such as confidence, self-efficacy and resilience) interact with external networks (such as supervisors, peers and institutional structures) to shape adaptive outcomes. It also resonates with Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological view that proximal social processes form the immediate context through which individuals negotiate and enact agency during transition.

Overall, these findings suggest that personal transformation in doctoral transitions emerges through the cumulative development of agency over time, sustained by relational support. From a bioecological perspective, such development occurs through sustained engagement in proximal relationships within students' immediate academic and social environments. In line with

Schlossberg's Transition Theory, the Self and Support dimensions are mutually reinforcing: agency develops through experience but is consolidated through relational processes. The next section turns to how these relational networks evolve across time.

7.1.2 Relational Dimension in Transition: From Dependence to Autonomy

Building on the individual-level development discussed in Section 8.1.1, this section shifts the analytical focus to the relational dimension – how Chinese international doctoral students' interpersonal networks evolve throughout the doctoral journey and contribute to their adaptive capacity. The findings across both studies reveal that relationships with supervisors, peers, and families are not static sources of help but dynamic systems that co-develop alongside students' growing agency. Initially characterised by dependence and reassurance-seeking, these relationships gradually transform into collaborative and confidence-building partnerships that reinforce students' academic and professional autonomy.

This shift suggests that relational resources do not facilitate adjustment automatically. Rather, their developmental value depends on how doctoral students interpret, access, and mobilise support as their needs and capacities change over time. In this sense, doctoral transition involves not merely receiving help but learning to convert available support into collaborative energy that strengthens autonomy. For instance, several participants noted that support from supervisors or peers did not initially ease their difficulties; only when they became more aware of their needs and learned to seek targeted advice did such support begin to facilitate adjustment.

From a bioecological perspective, these relational dynamics can be understood as proximal processes within the microsystem – the immediate social environments in which development unfolds (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Relationships functioned as developmental catalysts: in early stages they provided emotional security and belonging; over time they enabled intellectual collaboration through dialogue and shared problem-solving; and as students approached completion, they contributed to identity affirmation and professional confidence.

This pattern also aligns with Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981), particularly the interaction between Self and Support within the 4S system. Supervisory guidance, for instance, became most effective when doctoral students actively engaged with feedback and used it to shape their own decisions, rather than relying on support passively. In this way, relational transition involved not merely receiving help but transforming support into collaborative energy that reinforced autonomy. This relational shift can be further understood through the three phases of transition – Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving Out – which structure the evolving role of support across the doctoral journey.

In the early Moving In phase, relational support primarily served as a foundational safeguard. Students faced anticipated transitions such as adapting to academic conventions (e.g., critical thinking, independent research) and cultural norms (e.g., language use, social etiquette). Study 2 participants frequently described relying on supervisors for clear research direction, on peers – particularly senior Chinese students – for sharing tacit academic norms, and on family members or partners for emotional reassurance to alleviate early-stage isolation. At this point, relational support was largely passively received, as students had yet to develop the agency or confidence to selectively mobilise different forms of support.

As students entered the Moving Through phase, relational dynamics began to shift from dependence to collaboration. With doctoral work becoming increasingly complex and self-directed, support networks were no longer approached as sources of ready-made answers but as spaces for dialogue,

reflection, and co-construction. This relational shift was most evident among Study 1 graduates and doctoral students in Study 2 who were entering the thesis-writing stage of their PhD. As they gained experience and confidence, supervisory meetings became less about seeking direction and more about engaging in joint reflection and scholarly dialogue. Rather than asking “what should I do next?”, these students increasingly discussed “how can we refine this argument together?”, signalling a move toward intellectual partnership. This evolution reflected both growing academic maturity and a subtle redefinition of authority, as participants learned to negotiate feedback, articulate independent perspectives, and position themselves as emerging members of the academic community.

Similarly, peer interactions developed into critical friendships that supported both intellectual progress and emotional resilience (Lorenzetti et al., 2023). As participants became more experienced, peer communication moved beyond basic reassurance toward the sharing of useful information and constructive feedback on writing, conferences, and career preparation. These exchanges offered a more collaborative and forward-looking form of support, helping students navigate uncertainty together rather than in isolation. By contrast, family and partner relationships remained relatively stable in function, continuing to provide emotional security rather than direct academic input. However, this steady background support was often crucial in sustaining motivation during demanding phases of research or publication.

Importantly, the shift toward collaboration unfolded at different paces. Some students quickly engaged supervisors and peers as active contributors to their thinking and writing, while others required longer to feel comfortable initiating such exchanges. Despite these differences in timing, most participants eventually reached a turning point at which relational support became dialogic and empowering rather than directive or protective — marking the emergence of relational agency in their doctoral transition.

However, the capacity to reach this turning point was shaped not only by individual readiness but also by structural conditions. Access to informal networks – through which the hidden curriculum of doctoral study is transmitted (Elliot et al., 2016) – varied considerably among participants. In this sense, relational agency was not solely an individual developmental achievement but also an outcome mediated by unequal access to meaningful social participation.

Across both studies, students who possessed greater linguistic confidence, familiarity with UK academic interactional norms, or prior exposure to Western doctoral cultures were better positioned to participate in informal peer discussions, post-seminar conversations, and unstructured academic exchanges (Ma, 2020; Yang & MacCallum, 2022a). These spaces, though often perceived as peripheral, functioned as critical sites for learning how to interpret feedback, negotiate academic voice, and access tacit information about publishing, conferences, and career pathways. For those who struggled to enter such networks, relational engagement remained more directive or protective for longer, limiting opportunities for collaborative participation and delaying the development of relational agency.

This pattern highlights a broader institutional tension. Although universities formally promote doctoral independence and peer learning, they often rely implicitly on informal networks to facilitate these outcomes, while leaving access to such networks largely to individual initiative (Elliot, 2023). In doing so, responsibility for navigating the hidden curriculum is shifted onto students themselves, arguably disproportionately disadvantaging international doctoral students who face linguistic, cultural, or interactional barriers. From an equity perspective, this reliance on informal relational spaces without corresponding institutional scaffolding risks reproducing unequal opportunities for autonomy and professional development, rather than equalising them.

Seen through this lens, relational agency emerges not merely from individual readiness but from structurally mediated access to meaningful

participation. The transition from dependence to autonomy is thus both a developmental and an institutionally mediated process.

In the Moving Out phase, relational support evolved from practical assistance to symbolic affirmation, marking the consolidation of students' professional and personal identities. Viewed across both studies, this transformation reflected a shared trajectory from dependence to autonomy. Graduates in Study 1 recalled that in the later stages of their doctorate – particularly as they approached completion – recognition and affirmation from supervisors and peers helped consolidate their confidence as independent researchers. By contrast, current doctoral students in Study 2 were still in the process of building this confidence – learning to trust their own judgement and position themselves for future careers as they approached thesis completion.

Across these experiences, relationships with supervisors, peers, and families no longer centred solely on immediate academic tasks but became sources of recognition and stability. Supervisors' recognition of scholarly maturity, peers' acknowledgement of shared achievements, and family or partner encouragement all contributed to a deepened sense of belonging and purpose. Rather than marking a simple endpoint, this phase represented a significant reorientation – a movement toward greater professional autonomy and identity consolidation. Students were increasingly recognised as independent researchers, yet this autonomy remained in formation rather than fully settled. While earlier anxieties during the doctorate were often rooted in doubts about competence, later uncertainties reflected the open-ended nature of professional identity development.

Taken together, these findings illustrate the central role of relational dimension in shaping doctoral development. Through continuous negotiation and mutual adaptation, students evolved from dependence to collaboration, and from collaboration to autonomy. This evolution not only consolidated their academic and professional confidence but also laid the interpersonal foundation

upon which institutional and structural influences operate — an aspect examined in the following section.

7.1.3 Institutional and Structural Contexts: Negotiating Opportunities and Constraints

Building on the relational dimension discussed in Section 8.1.2, this section turns to the institutional and structural environments that framed Chinese international doctoral students' transitions. Across both studies, participants' adaptive experiences were not only shaped by personal and relational factors but also by the institutional systems and broader policy structures within which they operated. These environments created uneven terrains of opportunity — offering valuable resources while simultaneously imposing systemic constraints that students had to navigate strategically.

From the perspective of Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, institutional and structural conditions constitute key aspects of Situation and Support, shaping how individuals appraise change and mobilise coping resources. Within Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological framework, these influences operate primarily at the mesosystem and exosystem levels, where institutional practices and policy environments indirectly yet powerfully structure developmental possibilities. Importantly, both frameworks suggest that agency does not operate in isolation from structure: adaptive outcomes depend not merely on the availability of institutional resources, but on how students interpret, access, and strategically engage with them within specific structural constraints.

Study 1 graduates frequently recalled how institutional affordances — such as consistent supervision, access to research training, and opportunities for teaching or conference participation — supported both academic growth and early employability development. These experiences offered not only material support but also symbolic validation, reinforcing their sense of belonging within the academic community. In contrast, Study 2 participants reported more

uneven access to such opportunities across departments and disciplines. Some described employability training as overly generic or geared toward domestic students, while others encountered gaps in communication regarding international career pathways or visa-related guidance. Consequently, agency was often exercised within restrictive institutional structures rather than in open fields of choice. To cope, students developed self-directed strategies – such as consulting supervisors for visa advice, joining informal peer groups to exchange employment information, or independently searching for research assistantships—to fill these institutional gaps. Rather than operating in fully supportive environments, many students navigated fragmented institutional systems. Their agency therefore emerged not from open opportunity, but from strategic adaptation within constraint.

Institutional and structural factors also extended beyond universities, linking to broader national and cross-national systems that governed students' academic and career trajectories. Visa regulations, funding schemes, and host-country immigration policies often introduced uncertainty that compressed students' decision timelines and limited post-study options (Song & Kim, 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Meanwhile, home-country academic systems – particularly hierarchical recruitment practices such as Shimen networks – created further layers of structural inequality (Zheng et al., 2018; Liu & Dong, 2025).

Although many Study 1 graduates described their success as a matter of “luck”, closer examination suggests that their institutional preparedness and networked visibility positioned them more favourably within competitive academic structures. Those who planned to return to China had strategically strengthened their competitiveness by publishing multiple papers prior to graduation, recognising that academic output served as a critical credential within China's Shimen-based recruitment culture. In contrast, current doctoral students in Study 2 continued to perceive such structural inequalities as ongoing challenges, particularly when lacking similar institutional access or publication opportunities. These cross-study contrasts illustrate that structural transitions

are not uniformly experienced but are mediated by access to institutional capital and by students' capacity to transform constraints into adaptive strategies.

Overall, the findings highlight that institutional and structural systems functioned as meso-level scaffolding in doctoral transition – enabling growth for some while constraining flexibility for others. Rather than operating as passive backdrops, these systems actively shaped students' developmental possibilities, requiring ongoing negotiation between agency and structural conditions.

Importantly, institutional dynamics did not operate independently from students' personal and relational worlds, but intersected with cultural orientations and value systems that shaped how success, legitimacy, and opportunity were interpreted. In this sense, institutional adaptation was inseparable from cultural negotiation. The next section therefore examines how cultural values and identity processes further mediate doctoral transition and employability development.

7.1.4 Cultural and Identity Adaptation: Negotiating Self and System

Building on the institutional analysis presented in Section 8.1.3, this section turns to the cultural and identity-related processes that shaped Chinese international doctoral students' adaptation and employability development. Across both studies, participants' narratives revealed that transition was not only an academic or institutional journey but also a deeply cultural and identity-oriented negotiation.

Across both studies, participants described a gradual process of navigating differences between Chinese and UK academic cultures. They came to understand that while Chinese academia often values relational hierarchy and deference to authority, the UK system expects greater independence, critical

engagement, and open discussion (Lou, 2024). Over time, students learned to balance these expectations—maintaining respect for supervisors while expressing their own views more confidently and adjusting their communication style to fit a more dialogic academic environment. This gradual adjustment enhanced their confidence and sense of academic belonging. It was not simply about adopting Western norms but about finding a comfortable middle ground between the two systems (Elliot et al., 2016; Bui, 2021). Through this process, students developed a more flexible and confident academic identity, which also contributed to their preparedness for future employment within global academic and professional settings.

Beyond academic adaptation, cultural frameworks also shaped how students understood and pursued employability. Within the Chinese academic system, Shimen culture — a mentor-based professional hierarchy — was both a resource and a constraint (Dai & Elliot, 2023; Wang et al., 2025). Graduates in Study 1 who had maintained active connections with their supervisors and home-country networks found smoother re-entry into Chinese academia. Yet several also reflected on the exclusivity of Shimen relationships, acknowledging that such networks may privilege internal candidates and disadvantage those educated abroad. Study 2 participants were acutely aware of these dynamics; some explicitly planned to “build connections” after returning to China to bridge this gap, while others expressed frustration in the face of entrenched hierarchies. These perceptions demonstrate that employability development was embedded in unequal cultural structures of opportunity, where relational and symbolic capital could outweigh formal credentials.

This interpretation draws on Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory (2005), particularly the macrosystem, which encompasses enduring cultural values, traditions, and societal norms that shape individuals’ developmental contexts. In this study, such macrosystemic influences — ranging from the Shimen tradition within Chinese academia to the meritocratic ethos of UK higher education — constituted the broader cultural backdrop against which students

negotiated their academic, cultural, and employability development. This process also resonates with Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981), specifically the Self dimension of the 4S system, which highlights how individuals' identity, values, and self-perceptions influence their appraisal of and adaptation to change. In this sense, cultural and identity negotiations are not merely contextual challenges but central to students' evolving sense of self and professional direction during transition.

At the same time, these cultural systems and institutional hierarchies function as part of the Situation context in Schlossberg's framework — structural conditions that both enable and constrain agency development and employability progression throughout the doctoral journey. Together, these perspectives illuminate how Chinese international doctoral students' transitions and employability trajectories are shaped by both the internal reconstruction of self and the external negotiation of cultural systems, reflecting the deeply intertwined nature of individual agency, cultural identity, and structural opportunity.

Taken together, these findings underscore that cultural and identity adaptation is not a peripheral aspect of doctoral transition but a central mechanism through which Chinese international students develop both academic confidence and employability readiness. Within this process, employability development emerges not simply as the acquisition of skills, but as a form of identity work grounded in self-understanding and contextual awareness — a process that connects personal growth with broader institutional and cultural systems explored throughout this chapter.

7.1.5 Integrative Perspective: Interconnected Dimensions of Transition and Employability Development

This synthesis demonstrates that Chinese international doctoral students' transitions and employability development are structurally conditioned,

relationally mediated, culturally negotiated, and individually enacted. Rather than unfolding as linear progressions, these processes emerge through dynamic interaction across multiple ecological layers, where change in one domain reverberates across others.

Agency, as revealed across both studies, is not an isolated attribute but an ecological achievement. At the individual level, challenges catalysed growth through reflection and self-regulation; at the relational level, supervisory and peer interactions scaffolded confidence and autonomy; at the institutional level, opportunities were unevenly distributed; and at the cultural level, values and identity orientations shaped how success and legitimacy were interpreted. Agency therefore emerged not as independent action, but as negotiation within layered systems of constraint and possibility.

Notably, participants in Study 1 – all of whom had successfully completed their doctorates – frequently described their enabling relational and institutional conditions as matters of “luck,” particularly in encountering supportive supervisors, timely advice, or access to informal opportunities. However, these accounts suggest that such advantages were not purely accidental. Access to guidance, visibility, and informal academic networks was unevenly distributed across institutional contexts, shaped by departmental cultures and relational positioning. In this sense, what appeared as individual fortune often reflected structured differences in access to institutional and relational resources. This contrast also helps explain why some participants in Study 2, who lacked comparable access, experienced greater uncertainty or structural constraints in their employability development. Together, these findings indicate that employability development cannot be understood solely as an outcome of individual effort, but must be situated within broader institutional and policy frameworks that mediate opportunity.

Together, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory enable a relational-ecological understanding of

doctoral transition and employability development as interconnected developmental processes rather than discrete outcomes. Schlossberg's 4S framework foregrounds how students mobilise Self and Support in response to changing Situations across different phases of the doctoral journey, while Bronfenbrenner's ecological lens situates these adaptive processes within nested relational, institutional, and cultural systems. In this integrated view, both transition and employability are understood not as isolated milestones, but as evolving configurations of identity, strategy, and opportunity within shifting structural conditions.

For example, an international doctoral student may seek to enhance her employability by taking on a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) role. Yet this decision is rarely straightforward. Intense academic pressure—particularly in the absence of timely supervisory feedback—can redirect her cognitive and emotional resources toward safeguarding doctoral progress rather than expanding professional experience. At the same time, visa uncertainty and the prospect of returning to China complicate the perceived value of such roles. If long-term employment in the UK appears unlikely, the strategic worth of GTA experience must be reassessed in relation to domestic academic expectations and recruitment norms.

What emerges is not a simple trade-off, but a layered negotiation across systems: individual motivation intersects with supervisory practice (microsystem), institutional opportunity structures (mesosystem), and immigration and labour-market regimes (exosystem and macrosystem). Employability development thus unfolds within a dynamic ecology of competing demands rather than as the product of individual effort alone.

Ultimately, this synthesis reframes transition and employability not as individual achievements, but as negotiated accomplishments within stratified institutional ecologies. In doing so, it challenges deficit narratives of

international doctoral students and foregrounds their adaptive agency within structurally mediated opportunity landscapes.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis makes four interrelated theoretical contributions that advance a process-oriented and multi-system understanding of international doctoral transition and employability development. Figure 8.2 offers an overview of these contributions and shows how they connect across individual, relational, institutional, and structural levels. The figure serves as a visual reference to support coherence across the chapter and to guide the reader through the discussion that follows.

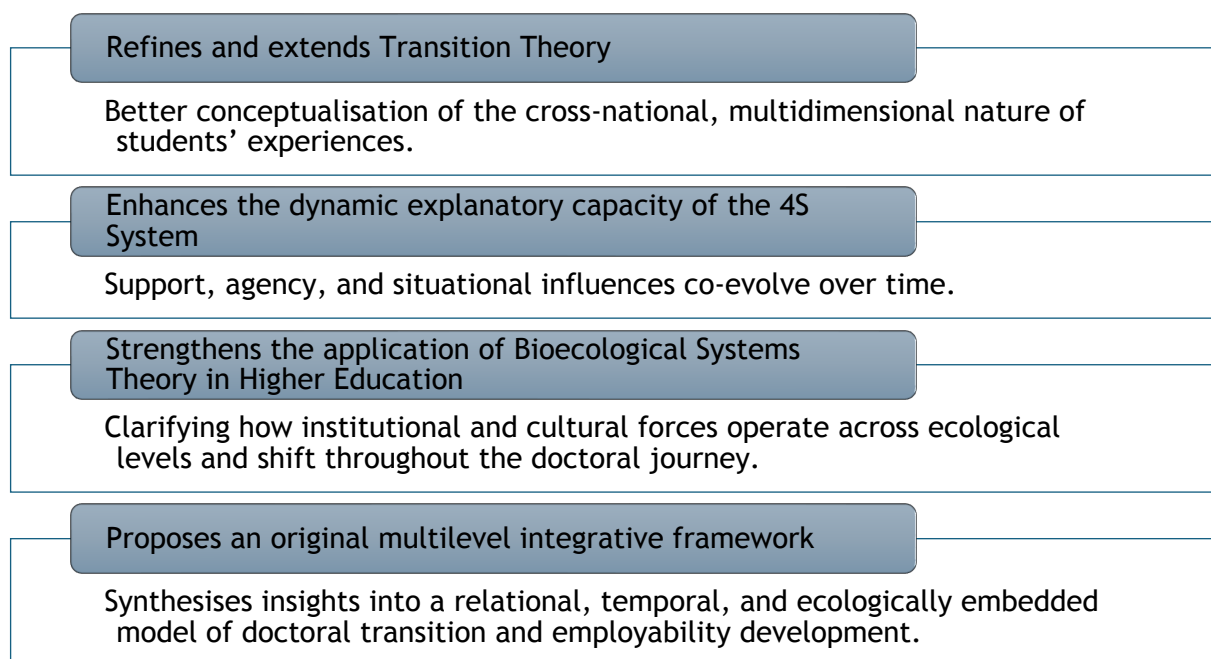


Figure 7.2 Overview of the Theoretical Contributions of the Thesis

7.2.1 Advancing Transition Theory in Cross-National Contexts

Refining transition categorisation in cross-national doctoral contexts

Although Schlossberg's Transition Theory distinguishes between anticipated, unanticipated and non-event transitions, such classifications remain too broad to reflect the multidimensional and cross-systemic transitional experiences of

international doctoral students. As shown in this thesis, a single challenge – such as supervisory misalignment – can simultaneously entail cultural negotiation, confidence fluctuations and implications for future employability. When applied to cross-national contexts, the existing typology therefore risks providing only descriptive labels without sufficiently explaining variation in adaptive demands or support needs.

To address this limitation, this thesis introduces a refined categorisation of transitions based on two intersecting dimensions: the degree of individual controllability and the locus of structural influence. This framework identifies three analytically distinct transition types:

- individually controllable transitions, primarily manageable through self-directed strategies (e.g., academic writing, language development)
- individually uncontrollable but structurally manageable transitions, where institutional intervention is required (e.g., uneven access to teaching and employability support)
- individually and structurally uncontrollable transitions, shaped by wider policy-level or global disruptions (e.g., visa uncertainty and pandemic-related restrictions)

This reconceptualisation advances Transition Theory by clarifying who holds responsibility for adaptation, how adaptive demands vary across stages of the doctorate, and why different forms of support become necessary over time. In doing so, it enables a more context-sensitive explanation of variation in doctoral students' experiences and developmental possibilities within cross-national settings. This refinement is illustrated in Figure 8.3, which visually positions transition types according to the balance between individual control and structural influence.

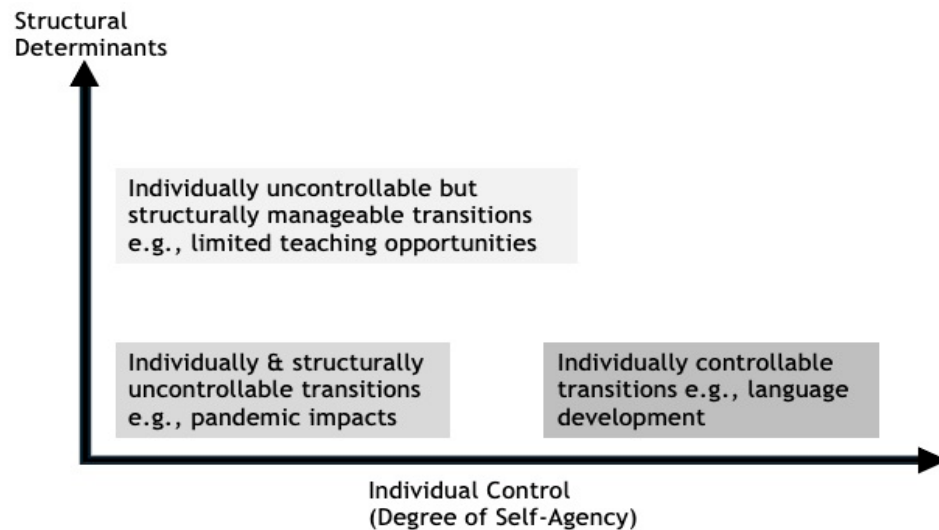


Figure 7.3 Refined Transition Typology for International Doctoral Students

Introducing the concept of “bicultural transitional adaptation”

A further theoretical advancement concerns the dual-system nature of international doctoral transitions. Existing conceptualisations of international doctoral adaptation have often foregrounded adjustment within a single host sociocultural environment, with an implicit emphasis on linear assimilation into dominant academic norms, while paying limited attention to the dynamic, interactive, and cross-systemic nature of international doctoral experiences (Bui, 2021; Yang & MacCallum, 2022a). However, findings from both studies reveal that Chinese international doctoral students need to simultaneously navigate the dialogic, independence-driven norms of UK academia while remaining responsive to the hierarchical, relationship-oriented expectations of Chinese academic culture, where many hope to pursue future careers.

This bicultural positioning requires two concurrent forms of adaptation: developing the critical communication styles, autonomous research practices, and confidence valued in the UK while also sustaining relational obligations, credential expectations, and access to Shimen-based professional networks in China. As a result, their transitions are not characterised by a shift from an “old” to a “new” system, but by continuous negotiation and identity work across two interconnected cultural logics.

To conceptualise this complexity, this thesis introduces the Bicultural Transitional Adaptation Model, which explains how professional identity, career decision-making, and interpretations of success are dynamically shaped across both academic systems. This reframing advances transition theory by moving beyond single-context adaptation and illustrating how agency and belonging are co-constructed within cross-national academic trajectories. Figure 8.4 visualises this bicultural negotiation process by positioning the doctoral student between the UK and Chinese academic systems.

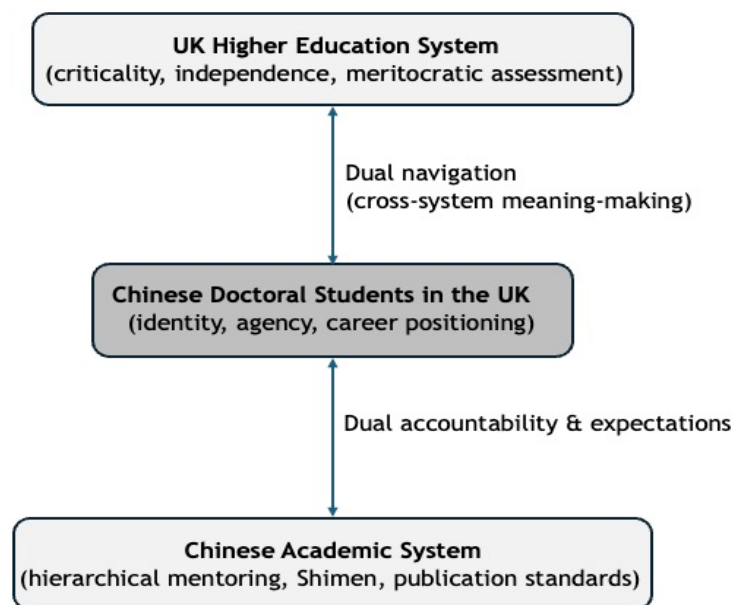


Figure 7.4 Internal Negotiation Model of Bicultural Transitional Adaptation

7.2.2 Extending the Dynamic Mechanisms of the 4S System

Support-Self Co-evolution Mechanism

Existing applications of Schlossberg's 4S System typically conceptualise "Support" as a relatively fixed external input—something that institutions, supervisors, or peers provide to assist the individual during transition. However, findings from both studies show that support within cross-national doctoral contexts is not merely received, but transformed through the student's developing capability, confidence, and strategic agency. In other words, support is not static; it evolves as the individual evolves.

Participants commonly described an early reliance on directive supervision – such as detailed correction of writing, close management of progress, and explicit interpretation of academic expectations – reflecting lower confidence and limited familiarity with academic norms. Over time, however, the nature of supportive interactions changed. As students gained competence and a stronger sense of scholarly identity, supervisory relationships became more dialogic and collaborative, with students actively shaping project decisions and seeking higher-level conceptual feedback. Study 2 participants who were still mid-transition demonstrated similar trajectories in progress, indicating that this shift represents a broader developmental process rather than a retrospective reinterpretation unique to Study 1.

These findings lead to the conceptualisation of a Support-Self Co-evolution Mechanism, where changes in the “Self” dimension – such as growing agency, academic confidence, and cultural adaptability – trigger corresponding changes in the type, function, and reciprocity of support. This mechanism foregrounds temporal sequencing: support initially operates as external scaffolding but gradually becomes internalised as self-regulatory capability. It also highlights relational dynamics: students increasingly participate as co-constructors of support rather than passive recipients.

Crucially, this co-evolutionary process is mediated by students’ access to informal and often unarticulated knowledge about how support is expected to be sought, negotiated, and enacted within doctoral environments. Findings from both studies suggest that learning how to engage productively with supervisors and institutional resources frequently occurred outside formal guidance, through observation, peer advice, and relational trial and error. In this sense, the Support-Self co-evolution mechanism is closely intertwined with hidden curricular processes, through which doctoral researchers gradually learn the tacit rules governing legitimate participation, appropriate initiative, and effective help-seeking.

This theorisation extends the 4S System from a more static typology to a developmentally dynamic model, demonstrating that the interaction between the Self and Support dimensions is not simply additive but mutually shaping. By emphasising the co-evolution of these spheres, the thesis advances a more nuanced understanding of how transition unfolds over time and why support needs to adapt as students progress – and why the effectiveness of such adaptation is further conditioned by the broader situational contexts within which doctoral transitions unfold.

7.2.3 Enhancing the Application of Bioecological Systems Theory in Higher Education

This thesis enhances the application of Bioecological Systems Theory in cross-national doctoral contexts by operationalising the exosystem and macrosystem in more concrete terms. Rather than treating institutional, policy, and cultural forces as abstract background conditions (e.g., Wang et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024), the study identifies specific exosystem influences—such as visa regulations, departmental teaching access, and recruitment criteria—and macrosystem logics, including meritocratic norms in the UK and Shimen-based relational hierarchies in China. By specifying these distal yet powerful forces, the thesis demonstrates how agency formation is shaped not only within immediate supervisory relationships but also through wider cross-national structures and cultural ideologies.

Introducing a temporal-system interaction model

While Bronfenbrenner’s framework incorporates the chronosystem to account for temporal change, less attention has been paid to how ecological influences reconfigure across stages of doctoral study. Findings from both studies demonstrate that system-level influences shift in both nature and intensity over the doctoral trajectory.

In the early stage (Moving in), developmental trajectories are predominantly shaped by microsystem interactions, particularly supervisory guidance and peer support, which help students establish foundational academic skills, confidence, and belonging. As students' progress into the middle stage (Moving through), mesosystem and exosystem forces – including publishing expectations, access to teaching, and institutional policies – become more consequential in shaping engagement strategies and access to developmental opportunities. Toward the final stage (Moving out), macrosystem and exosystem structures come to the forefront: China's academic recruitment criteria, publication hierarchies, and UK visa policies directly inform career orientations, mobility pathways, and post-graduation decision-making.

To illustrate these shifts, Figure 8.5 visually maps how the relative dominance of ecological layers changes over time.

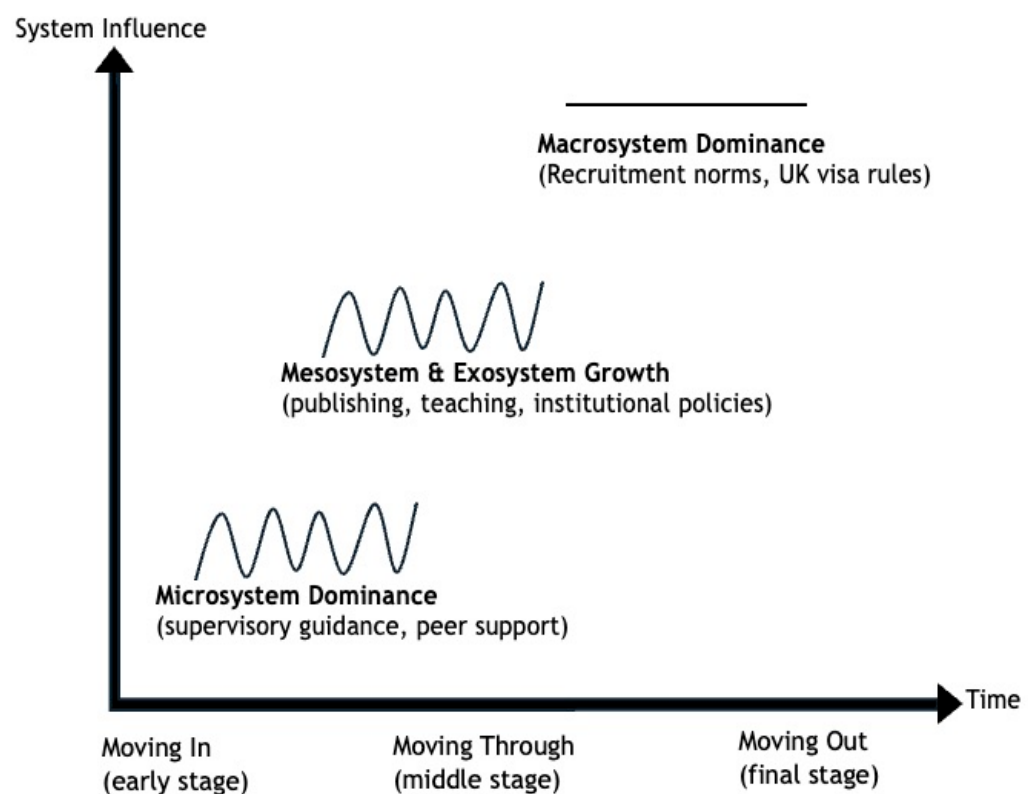


Figure 7.5 Temporal-System Interaction Model of Cross-National Doctoral Transitions

The wavy lines represent influences characterised by variability, fluctuation, and relational negotiation – such as supervisory support, peer networks, and institutional practices. In contrast, the straight line represents enduring, structurally embedded influences – particularly national labour-market and policy conditions – that remain largely impervious to individual agency. The visual transition from wave to line highlights how challenges evolve from being relationally negotiable in earlier phases to becoming structurally constrained in later stages, requiring different adaptive strategies and sources of support.

Together, these findings inform a Temporal-System Interaction Model that reconceptualises the chronosystem not simply as the passage of time, but as a shifting hierarchy of ecological influence. Across the doctoral journey, different system layers become more or less dominant, reshaping students' priorities, strategies, and interpretations of opportunity. Importantly, uneven patterns of employability engagement should not be interpreted as individual deficit or failure, but as outcomes shaped by shifting priorities and structural conditions across the doctoral timeline.

7.2.4 An Original Multilevel Integrative Framework for Cross-national Doctoral Transitions

The final theoretical contribution of this thesis is the development of an original multilevel integrative framework (Figure 8.1) that brings together the individual, relational, institutional and cultural-identity dimensions of international doctoral transition into a single coherent model. While introduced earlier as a synthesis of findings across Studies 1 and 2, this framework is here theorised as an original multilevel integrative theoretical contribution of the thesis.

Crucially, this framework demonstrates how inequity can persist even among successful doctoral graduates, when access to critical academic and

career resources is mediated through informal, relational, and hidden curricular processes rather than institutional guarantees. Drawing on core strengths of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) and the Bioecological Systems (2005) perspective, the model positions agency as relationally and structurally embedded rather than an exclusively personal attribute. It also incorporates a temporal dimension by foregrounding how the influence of different systems shifts as students move through distinct phases of the doctorate.

Rather than treating employability development as a separate, career-focused activity, the framework shows that it develops gradually through doctoral students' everyday interactions within supervisory relationships, institutional settings, and cultural contexts. In this sense, employability is shaped alongside academic learning and identity development, rather than added on at a later stage. The framework further captures the bidirectional interactions between developmental layers, showing how change in any one domain can ripple across others. For example, when supervisory support is inconsistent or ineffective and institutional oversight fails to provide timely intervention, doctoral students may experience heightened academic uncertainty, weakened confidence, and disrupted identity development, which in turn shapes how they approach career planning and employability-related decisions.

Taken together, these theoretical contributions demonstrate the value of viewing international doctoral transition as a multi-system, multi-temporal, and culturally embedded process. By refining existing theoretical tools and introducing new conceptual mechanisms, this thesis provides a stronger analytic foundation for understanding how agency, structure, and cultural identity co-evolve across borders. These developments not only strengthen theoretical explanations of cross-national doctoral mobility but also establish a platform for the practical and methodological implications discussed in the following sections.

7.3 Practical Implications and Recommendations

Building on findings from two qualitative studies, this chapter outlines practical implications for supporting international doctoral study and employability development, which are operationalised as recommendations at institutional, supervisory, and student levels.

7.3.1 Institutional-Level Implications: Strengthening University Support Systems

This section presents six institutional-level recommendations that respond directly to the structural and relational challenges identified in this study. These recommendations address doctoral working environments, peer support, supervisory feedback and practices, wellbeing, and employability development, with the aim of promoting more equitable and sustainable doctoral ecosystems.

Recommendation A1:

The university should provide a combination of dedicated shared office spaces with fixed desks and flexible hot-desking options for doctoral students, rather than allowing one model to fully replace the other. Fixed desks are important for building stable peer communities and supporting everyday informal learning, whereas hot-desking is better suited to students who need greater flexibility because of different working patterns or personal circumstances.

Recommendation A2:

Graduate schools should establish structured peer-mentoring schemes as part of doctoral training, with light-touch guidance and clear recognition for senior doctoral mentors. These schemes may include initiatives such as mixed-nationality writing groups and peer-mentoring arrangements that connect newly arrived international doctoral students with more advanced colleagues.

Together, such practices can support early-stage academic and social adjustment, facilitate the exchange of feedback styles and scholarly practices, and create discipline-based opportunities for collaboration, research development, and employability.

Recommendation A3:

Universities should strengthen institutional support for timely supervisory feedback by embedding a cumulative feedback record within existing supervisory meeting or progress monitoring systems used throughout the doctoral programme. By documenting whether written feedback has been provided and shared with the student following supervisory meetings and document submissions over time, this record can function as a practical reminder for busy supervisors, while also ensuring that feedback practices remain visible, consistent, and supportive for doctoral students.

Recommendation A4:

Universities should strengthen supervisor development programmes that support culturally responsive mentoring, including guidance on balancing autonomy with structured support and supporting international doctoral students' engagement with field-specific publishing and conference communities. At the same time, institutions should provide practical and visible support for supervisors who facilitate informal, group-based activities for doctoral students, recognising that such practices require time, emotional energy, and additional coordination. This may include access to appropriate spaces, small-scale funding, or recognition within workload and appraisal systems, to ensure that these supervisory practices are sustainable rather than becoming invisible or unrecognised labour.

Recommendation A5:

To address the uneven and contingent access to employability-related resources identified in this study, universities should adopt a proactive and

transparent approach to supporting doctoral students' understanding of employability development and changing labour market conditions. This can include maintaining a dedicated and regularly updated section within student-facing platforms (such as student centres or central online portals), alongside access to one-to-one employability consultations. Where discipline-specific expertise is required, these consultations can act as a point of coordination, with consultation staff supporting doctoral students in identifying and contacting relevant academic or professional staff. Importantly, the time and input of those contacted should be formally recognised and supported by the institution, rather than relying on unpaid or informal goodwill.

Recommendation A6:

Universities should adopt a system-level approach to wellbeing that supports both doctoral students and supervisors. For students, this may include doctoral-specific mental health services, stage-based wellbeing check-ins during high-pressure phases (such as topic development and thesis writing), and easily accessible support routes when academic progress becomes stalled.

For supervisors, institutions should recognise the emotional labour involved in doctoral supervision within workload models and provide practical training on emotionally responsive and culturally sensitive mentoring. Access to wellbeing resources for supervisors themselves is also important to prevent burnout and sustain high-quality supervisory support.

By embedding wellbeing support within doctoral structures rather than treating it as an individual responsibility, institutions can promote healthier, more sustainable doctoral environments.

7.3.2 Supervisor-Level Implications: Supporting Doctoral Transition and Employability through Routine Supervisory Practices

This section outlines three supervisor-level recommendations focusing on early-stage adjustment, employability sense-making, and wellbeing within everyday supervisory practices.

Recommendation B1:

Supervisors can support early-stage doctoral students by creating informal, group-based activities that bring together doctoral students within the same supervisory group. Such activities may include occasional group meetings, informal discussions, or collaborative reading or writing sessions, providing a low-pressure setting in which doctoral students can share experiences, ask questions, and gradually observe and learn disciplinary publishing and feedback practices through peer interaction.

Where such group-based activities are not feasible, supervisors can still support early-stage adjustment by being attentive to opportunities to facilitate contact between newer and more senior doctoral students. Together, these practices can support smoother academic and social transition in the early stages of the doctorate, while also fostering collaborative practices and professional development that contribute to longer-term employability.

Recommendation B2:

Supervisors should integrate employability-related sense-making into supervision meetings once doctoral students are developmentally ready, rather than treating employability as a separate or late-stage concern.

In practice, this involves discussing how ongoing doctoral activities—such as teaching, publishing, conference participation, or collaborative projects—

contribute to different academic and non-academic career pathways, and helping doctoral students reflect on how these experiences develop transferable skills. Where appropriate, supervisors can also support this sense-making by helping doctoral students navigate access to conferences, co-authorship, or collaborative opportunities that may not arise automatically, particularly for those with limited academic networks. By making these links explicit within routine supervision, supervisors can support doctoral students in planning strategically and understanding employability development as an integral part of doctoral training.

Recommendation B3:

Supervisors therefore need to adopt emotionally attuned and culturally responsive supervisory practices, particularly when working with international doctoral students navigating unfamiliar academic norms and expectations. This may include acknowledging the emotional labour inherent in doctoral study, offering reassurance when appropriate, explicitly normalising struggle and uncertainty, and making expectations around feedback, critique, and academic interaction more explicit. Maintaining open channels for clarification during feedback processes can further reduce misunderstanding and anxiety.

In turn, such culturally responsive communication can support doctoral students' developing academic identity and foster a supervisory climate in which students feel respected, understood, and more confident in participating fully in scholarly dialogue.

However, these practices require sustained emotional engagement and time, and cannot be assumed to rest solely on individual supervisors. Institutional support is therefore critical, including access to relevant guidance or training, manageable workloads, and recognition of the relational dimensions of supervision, to reduce the risk of emotional burnout and enable supervisors to provide consistent and responsive support. Attending to emotional dynamics on both sides not only strengthens supervisory relationships but also contributes to

more equitable and inclusive doctoral experiences, particularly for international students navigating unfamiliar academic cultures.

7.3.3 Student-Level Implications: Navigating Doctoral Study and Career Development

Student-level implications do not assume that doctoral students can overcome structural constraints through individual effort alone. Instead, they highlight how, when appropriate institutional and relational support is in place, students can develop forms of agency that expand what is possible for them within existing conditions. This section outlines three student-level recommendations focusing on proactive engagement, cross-national career awareness, and wellbeing during doctoral study.

Recommendation C1:

Doctoral students are encouraged to engage proactively with academic and career-related opportunities while maintaining steady progress in their doctoral research and safeguarding their wellbeing. This includes seeking relevant information, participating in learning and professional development activities, and engaging with peers to better understand their research interests and potential career directions. As doctoral students gain greater clarity about their academic interests and employment aspirations, they can more strategically plan where to focus their efforts—for example, by exploring the expectations and developmental pathways associated with an academic career if they wish to remain within academia.

Recommendation C2:

International doctoral students should actively learn how academic and professional success is defined and assessed in different national contexts relevant to their career plans. This may involve comparing recruitment criteria, publication expectations, and career pathways across UK-based and home-

country systems and reflecting on how their doctoral experiences can be communicated accordingly. Such awareness can help students prepare more strategically for career opportunities across different national contexts.

Recommendation C3:

Doctoral students are encouraged to prioritise their mental health and wellbeing alongside academic progress, recognising that sustained productivity and development depend on manageable expectations and emotional stability. Paying attention to signs of stress, seeking support when needed, and maintaining boundaries around workload can help students remain engaged over the longer term. Resilience should be understood as something that develops over time through experience rather than as a fixed personal trait. Reflecting on challenges encountered and how they have been managed across different stages of the doctorate can therefore support confidence, motivation, and decision-making during periods of uncertainty.

Taken together, these practical implications highlight the need for aligned support across institutional, supervisory, and student levels. The recommendations demonstrate how everyday practices and organisational arrangements can complement individual engagement to support doctoral progression and employability development. Grounded in empirical evidence, this section provides a set of actionable considerations for enhancing doctoral education for international doctoral students.

7.4 Methodological Reflections

The methodological design of this thesis – comprising two qualitatively driven studies conducted at different stages of the doctoral journey – offers several strengths yet also presents limitations that warrant reflection. Together, these methodological considerations clarify how the research approach shaped the types of knowledge generated in this thesis and illuminate areas for refinement in future inquiry.

7.4.1 Strengths of the Research Design

The research design adopted in this thesis brings several methodological strengths that enhance the depth, credibility, and interpretive richness of the findings. By combining two qualitatively driven studies situated at different stages of the doctoral journey – Study 1 addressing multiple transitions across the doctoral lifecycle, and Study 2 focusing specifically on employability development in real time – the thesis captures both the immediacy of ongoing challenges and the retrospective clarity afforded by completed trajectories. This dual-study configuration not only strengthens the analysis of doctoral transitions broadly defined but also deepens understanding of employability development as a specific, practice-oriented dimension of cross-national doctoral experience. The following subsections outline three key strengths of this research design: its longitudinally informed multi-phase architecture, its capacity for in-depth qualitative exploration, and the cross-systemic perspective enabled by inductive analysis.

A longitudinally informed, multi-phase perspective

Although the thesis did not adopt a formal longitudinal design, the two-study structure enabled a form of temporal layering across different stages of doctoral experience, allowing patterns of change to be examined in ways that partially approximate longitudinal insight. Study 1 provides retrospective accounts of completed doctoral trajectories and post-PhD positioning, while Study 2 captures transitions as they unfold in real time across different stages of the doctorate. Together, these datasets allow patterns of change to be examined across phases rather than at a single point in time.

By combining retrospective and real-time narratives, the research was able to trace how transitions are both lived and later interpreted. Study 2 revealed the immediacy of uncertainty, adjustment, and evolving strategies during early, middle, and later stages of the doctorate. Study 1, in contrast, illuminated how

these experiences were subsequently re-evaluated once doctoral completion and employment outcomes had been achieved. This comparative layering made visible how meaning-making itself develops over time.

Importantly, the dual-study structure also enabled analysis of how challenges and adaptive strategies evolve across phases. Early-stage concerns – such as language anxiety or unclear supervisory expectations – gradually shifted toward more complex negotiations of academic identity, professional positioning, and structural constraint. Similarly, forms of support that initially operated as directive scaffolding increasingly became dialogic and collaborative as students developed greater autonomy. These patterns provided empirical grounding for theorising chronosystem effects within cross-national doctoral transitions.

Furthermore, the research design made it possible to differentiate between “transitions as lived processes” and “transitions as interpreted outcomes.” Study 2 captured the immediacy, uncertainty, and improvisation that shape transitions as they unfold, while Study 1 illuminated how those same experiences were re-evaluated after students had progressed into academic employment. This contrast enriched the theoretical synthesis by demonstrating that transitions are not discrete events but evolving trajectories shaped by shifting agency, accumulated experience, and changing structural conditions.

Taken together, this multi-phase temporal architecture considerably strengthened the analytic depth of the thesis, allowing doctoral transitions to be theorised as dynamic, developmental, and interpretative processes rather than static or isolated phenomena.

In-depth, qualitative exploration of complex transitions

The qualitative design of this thesis enabled a nuanced understanding of doctoral transitions that would not have been accessible through quantitative approaches alone. Because participants were able to narrate their experiences

in their own words, the research captured dimensions of doctoral transition that are often difficult to articulate and even harder to measure, such as uncertainty, emotional turbulence, cultural negotiation, and evolving academic identity.

The interview format encouraged participants to elaborate on issues that were deeply personal or culturally embedded, including their perceptions of supervisory relationships, their interpretations of feedback and academic expectations, and the subtle ways in which institutional and cultural norms shaped their decisions and self-understanding. These accounts revealed processes that are typically invisible in structured questionnaires – for example, how students navigate hierarchical relationships, how they make sense of implicit academic norms, and how they gradually develop confidence and strategic agency.

Importantly, the qualitative approach enabled the thesis to uncover the interconnectedness of academic, cultural, and employability transitions. Participants often described how difficulties in one domain (e.g., unfamiliar academic writing conventions or uncertainty about communicating with supervisors) directly influenced their career planning, confidence, or sense of belonging. This cross-domain interplay is difficult to detect through methods that isolate variables or impose predefined analytical categories.

Furthermore, because both studies invited participants to reflect not just on what happened but also on how they felt and why they acted in certain ways, the data captured the meaning-making processes underlying their choices. These insights were essential for developing the multilevel framework presented in Section 8.1, which emphasises the relational, ecological (multi-layered environmental), and cumulative nature of doctoral transitions. In this sense, the qualitative depth of the research was foundational to its theoretical contributions: it allowed the thesis to portray doctoral transitions not as linear

steps, but as complex, evolving processes shaped by interactions between individuals and their environments.

Cross-systemic perspective enabled by inductive analysis

By adopting an inductive analytic strategy, the thesis was able to identify patterns cutting across individual, relational, institutional, and cultural domains without being confined to a predetermined framework. Rather than isolating influences into discrete categories, the analysis captured how these ecological layers intersect and interact within lived doctoral experiences.

This cross-systemic perspective became a key methodological strength. It not only reflected the complexity of Chinese international doctoral students' transitions but also provided the empirical foundation for the multilevel conceptual framework developed in Section 8.1. By allowing themes to be developed from the data, the analysis traced nuanced interconnections — such as how cultural expectations mediate institutional engagement, or how supervisory relationships shape employability strategies.

Collectively, this approach strengthened both the originality and ecological validity of the thesis, enabling a richer and more interconnected understanding of doctoral transitions than a strictly theory-driven design would have permitted.

Taken together, these strengths demonstrate that the research design of this thesis is not only methodologically rigorous but also analytically generative. By integrating multi-phase perspectives and in-depth qualitative analysis, the study captures doctoral transitions as dynamic and relational processes, providing a nuanced interpretation of both broad patterns and fine-grained complexities in Chinese international doctoral students' experiences.

7.4.2 Limitations and Methodological Challenges

Understanding the methodological limitations of this thesis is essential for clarifying the interpretive boundaries of the findings. Because the research design combined retrospective accounts from doctoral graduates (Study 1), real-time narratives from current doctoral students (Study 2), and interviews conducted by a culturally aligned researcher, it inevitably introduced specific methodological challenges related to memory, temporal positioning, and researcher positionality. These challenges do not diminish the value of the findings but highlight the complexities inherent in studying long-term and multi-system doctoral transitions. This subsection therefore outlines three key methodological considerations: the interpretive nature of retrospective narratives, the partiality of real-time accounts, and the cultural-linguistic positioning of the researcher.

Interpreting Retrospective Narratives: Limitations and Value

A common concern in retrospective interview research is the possibility of retrospective bias, as participants recount past events through the interpretive lens of later experiences. This general limitation applies to Study 1 as well, since graduates reflected on transitions that occurred several years earlier. However, in this thesis, the influence of retrospective bias is tempered for two reasons.

First, despite their overall positive tone — shaped by the purposeful sampling of successful graduates — participants provided detailed and consistent accounts of early-stage challenges such as academic adjustment, supervisory difficulties, and language barriers. These descriptions closely aligned with the real-time experiences reported by early-stage participants in Study 2, suggesting that key challenges were neither forgotten nor idealised over time. Second, retrospective narratives offered unique analytical value by capturing how students made sense of their transitions after completing the doctoral journey and securing employment. This meaning-making perspective could not have been

obtained through real-time interviews alone and was essential for theorising temporal development, agency consolidation, and employability trajectories.

Thus, while retrospective accounts are inherently interpretative, in this thesis they function as a complementary lens rather than a source of distortion, providing insights into long-term developmental processes that real-time interviews cannot capture.

Real-time interviews in Study 2 capture only partial trajectories

Another limitation arises from the fact that Study 2 participants were interviewed while they were still in the midst of their doctoral programmes. Because their transitions were ongoing, the data represent only a “snapshot” of experiences at a particular moment. Their emotions, interpretations of challenges, and employability strategies may shift considerably as they progress toward thesis submission or enter the job market. As such, Study 2 cannot fully capture how their transitions stabilise over time or what long-term outcomes they eventually achieve.

To address this limitation, the analysis was conducted in two ways. First, participants’ accounts were interpreted in relation to their stage of study, allowing developmental differences to be recognised and preventing early-stage uncertainty from being misread as a stable pattern. Second, Study 2 findings were triangulated with the completed trajectories reported in Study 1. This comparative layering enabled the analysis to distinguish between challenges that are temporary or stage-specific and those that persist across the doctoral journey, including structural constraints and the cumulative nature of employability development.

Although these strategies cannot eliminate the limitation entirely, they help ensure that interpretations of Study 2 remain balanced, cautious, and situated within a broader developmental context.

Cultural and linguistic positioning of the researcher

As a Chinese doctoral student conducting all interviews in Mandarin, my positionality inevitably shaped the data generation and interpretation processes. The shared linguistic and cultural background facilitated strong rapport and allowed participants to articulate emotionally nuanced or sensitive experiences with ease. However, this familiarity may also have led to unspoken assumptions or taken-for-granted meanings, requiring careful attention during transcription and analysis. For example, when participants referred to Shimen (academic lineage), both the participants and the researcher often treated mutual support within the Shimen as a normal and self-evident practice. However, follow-up questions were used to explore what this “support” actually involved in practice, such as specific forms of help or assistance, rather than taking its meaning for granted.

My experience as an international doctoral student further influenced how I interpreted participants’ narratives. While this positional alignment enhanced empathetic understanding, it also required reflexive awareness to avoid imposing personal interpretations on the data. To mitigate these influences, reflexive memos, supervisory debriefings, and constant comparison were used throughout the analytic process. Nevertheless, as is widely acknowledged in qualitative inquiry, complete neutrality is neither possible nor desirable; researcher positionality is integral to meaning-making.

Taken together, these methodological considerations define the scope within which the findings of this thesis should be interpreted. While each limitation introduces constraints – whether related to retrospective reconstruction, partial developmental trajectories, or researcher positionality – the combination of strategies employed (stage-sensitive analysis, cross-study triangulation, reflexive memo-ing, and supervisory debriefing) helped strengthen the analytic robustness of the study. Rather than undermining the validity of the research, these challenges reflect the inherent complexity of examining doctoral transitions across temporal, structural, and cultural systems. They also provide

an important foundation for the analytic integration discussed in Section 8.4.3 and for the future research directions outlined in Chapter 8.5.

7.4.3 Reflections on Analytic Integration Across the Two Studies

Integrating findings from two studies conducted at different doctoral stages, under different historical and structural conditions, required careful and theoretically informed analytic decision-making. Study 1 drew on retrospective narratives from graduates who had completed their doctorates during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas Study 2 captured real-time experiences from current doctoral students navigating a largely post-pandemic but increasingly restrictive visa and labour-market environment. This dual-dataset configuration created both opportunities and methodological challenges. To make these analytic decisions transparent, the subsections below discuss two key challenges: (a) balancing convergence and divergence across datasets, and (b) ensuring theoretical coherence across multiple frameworks.

Balancing convergence and divergence across datasets

A first analytic challenge concerned the extent to which themes aligned across the two studies. Several patterns – such as the central importance of supervisory support, the cumulative development of academic confidence, and the ongoing interplay between individual agency and structural constraints – emerged consistently across both cohorts. At the same time, certain differences reflected temporal and contextual conditions rather than substantive conceptual distinctions. For instance, Study 2 participants expressed heightened anxiety regarding shifting visa regulations, while Study 1 graduates were more preoccupied with pandemic-era disruptions and reintegration into China's competitive academic labour market. The analysis therefore needed to avoid forcing artificial similarity between the two datasets while also ensuring that

stage- or time-related differences were not overstated as deep conceptual divergence.

To navigate these issues, several analytic safeguards were employed. First, Study 2 data were interpreted through a stage-sensitive lens, examining early-, mid-, and late-stage participants separately rather than treating them as a homogeneous group. This distinction helped ensure that early-stage uncertainty or mid-stage consolidation was recognised as a normal part of doctoral progression, rather than mistakenly interpreted as a substantive difference between the two studies. Second, constant-comparison techniques were used during coding (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). This means that whenever a theme identified in one dataset, it was immediately compared with the other dataset to see whether the same pattern appeared. Through this process, the analysis could identify which themes were genuinely stable across both cohorts and which themes only reflected temporary, stage-specific experiences.

Importantly, the inclusion of successful doctoral graduates in Study 1 represents not a methodological weakness but a deliberate analytic choice. Focusing on participants who had completed their doctorates and secured academic employment made it possible to examine how structural contingencies and hidden curricular processes operate even when outcomes are positive. Rather than attributing success solely to individual merit or resilience, these retrospective accounts revealed how access to critical resources—such as supportive supervision, informal networks, and timely career-relevant opportunities—was often experienced as contingent and unevenly distributed. Participants’ frequent references to being “lucky” therefore functioned as analytic signals of structural opacity, highlighting how opportunity is mediated through informal and relational processes rather than institutional guarantees.

Ensuring theoretical coherence across multiple frameworks

A second analytic challenge involved ensuring theoretical coherence while drawing on multiple frameworks. Transition Theory served as the primary

conceptual anchor for the thesis, offering the overarching structure through which doctoral transitions were interpreted. However, two additional frameworks contributed essential insights: the Four Stages of Learning illuminated patterns of developmental progression that were particularly salient in Study 1, while the Bioecological Systems Theory clarified the structural, institutional, and cultural layering that characterised participants' experiences in Study 2.

Integrating these perspectives required a deliberate and iterative analytic process. Coding was conducted in multiple cycles so that identified thematic patterns and trends could be repeatedly examined through different theoretical lenses. The analysis also involved explicitly mapping theoretical constructs—such as “microsystem influences,” or “support within the 4S system”—onto specific empirical patterns within the data. Importantly, analytic decisions were made about the relative interpretive priority of each framework. Transition Theory ultimately provided the foundation for the final synthesis in Chapter 8, while the Bioecological model was used selectively to deepen interpretation where issues of developmental progression or ecological layering were most relevant.

Although this multi-framework strategy increased conceptual complexity, it also significantly strengthened the analysis. It enabled the thesis to capture both the micro-level processes of agency development and identity formation, and the macro-level forces — such as visa policies, academic cultures, and labour-market structures — that shape cross-national doctoral trajectories. This breadth of interpretation would not have been achievable through reliance on a single theoretical lens.

Overall, integrating the two studies within a single analytic framework — while navigating retrospective and real-time accounts, inductive coding, and multiple theoretical lenses — enabled this thesis to generate a rich and ecologically sensitive understanding of Chinese international doctoral transitions. Although each dataset carried its own methodological constraints,

their combined analysis offered a more comprehensive and temporally layered interpretation than either study could have produced alone. This integrated approach provides the conceptual foundation for the theoretical and practical contributions advanced in this chapter.

These methodological reflections not only strengthen the interpretive coherence of the thesis but also point towards future research designs that can build on this multilevel, cross-temporal approach to studying international doctoral trajectories.

7.5 Directions for Future Research

Building on the conceptual, empirical and methodological contributions of this thesis, several promising directions emerge for future research. These directions not only address the limitations acknowledged in this chapter but also extend the theoretical possibilities opened up by the multilevel and cross-systemic framework developed in Section 8.1. The following subsections outline three key avenues through which future work can deepen understanding of cross-national doctoral transitions and employability development.

7.5.1 Longitudinal Research on Doctoral Transitions and Employability Development

A first direction concerns the need for fully longitudinal research that follows international doctoral students across the entire duration of the doctorate and into the early career stage. While the dual-study structure in this thesis created a form of temporal layering, it nevertheless relied on retrospective accounts (Study 1) and partial in-progress trajectories (Study 2). A genuinely longitudinal design – tracking the same individuals from the moment of enrolment through submission, graduation, and their transition into academic or non-academic employment – would offer stronger evidence of how transitions evolve, intensify, stabilise or transform over time.

Such research could capture how academic uncertainties, language challenges, and supervisory relationships shift at multiple turning points in the doctorate. It could also reveal how employability planning interacts with academic confidence, personal agency, structural constraints, and cultural expectations at different milestones. Importantly, longitudinal work would allow researchers to identify which early challenges are temporary and which persist, which strategies lead to long-term positive outcomes, and how individuals re-interpret earlier experiences once they have entered the labour market. This would significantly extend the chronosystem-based temporal analysis proposed in this thesis and deepen understanding of the cumulative nature of doctoral development.

7.5.2 Cross-national Comparative Research on International Doctoral Trajectories

A second promising direction for future research is to expand the geographical and cultural scope of inquiry into international doctoral transitions. This thesis concentrated on the UK-China mobility route, a context shaped by distinctive structural and cultural dynamics – including expectations of academic autonomy within UK institutions, the relational and hierarchical nature of Chinese academia, visa constraints, and recruitment practices influenced by Shimen culture. While this focus enabled theoretically rich and context-sensitive analysis, it necessarily limits the generalisability of some findings.

Comparative studies incorporating other cross-national pathways – such as India-UK, Europe-Asia, China-Australia, or South-South mobility routes within the Global South – could clarify how doctoral transitions are shaped by differences in academic cultures, labour-market structures, and migration regimes. Such research would help identify which dimensions of transitional experience represent common global patterns (e.g., the developmental role of supervisory

support, language-mediated participation in academia) and which are culturally or institutionally specific.

Moreover, cross-national comparison would provide a robust foundation for further refining and testing the Bicultural Transitional Adaptation Model developed in this thesis (see Section 8.2.1). Examining mobility routes with varying degrees of cultural distance – for example, between structurally aligned systems versus highly divergent ones – would reveal how dual-system navigation may shift depending on contextual compatibility, thereby extending the theoretical applicability of the model beyond the UK-China context.

7.5.3 Empirical Validation and Further Development of the Multilevel Framework

A third direction concerns the empirical testing and refinement of the conceptual framework developed in this thesis, including the multidimensional typology of transitions, the Bicultural Transitional Adaptation Model, and the proposed extensions to the 4S System. These models offer new theoretical tools for understanding how agency, structure, culture, and temporality interact in shaping doctoral experiences, but they would benefit from application and validation in a wider range of contexts.

Future studies could examine the framework using mixed methods – for example, combining longitudinal qualitative data with survey-based measures of agency, belonging, cultural adaptation, or perceived structural constraints. This would help determine the extent to which the interactional mechanisms proposed in this thesis (e.g., cross-national situational layering, support-self co-evolution, bicultural navigation) hold across different disciplines, institutional structures, and cultural contexts.

By directly testing specific elements of the framework, future research can contribute to the ongoing theoretical refinement of transition theory and

bioecological perspectives in higher education. Such work would also help establish the practical utility of these models for informing institutional policies, supervisory practices, and employability support systems.

Taken together, these directions for future research highlight the generative potential of the conceptual and empirical contributions developed in this thesis. By extending the temporal, geographical, and theoretical scope of future inquiry, researchers can build on the multilevel framework established here to deepen understanding of how international doctoral transitions unfold across time, cultures, and structural systems. These avenues not only offer opportunities to refine existing theories but also support the development of more equitable, responsive and contextually grounded support structures for international doctoral students.

7.6 Final Thesis Conclusion

This thesis has investigated how Chinese international doctoral students in the UK navigate a complex constellation of academic, cultural, institutional, and employability transitions. Through a dual-study qualitative design, it addressed two interconnected aims: (a) to understand how transitions are experienced and negotiated across multiple domains of doctoral life, and (b) to examine how these processes shape employability preparation in the context of cross-national mobility and labour-market competition.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that international doctoral transition is not a single adjustment but a dynamic, relational and cumulative developmental pathway. Challenges in one domain – whether supervision, language, or social belonging – frequently reverberate across others, shaping confidence, identity and future aspirations. This thesis therefore reconceptualises doctoral transition as a multidimensional and temporally unfolding process, in which agency and structure continually interact and co-evolve.

A central contribution of this thesis lies in demonstrating the inseparability of employability development from broader doctoral transition. Although Study 2 focused specifically on employability, participants' strategies were deeply entangled with academic expectations, cultural norms, relational interactions, and structural constraints such as visa policies and labour-market logics. These findings challenge deficit-based assumptions about international students and instead portray them as active agents who strategically navigate opportunities across multiple systems. The thesis thus positions doctoral study as an extended formative stage of career identity construction and labour-market positioning—rather than a purely academic endeavour.

The thesis also makes several theoretical contributions. It advances Transition Theory in cross-national contexts by illuminating temporal sequencing and stage-specific dynamics within international doctoral study. It extends the 4S System by emphasising the dynamic interplay of changing supports, shifting strategies, and identity evolution over time. Furthermore, it applies and adapts Bioecological Systems perspectives to foreground multi-layered structural and cultural influences on international students. The integrative multilevel framework developed in this chapter synthesises these contributions and provides a foundation for future theoretical refinement.

Methodologically, the thesis demonstrates the value of combining retrospective and real-time qualitative accounts to capture both lived transitions and the later interpretation. This complementary approach revealed patterns that would not be apparent from either dataset alone — for example, how external support gradually becomes internalised, or how meaning-making shifts once outcomes have materialised. This design therefore contributes to qualitative methodology by highlighting how dual-temporal perspectives can more fully represent the complexity of doctoral transition.

Practically, the findings call for more equitable, culturally sensitive, and context-aware support structures for international doctoral students. While

supervisory practices and institutional guidance play a central role in shaping doctoral development, students' own proactive engagement and adaptive strategies remain equally important within these relational contexts. Strengthening supervisory and institutional systems can create more transparent and sustainable conditions for agency to operate effectively, thereby supporting both student well-being and the long-term sustainability of international research mobility.

Looking forward, this thesis proposed three avenues for expanding this field of inquiry: fully longitudinal research tracking students into post-doctoral careers; cross-national comparative studies testing whether the observed patterns generalise beyond the UK-China context; and empirical validation of the multilevel framework across disciplines, institutions, and other international student groups.

In conclusion, this thesis shows that when doctoral success is experienced as a matter of luck, inequity has not disappeared – it has been rendered less visible. By examining doctoral transitions and employability development across academic, relational, institutional and cultural domains, this research demonstrates how access to critical resources is often mediated through informal, relational and hidden curricular processes rather than systematic institutional provision.

At the same time, the findings show that Chinese international doctoral students are not merely completing a degree abroad – they are actively negotiating identity, recognition, support, and future possibilities across intersecting sociocultural systems. Their journeys reveal both the vulnerabilities and the transformative potential embedded in global higher education. By foregrounding their voices and experiences, this thesis contributes to a more comprehensive and human-centred understanding of what it means to pursue a doctorate across borders—and how universities can better support those who undertake this ambitious, uncertain, and profoundly meaningful journey.

7.7 Personal Reflection

Conducting this research was a meaningful and largely positive experience. I particularly enjoyed the research interview process, as the conversations were open, thoughtful, and engaging. Rather than feeling like a one-sided process of data collection, the interviews felt like genuine exchanges in which participants shared their experiences freely and reflectively. Through these interactions, I was able to develop a deeper and more concrete understanding of the different ways Chinese international doctoral students navigate their doctoral journeys. The interview process therefore functioned not only as a method of data generation, but also as an important space for learning, connection, and reflection.

Reflecting on the two studies, I became aware that I related differently to the two groups of participants. In Study 1, I interviewed doctoral graduates who had completed their PhDs successfully and secured academic positions. I recognised that they were highly accomplished, and some peers expressed curiosity about whether engaging with such successful senior scholars might feel intimidating or create a sense of pressure. Reflecting on this during the research process, however, I did not experience the interviews in this way. Rather than feeling pressured or inclined to compare myself with them, I approached these conversations with curiosity and respect. I saw my role primarily as listening carefully, learning from their experiences, and representing their stories accurately so that others might also learn from them.

In contrast, interviews in Study 2 felt more familiar and personally connected. Many participants were current Chinese international doctoral students across different stages of doctoral study but within broadly similar academic and cultural contexts. Because we were navigating comparable challenges and uncertainties associated with doctoral study and cross-national mobility, our conversations felt more natural and empathetic. Although my own employability outcomes were still uncertain, I found it meaningful, when

appropriate, to share general and anonymised insights drawn from Study 1 with these participants, particularly where such reflections might offer reassurance or practical perspective. These exchanges were not intended as guidance or advice, but as moments of reciprocal reflection within a shared doctoral context. Through this process, the research became not only an academic task, but also a relational and mutually respectful experience.

Looking back on my doctoral journey, I realise how fortunate I have been to complete this research in a generally supportive environment. I benefited from encouraging supervision, supportive peers, and a balanced life that allowed space for physical activity and interests beyond academia. At the same time, the process was not without challenges. One recurring difficulty was revising my literature review multiple times, often with the feeling that the overall structure was still not quite right. Working through this uncertainty required patience and repeated reflection, and it gradually helped me develop a clearer sense of how to organise complex ideas.

Unlike the common portrayal of doctoral study as constantly stressful or overwhelming, my experience was largely steady and manageable. Over time, I developed greater critical awareness, increasing confidence in academic writing, and a more balanced understanding of challenges as an expected and constructive aspect of doctoral learning.

As this doctoral phase draws to a close, I am aware that it also marks the beginning of a new period of transition. While the structured learning of the doctorate is coming to an end, my sense of uncertainty about the future has not diminished and, in some ways, has become more visible. At the same time, this transition does not signal the end of learning, but a shift in how learning continues. I move forward recognising that uncertainty is part of this next stage, and that continued reflection, adaptation, and learning will remain central beyond the doctorate.

8. References

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Appendix A. Participant Information Sheet (Study 1)



College of Social
Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

Study title: Exploring how Chinese international doctoral students successfully 'go through' the transitions under UK education system

Researcher: Fanzhu Meng (f.meng.1@research.gla.ac.uk)

Supervisors: Dr. Christopher Hand (Christopher.Hand@glasgow.ac.uk)

Dr. Dely Elliot (dely.elliott@glasgow.ac.uk)

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

The purpose of this study is to explore find out how Chinese international doctoral students successfully 'go through' the transitions under UK education system. If you decided to take part in the interview, I will ask you some questions about what you think about your experiences when studying in the UK. This will take about 45 minutes and your participation is voluntary. You can stop the interview at any time, and you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

- **Keeping information confidential**

All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation. Participants will be referred to by pseudonym in any publication arising from the research. Notably, you will not be able to withdraw once data have been anonymised - this will be by September 2024.

- Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

- **The results of this study**

I will analyse the data I collect from participants and present this in the thesis which I am writing for my qualification, PhD in Education. This may be disseminated on conference papers, research reports, journals, or a PhD thesis. Any participants can access the outputs of the study by requested. Anonymised datasets suitable for future re-use will be openly available via data repository (Enlighten). The anonymised research data will be deposited in Enlighten for up to 10 years, and then be destroyed totally.

- **Review of the study**

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee.

If you have any questions about this study, you can ask me

at f.meng.1@research.gla.ac.uk , my supervisors Dr Christopher Hand and Dr Dely Elliot

at christopher.hand@glasgow.ac.uk and dely.elliott@glasgow.ac.uk . To pursue any complaint about the conduct of the research: Lead for Ethical Review, College of Social Sciences, (socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk).

Thank you for reading this.

If you are based in the UK, and have any problems, or need to speak about difficulties you are having, there are counselling and support services available, including the Samaritans who are free to phone at any time on 116123, whatever you are going through.

<https://www.samaritans.org/>

<http://breathingspace.scot/>

If you are based outside the UK, please seek support from either your own University, or via your workplace, or from relevant local health / support services.

Appendix B. Consent Form (Study 1)



College of Social
Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: Exploring how Chinese international doctoral students successfully 'go through' the transitions under UK education system

Researcher: Fanzhu Meng (f.meng.1@research.gla.ac.uk)

Supervisors: Dr. Christopher Hand (Christopher.Hand@glasgow.ac.uk)

Dr. Dely Elliot (dely.elliott@glasgow.ac.uk)

My name is Fanzhu Meng, and I am a student at the University of Glasgow. I am currently working on my PhD research project. The topic for the project is an investigation about how Chinese international doctoral students successfully 'go through' the transitions under the UK education system.

Please read the following statements that apply to you, and if you consent, please mark and sign below.

I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary, and they are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

The findings will form a report that will be accessible to university support services in the UK.

Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed if you disclose any intention to harm yourself or others.

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym and they have the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym according to their preferences.

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my grades/employment arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

- All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.

- The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.
- I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
- I understand that other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form

I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I consent to interviews being audio-recorded.

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant Signature

Date

Name of ResearcherSignature

Date

Appendix C. Instructions for The River of Experience (Study 1)

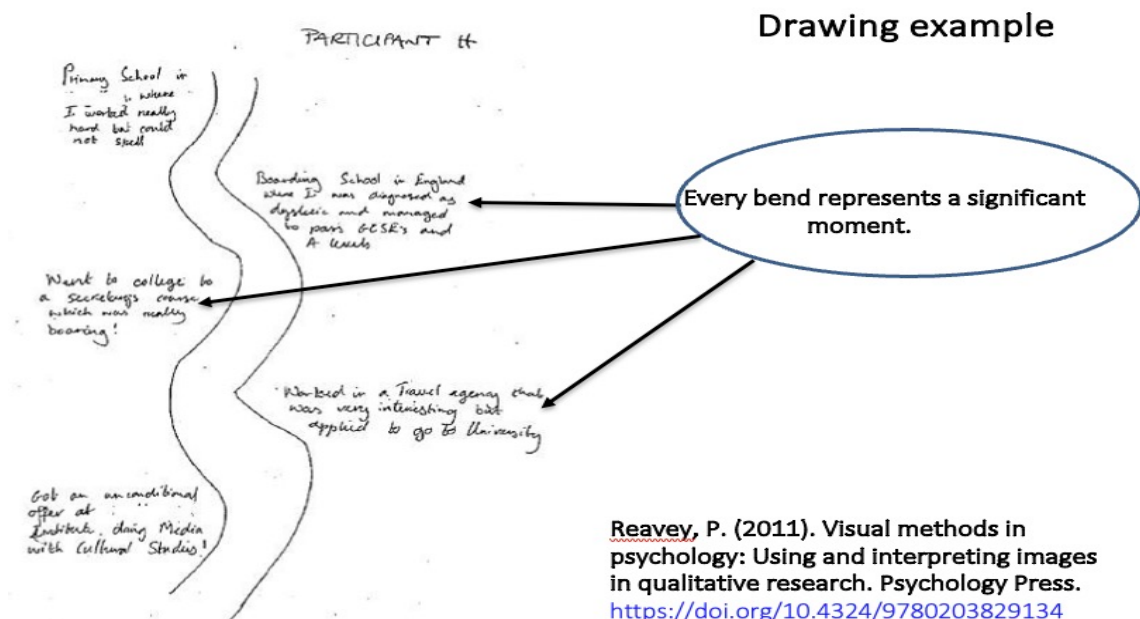


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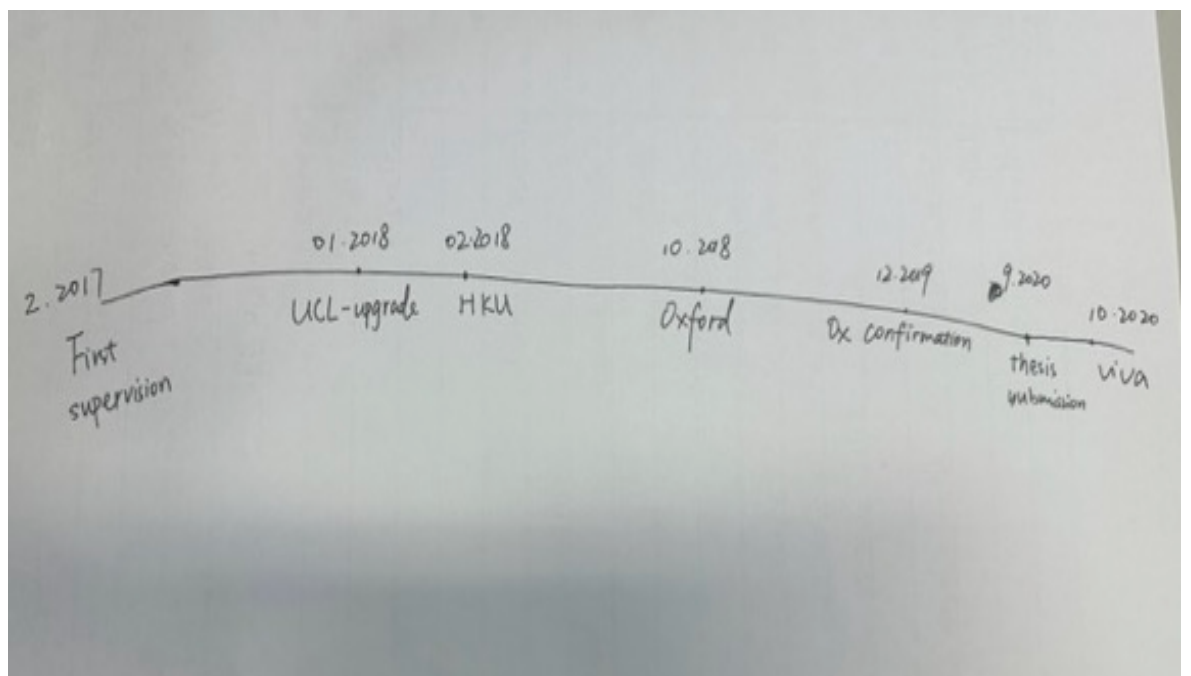
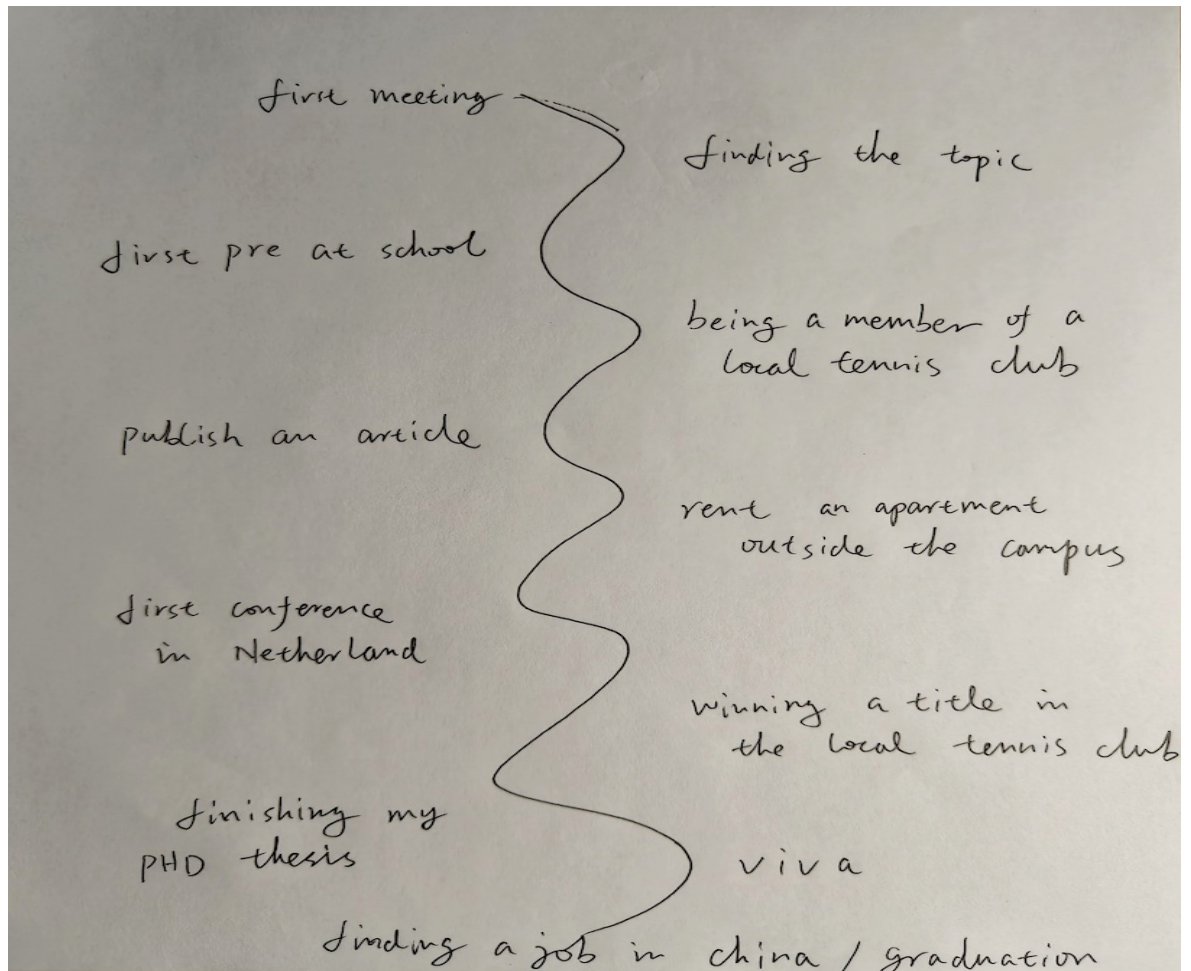
Instructions for The River of Experience

I appreciate your agreement to take part in the study. Before the interview, I would like to ask you to complete a pre-interview task, which will take about 10 minutes to finish. Please follow the instructions below to proceed.

- On a blank sheet of paper, please draw a river to depict your entire doctoral journey. The beginning of the river symbolizes your first official meeting with your supervisors, and the end signifies your PhD graduation.
- For your drawing, each bend in the river represents a significant moment in your doctoral journey. Please provide a short explanation for every river bend, which could be a milestone or a moment of importance to you in the PhD life. These significant moments could be related to your personal life, cultural background, or academic experiences.
- During the interview, be ready to discuss what each river bend represents and what makes them significant to your PhD experience.
- Kindly take a picture of your drawing as we will refer to it during the interview. In case you are unable to take a picture, you may show the image on the screen.
- Please see the drawing example below.



Appendix D. Illustrative River Drawings (Study 1)



Appendix E. Interview Guide (Study 1)

Ice-breaker Questions:

1. How are you today?
2. Can you briefly introduce yourself and your background as a doctoral student in the UK?
3. What motivated you to pursue a doctoral degree in the UK?

Main Interview Questions:

1. Please could you talk through this river and explain why you draw the river like this?
2. What does your river represent?
3. What do the different parts of the river mean to you?
4. How does your river represent your experience of transitioning to the UK educational system?
5. Are there any parts of the river that are particularly meaningful to you?
6. Why is X (pointing something in a picture) an important aspect of your transition experience? How did you manage that transition?
7. Can you reflect on the learning and growth that occurred during this transition? What did you discover about yourself and your capabilities?
8. Can you share any memorable moments when you felt successful or accomplished in navigating a particular transition or challenge? What factors contributed to that success?
9. Can you tell me about a moment when you felt particularly successful or accomplished in navigating a transition in the UK?
10. Is there anything you would like to add or change about your river?
11. Is there anything else you want to discuss about your transition experience which is not showed here?

Mood-booster Questions:

1. Is there any advice or tips you would like to share with other international students who may be facing similar transitions in the UK education system?
2. What aspects of the UK education system do you find most valuable or beneficial for international students like yourself?

Appendix F. Participant Information Sheet (Study 2)



College of Social
Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

Study title: Exploring the employability experiences of Chinese international Postgraduate Researchers (PGR) in the UK universities.

Researcher: Fanzhu Meng (f.meng.1@research.gla.ac.uk)

Supervisors: Dr. Christopher Hand (Christopher.Hand@glasgow.ac.uk)

Dr. Dely Elliot (dely.elliott@glasgow.ac.uk)

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

The purpose of this study is to explore the employability experiences of Chinese international Postgraduate Researchers (PGR) in UK universities. If you decided to take part in the interview, I will ask you some questions about what you think about your experiences when studying in the UK. This will take about 45 minutes and your participation is voluntary. You can stop the interview at any time, and you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

- **Keeping information confidential**

All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation. Participants will be referred to by pseudonym in any publication arising from the research. Notably, you will not be able to withdraw once data have been anonymised - this will be by September 2024.

- Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

- **The results of this study**

I will analyse the data I collect from participants and present this in the thesis which I am writing for my qualification, PhD in Education. This may be disseminated on conference

papers, research reports, journals, or a PhD thesis. Any participants can access the outputs of the study by requested. Anonymised datasets suitable for future re-use will be openly available via data repository (Enlighten). The anonymised research data will be deposited in Enlighten for up to 10 years, and then be destroyed totally.

- **Review of the study**

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee.

If you have any questions about this study, you can ask me

at f.meng.1@research.gla.ac.uk , my supervisors Dr Christopher Hand and Dr Dely Elliot

at christopher.hand@glasgow.ac.uk and dely.elliott@glasgow.ac.uk . To pursue any complaint about the conduct of the research: Lead for Ethical Review, College of Social Sciences, (socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk).

Thank you for reading this.

If you are based in the UK, and have any problems, or need to speak about difficulties you are having, there are counselling and support services available, including the Samaritans who are free to phone at any time on 116123, whatever you are going through.

<https://www.samaritans.org/>

<http://breathingspace.scot/>

If you are based outside the UK, please seek support from either your own University, or via your workplace, or from relevant local health / support services.

Appendix G. Consent Form (Study 2)



College of Social
Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: Exploring the employability experiences of Chinese international Postgraduate Researchers in the UK universities

Researcher: Fanzhu Meng (f.meng.1@research.gla.ac.uk)

Supervisors: Dr. Christopher Hand (Christopher.Hand@glasgow.ac.uk)

Dr. Dely Elliot (dely.elliot@glasgow.ac.uk)

My name is Fanzhu Meng, and I am a student at the University of Glasgow. I am currently working on my PhD research project. The topic for the project is an investigation about the employability experiences of Chinese international Postgraduate Researchers in the UK universities.

Please read the following statements that apply to you, and if you consent, please mark and sign below.

I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary. Notably, you will not be able to withdraw once data have been anonymised - this will be by September 2024. The findings will form a report that will be accessible to university support services in the UK. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed if you disclose any intention to harm yourself or others. I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym and they have the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym according to their preferences. I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my grades/employment arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

- All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.
- I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

- I understand that other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form

I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project. I consent to interviews being audio-recorded.

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant Signature

Date

Name of ResearcherSignature

Date

Appendix H. Interview Guide (Study 2)

Ice-breaker Questions:

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself and your background as a doctoral student in the UK?
2. Can you tell me a bit about your academic journey so far and what led you to choose your field of study?

Main Interview Questions:

1. Have you started thinking about what you would like to do after completing your PhD?
2. Where do you envision working—UK, China, or elsewhere?
3. What might assist you as you transition from a PhD to a career phase?
4. Are you familiar with the expectations of both academia and industry?
5. In your view, what can support you to accomplish your career objectives?
6. In this respect, which skills do you think are more valuable? Which skills do you tend to prioritise?
7. Describe any initiatives you have taken to enhance your employability during your doctoral program.
8. If you took part in an employability session as a doctoral scholar, please tell me about your experience.
9. What is useful? What is not useful? Think of pursuing an academic career and a non-academic career.
10. Have you faced any barriers or challenges in accessing employability support services?
11. What do you consider your competitive advantages in the workplace compared to other doctoral students?
12. How would you rate the university's employability support services? Are there any specific resources or programs you'd like to see introduced or expanded?

Mood-booster Questions:

1. What aspects of your research or academic work bring you the most joy or satisfaction?
2. How do you typically unwind and relax after a challenging day or week of doctoral work?