



## Article

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# Investigating the impact of experiential learning on employability skill development and employment outcomes: a UK case study of MBA students from the Indian Subcontinent

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## ABSTRACT

Global economic events have had a profound effect upon both businesses and the available workforce. Industries need a more skilful and advanced labour market and individuals who complete tertiary-level education are afforded better protection against economic uncertainties. Consequently, demand for higher education worldwide is growing, due to a rising number of globally mobile students. However, return on investment is important and curriculums offering employability enhancement and work opportunities are motivating factors when international students make their study decisions. This paper details one UK university's approach to enhancing international student employability skills and employment outcomes, using a 3-day experiential learning residential on an MBA programme. Employing a survey design, the research investigates the benefits of this residential to 182 international MBA students (all from the Indian subcontinent region). The findings report that the international students developed key employability skills via the residential which significantly increased their propensity to obtain subsequent employment. The results of this paper provide much needed insight into improving both the employability skills and employment outcomes of international students, especially students from the Indian subcontinent, via immersive experiential learning activities.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Employability; employment; experiential learning; international postgraduate students; Indian subcontinent

## Introduction

The global pool of international students is growing, with increasing numbers of students wishing to study undergraduate and postgraduate degrees abroad (OECD 2022). Since 2003, the total number of international students worldwide has grown at a steady 6% year-on-year (British Council 2020a). The top four global recruiters attracting international students are the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada (OECD 2022). Combined, they have over 2,000,000 international students enrolled in their higher education systems (Institute of International Education 2021).

Host countries rely heavily upon international students to sustain both the local and national economy (Han, Gulanowski, and Sears 2022) and specifically in the UK, to sustain their own higher education system. For example, domestic students in England on undergraduate programmes benefit from a tuition fee cap (£9,250 per year) which is to remain fixed until 2024 (Fazackerley 2022). This poses a sustainability challenge for English Universities amidst the rising costs of teaching

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(Russel Group External Briefing 2022). Conversely, tuition fees for international students and postgraduate students are not capped, which affords English universities more opportunity for expansion. International students have therefore become a necessity for British higher education institutions' (HEI) survival.

China and India are the biggest exporters of international students. Combined, these economies provide over 30% of the global number of students choosing to study internationally in one of the top four global recruiter countries. For the UK, Indian student numbers are rapidly rising, with record numbers of Indian students applying for study visas (Universities 2022). This influx from India, is attributed to developments in the Indian economy over the past 20 years, resulting in growing middle classes and mounting support for the benefits of studying abroad (ICEF Monitor 2022).

In addition to a changing international student body, UK universities are witnessing a growing demand for postgraduate programmes, especially those containing practical training or work opportunities, culminating in a 32% increase in Indian students (Duttagupta 2018). Whilst it has long been known that *'university students do in fact operate in rational and utilitarian ways, looking to optimise their potential for a return on their investment in education'* (Tomlinson 2017, 302), for international students especially, work experience opportunities and employability-enhancing initiatives, are of particular importance and factor heavily into country and course decision-making (British Council 2020a, Universities UK International 2020; Duttagupta 2018). Indian markets specifically, place huge emphasis on international employability (ICEF Monitor 2022).

At a time when the UK is experiencing growing numbers of international students, who are specifically motivated by employability and employment prospects, the UK and global economy has experienced volatility. Brexit, Covid-19, the war on Ukraine, increases in energy and food prices, coupled with ensuing supply-chain challenges, have brought uncertainty to the UK jobs market (Hooley 2020; Adams 2022; The; Institute for Government 2022). Even in favourable economic climates, it can be especially hard for international students to obtain work experiences in their host country, given additional barriers international students can face (Universities UK International et al. 2020; Jackson and Tomlinson 2021). Meeting international student employability expectations is therefore a substantial challenge for HEIs who rely upon international cohorts.

This is exacerbated by a lack of literature that looks specifically at enhancing the employability of taught postgraduate international students, therefore, more insight is urgently needed (Universities UK International 2020). Furthermore, international students are often reported as one homogenous group, with the fastest-growing student cohort from the Indian subcontinent, largely ignored in the literature (Kansal et al. 2022). To address the literature gap, this research provides an evidence-based study which showcases the employability and employment benefits to international students, of an immersive experiential learning residential for other institutions to draw upon. This is of international significance given the growing number of international students worldwide and the pressure on universities globally to provide international students with a return on their investment.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***International student employability***

It is widely accepted that employability comprises much more than simply being employed (Singh and Fan 2021), as one's propensity to obtain employment is just one facet of the employability concept. 'Employability' also encompasses the possession of skills, attributes, attitudes and competencies to obtain and remain in the job market (Melinda, Ferreira, and Potgieter 2015). Yorke and Knight (2006, 3) go further, asserting that graduate employability should ultimately *'benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'*. For personal developments to fully benefit the individual, self-perceived employability also plays a significant role. Consequently, graduates, need to have self-belief and self-confidence that

they are capable to prosper, whilst demonstrating resilience through challenging times (Tomlinson 2017; Tuononen and Hytinen 2022). Employability is therefore, a complex and multi-faceted concept with many interwoven parts.

Since the turn of the millennia, graduate employability has attracted increased attention in educational and political spheres, both in the UK and internationally (Huang 2013). Following the 2008 global financial crisis and more recent worldwide COVID-19 impacts, the focus on graduate employability has only strengthened (OECD 2022). As a result, several graduate employability frameworks now exist. One such framework is the CareerEDGE model by Sewell and Dacre Pool (2010). CareerEDGE is a mnemonic, which represents; Career development learning, Experience, Degree subject knowledge and skills, Generic skills and Emotional intelligence. Following this CareerEDGE model, a practical questionnaire was developed known as the CareerEDGE Employability Development Profile (EDP) (Sewell and Dacre Pool 2010). This EDP is a diagnostic tool to measure employability, which maps onto the components of the CareerEDGE model (Pool, Lorraine, and Sewel 2014).

The inclusion of 'Emotional Intelligence' (EI) as a component of graduate employability is one of the salient features of the CareerEDGE framework and EDP tool (Dacre and Lorraine 2017, 317), as emotional intelligence and emotional self-efficacy are believed to be strong predictors of employability (Pool, Lorraine, and Qualter 2013). Rozell, Pettijohn, and Parker (2002, 272) supports this notion as they state that *'grade point average (GPA) as well as a host of other testing measures have been used, often unsuccessfully, to predict career success . . . emotional intelligence is the missing link'*.

Lifestyle, background and cross-cultural differences in EI traits have been found (Goleman 2020), specifically that Western and Eastern populations score differently on a range of EI measures (Shipper et al. 2003; Johnsen et al. 2012; Gökçen et al. 2014). Thus, leading Sanchez-Ruiz, Mavroveli, and Petrides (2021, 305) to determine that *'culture plays a pivotal role in influencing emotion-related behaviours and values'*. Telbis, Helgeson, and Kingsbury (2014) outline further cultural barriers for international students, ranging from language differences to the impacts of moving from collectivist to individualist societies, all of which can negatively affect international students' confidence levels. This is compounded further when international students then seek employment, especially for those who may have little experience or knowledge of the host country's employment practices and cultures. International students who are not aware of the 'rules of the game' are placed at a further disadvantage (Tomlinson 2017). According to HEPI (2022), gaining work experience is crucial to enhancing employability skills, however, it is challenging for international students to acquire such opportunities in the UK (Universities UK International 2020; Jackson and Tomlinson 2021). Data collected from careers personnel at 43 HEIs found that visa regulations and sponsorship concerns were offered as the greatest barriers international students and graduates faced with UK hiring employers (Universities UK International 2020). Consequently, only one in five international students obtained paid work experience during their studies that is related to their degree and 42% of postgraduate international students had not secured any work experiences at all (HEPI 2022).

In the absence of work opportunities, international students may rely solely on the careers and employability support offered by their university. A recent report outlined the lack of provision available, noting only 52% of international students were satisfied with the level of careers and employability support accessible to them (International Student Futures 2022). This may be due to the volume of demand careers teams are facing. When compared to domestic students, international students have a higher necessity for careers support, which careers teams cannot meet amidst growing international student numbers (Universities UK International 2020). Indian students particularly, are more likely to book appointments with careers services (Universities UK International 2020). Indian students also list opportunities for obtaining work experiences as one of the top concerns when applying to study in the UK (International Student Futures 2022) and are also the cohort most attracted by the new Graduate Visa route for extending their stay to work in the UK (Universities UK International 2020). Employment and employability are, therefore, crucial for the Indian market.

Due to the wide-ranging barriers to developing international student employability, no 'one size fits all' solution currently exists. Differences amongst the needs of domestic and international students should be fully understood and accommodated for. As supported by Huang and Turner (2018, 175), higher education *'institutions have largely been UK-centric on their focus, with limited attention paid to the employability needs of international students'*. However, now recognising the increasing significance of international students to the UK higher education sector, there are calls for universities to consider *'ways of embedding experiences that support the development of employability skills and work experience within PGT courses'* (Universities UK International 2020, 70). Furthermore, whilst the focus has started to shift in recent years, there is still much to understand about developing diverse and inclusive approaches to enhancing international student employability, which do not rely heavily upon students obtaining work placements. The residential experiential learning approach is one way of addressing the gap in employability provision.

### **Experiential learning**

Experiential learning is the process of individuals learning by experience ('learning by doing') and the act of reflecting on authentic hands-on experiences, to maximise and deepen the learning from that experience (Kolb 1984). Using experiential learning activities to enhance students' employability skills, is not a new idea (see Laverie 2006). Tomlinson (2017) stresses that skills developed in a classroom environment are not always directly transferrable to a workplace context. As the contexts of education and employment can be so diverse, skills developed in a more situated context yield better outcomes. The experiential learning approach has gathered much evidence over the past two decades as an effective method for enhancing students' skills (Hicks 1996). However, there is common acknowledgement that not all experiential learning activities are equal, as not all activities elicit immersive and deeper-level learning and reflections (Nenzhelele 2014).

#### **The MBA residential**

The experiential learning residential was a mandatory 3-day leadership development programme embedded into the MBA course. The residential is largely undertaken outdoors, based in a remote location in Northern England and delivered by a 3rd party organisation. Students work in groups, on tasks in order to enhance key skills, such as: communication, leadership, interpersonal and negotiation skills. Self-reflection is supported throughout, requiring students to draw from prior life, education and cultural experiences. Additionally, students review their individual personality traits and characteristics to explain their behaviours and actions. Developing reflection skills has been linked to better employment outcomes. Tuononen and Hytinen (2022) report that those who struggled to reflect on their individual skills and abilities, were more likely to have less favourable employment outcomes.

Enhancing student reflection skills also develops emotional intelligence, as students contemplate how and why they respond in a certain way, to a shared experience. This residential therefore operates on the principles of inclusive curriculum design; recognising that *'students have multiple identities that are shaped by their previous experiences and that a diverse range of personal circumstances influence how they study'* (Morgan and Houghton 2011, 8). Seeing these multiple identities exhibited on the residential and observing how their peers respond to the activities, helps students to better understand themselves. This aligns with the principles of Bandura's (1971) social learning theory, whereby people learn from each other through shared experiences.

### **Materials and methods**

The aim of this research is to investigate the employability development and subsequent employment outcomes for international postgraduate taught (PGT) students who undertook a 3-day experiential learning residential as part of their course. This project held the following research objectives:

(RO1) to understand the specific employability skills PGT students from the Indian Subcontinent region felt they developed through the residential experience.

(RO2) to determine the effect of the residential on subsequent employment outcomes for the international PGT students.

The main issue being addressed in this research concerns the needs of the rising number of international PGT students who are specifically seeking programmes which enhance their employability and propensity to secure work. With this problem statement in mind, the research hypotheses are:

The alternative hypothesis (H1): due to the inclusive nature of the residential, international students will develop both EI and other key employability skills, which will help them apply for, and secure, subsequent employment.

The null hypothesis (H0): No statistical significance will exist between the variables and any relationship between the development of emotional intelligence skills on the residential and the subsequent employment experiences, will be due to chance.

This study adopts a quantitative approach in that a questionnaire was developed based upon the CareerEDGE EDP conceptual framework and applying this to PGT students from the Indian Subcontinent region after they had taken part in the MBA residential.

### ***The questionnaire***

In July 2020, an online questionnaire was distributed to all 629 students who were studying a 2-year MBA at a North-West England HEI. All students were international and from the Indian Subcontinent region. This questionnaire sought student views on their residential experience and how this experience had enhanced a range of employability skills. In addition, students were asked whether they felt any development of skills, or the residential experience itself, factored into subsequent employment outcomes.

The questionnaire produced was based upon the Employability Development Profile (EDP) diagnostic tool devised by Sewell and Dacre Pool (2010) as part of their CareerEDGE model of employability. As noted earlier, this model includes questions on Emotional Intelligence, perceived as a key component of graduate employability (Dacre and Lorraine 2017). The EDP was used as a basis and adapted for the purposes of this research involving PGT international students. Specifically, the generic skill questions and emotional intelligence questions from the EDP diagnostic tool were used with the inclusion of some employment-acquisition and employment-outcome questions.

The questionnaire had three components; the first two sections addressed generic employability skills and Emotional Intelligence from the EDP. The final component centred on students' wider benefits, including subsequent employment experiences and outcomes. The wording of all questions contained within the questionnaire were framed within the context of the residential and respondents answered questions using a similar Likert style design to the original EDP measurement tool.

### ***The sample***

All students studying a 2-year MBA course in the Business School at one North-West England HEI were invited to take part in the research. The MBA had 4 intakes (January 2020 September 2019, January 2019 September 2018), with a total sample size of 629 current full-time students. A total of 182 students completed the questionnaire, resulting in a 28.9% response rate. All students studying on this programme were international students and all from the Indian Subcontinent region (which includes the countries: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka).



## **Quantitative data analysis**

The questionnaire largely produced quantitative data and the analysis performed in SPSS includes binary logistic regression models for the binary dependent variable (Andy 2017; Pallant 2007). This has enabled predictions into the probability that a student will be more likely to obtain employment based on a range of independent variables.

### **Dependent and independent variables**

Our Dependent variable (DV), i.e. the main factor that we are attempting to predict, was 'the residential helped me gain employment'. This is a categorical variable as responses were coded dichotomously as either 'Yes' or 'No'. This dependent variable related to a key question in the questionnaire which sought to ascertain if students felt that the residential experience and skills developed from this, had helped them to get a job (either a placement, part-time employment or a graduate role at the end of their programme).

Our Independent Variables (IV), i.e. factors that we hypothesise have an impact on the DV include: three variables on the development of EI skills, three variables on the development of certain employability skills, and two variables on whether the residential experience was used by international students in recruitment processes for jobs. All eight IVs are categorical variables with dichotomous responses of either 'Yes' or 'No'. The underlying CareerEDGE framework helped to determine these independent variables.

### **Qualitative data**

As the data collection tool is a questionnaire, most data produced is quantitative. However, the questionnaire did include some open text questions. Respondents could type in longer responses in text, as such, some qualitative data was provided. However, this qualitative data is used as supplementary to the statistical findings, whereby a selection of student quotes is included to add some depth and wider context to the results.

### **Ethical considerations**

Prior to the start of the research project, ethical approval was received from the authors' University's Research Ethics Committee (Ethics Reference No: BAHSS2 0084 FR, Date: 29/4/2020).

## **Findings**

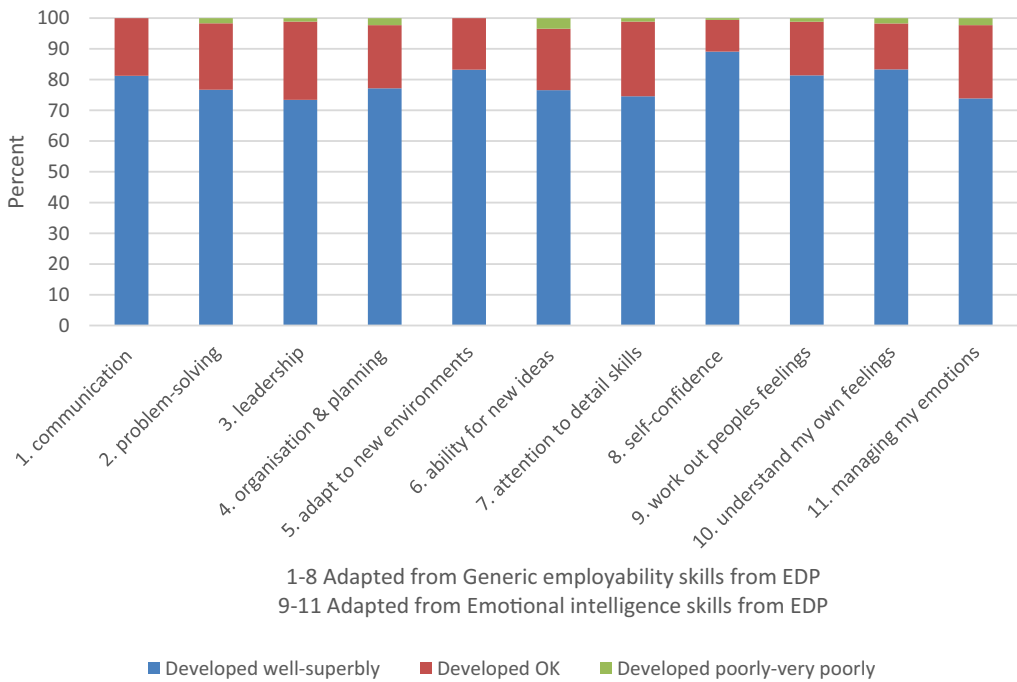
### ***RO1 - To understand the specific employability skills PGT students from the Indian Subcontinent region felt they developed through the residential experience***

The questionnaire first asked students about their perspective on the development of key generic employability skills and emotional intelligence as a direct result of the 3-day experiential learning residential.

As Figure 1 shows, all employability skills listed were perceived to be developed to some extent by the residential experience. The top 5 employability skills that students reported developing either well or superbly on the residential, were: self-confidence; learn how to understand my own feelings; adaptability to new environments; communication skills and learn how to work out what other people were feeling. Two of these five employability skills were markers of EI: 'understand my own feelings' and 'work out what other people were feeling'. The two employability skills students felt were the least developed by the residential, were 'leadership' and 'attention to detail' skills with 73% and 75% of the student cohort developed these well to superbly respectively.

In addition to the quantitative skill-development questions, students provided qualitative comments on their development of these key employability skills. Most students (89% of





**Figure 1.** Student perceptions of their development of key employability skills and emotional intelligence from the residential experience.

respondents) reported that the residential experience increased their self-confidence either well or superbly:

I can surely say that I met with the leader within me on the residential. This in turn boosted my confidence as I was being followed by my teammates’. A September 2018 intake MBA student

Before my residential I was somewhat timid and shy, but after the residential experience I have gained confidence in my skills and learnt that skills can be developed with practice and the feedback was very helpful to understand from expert point of view A January 2020 intake MBA student

Across the three EI questions, on average, 80% of students agreed that the residential had developed well or superbly, aspects of their emotional intelligence:

I particularly found it difficult to communicate with some of my team members due to language barriers. My team members mostly spoke in their native language all the time which rendered the learning experience more frustrating than I expected. Due to this main frustration, I learnt how to control my emotions and most importantly I cultivated a lot of self-control. A January 2020 intake MBA student

Personality assessments helped me to understand the reasons for my actions and emotions A January 2019 intake MBA student

Alongside the development of key employability skills, students were also asked about any wider impacts they experienced from attending the residential. For example, the questionnaire asked, ‘as an international student, did the residential help provide you with relevant experience in the UK’, to which 74% of students replied ‘yes’:

The residential improved my perception about life in UK. Prior to this, we were adapted to live according to our home conditions. But the residential gave us an opportunity to actively engage and learn about our peers and tutors and to reflect and appreciate our shortcomings A September 2019 intake MBA student

In the beginning, I was very shy to talk to other people, after residential, I gained some knowledge about the UK and people. Poor Communication played a major part in my life and it was only my drawback. But now I am really confident and enthusiastic. A September 2018 intake MBA student

In addition, international students reported that they particularly benefitted from the experiential learning approach that the residential employed:

Although I had previous work experience, at this residential I had challenging situations of reality, where people are out of their comfort zone in aspects of culture and variances in team member responses. This is where real interpersonal skills are tested and exposed. One cannot hide it within. This gives us true experience of reflection, different from what I got from my previous workplace. A January 2019 intake MBA student

Getting into situation during task helped us to improve our skills and provided a reality check on our strengths and weaknesses. Unlike many other subjects, it made us study about ourself A January 2020 intake MBA student

As the above findings show, students reported that they developed a range of skills via the residential experience. The next level in this study, linked to Research Objective 2, was to ascertain how the development of such skills translated into employment outcomes.

### ***RO2 - to determine the effect of the residential on subsequent employment outcomes for the international PGT students***

The second part of the questionnaire asked if the residential experience may have helped students to obtain employment (ranging from part-time work whilst studying to industry placements and graduate roles). The questionnaire asked about students' use of the residential experience in recruitment processes (job application forms and interviews) as well as an overall question asking if students felt the residential experience had helped them to gain subsequent employment. A summary of these results is provided in [Table 1](#) below:

Students were asked to comment on how they had used the residential experience in their recruitment processes:

I have been using this reflection at all my job interviews afterwards. 80% of my responses were taking "evidences" from my reflection of residential days. A January 2019 intake MBA student

I added my experience of residential in my CV and explained it in some of my interviews. My experiences were about teamwork, time management, decisions making, leadership. Those are the basics that every MBA candidate should have experience in. Hence I believe these experiences helped me get an internship. A January 2019 intake MBA student

For employment, I think it [the residential] gave me an additional thing to mention while describing about team work and leadership A January 2019 intake MBA student

The residential actually helped me to crack two of my interviews for my part time job. I am satisfied and the HR was very much impressed by the way I expressed my views very effectively because of the skills I enhanced during residential. A January 2019 intake MBA student

Some students had not directly used the residential experience in their CV, job applications or job interviews, but felt that the residential experience has indirectly assisted them with their employment – seeking:

**Table 1.** Student responses to questions pertaining to employment.

	Yes	No/Unsure
In job application forms, have you used examples from the residential?	53%	47%
In job interviews, have you used examples from the residential?	56%	44%
Do you feel the residential experience has helped you to gain employment?	63%	37%

It actually helped me to realise who I am and what's my strengths and weakness also, how I could actively participate in teamwork. That actually helped me in interviews and workplace. A January 2019 intake MBA student

It did not help me directly in obtaining employment. It only enlightened us about our strength and weaknesses in different situations. Improved our skills and understanding on different areas. Three days of residential experience did not provide us with any "golden ticket" which can help us in getting employment right away, but it helped us to understand and develop our skillset. A January 2020 intake MBA student

To further understand the impact of the residential experience to subsequent employment outcomes, three binary logistic regression analyses were performed which are detailed in turn below:

### ***Binary logistic regression analysis to determine the impact of generic employability skill development on students obtaining subsequent employment***

The first binary logistic regression was undertaken to ascertain the impact of several employability skill variables on students' perceptions that the residential helped them to obtain employment. This analysis contained 3 independent categorical variables: (1) developed self-confidence, (2) developed communication skills and (3) developed leadership skills. The full model containing all 3 predictors was statistically significant  $X^2(3, N = 170) = 12.007, P < .05$ . This means that the model was able to distinguish between respondents who thought the residential helped them to obtain employment and those who did not.

The model summary table in Appendix 1 provides the  $R^2$  value, which helps determine the amount of variation. The  $R$  value demonstrates that 9.3% of the variance in the dependent variable can be explained by these three skill predictor variables. Whilst an  $R^2$  value of less than 10% is low, the independent variables are statistically significant, as such, there is a relationship between these skills variables and obtaining subsequent employment.

Looking at the variables in equation table in Appendix 1 only 1 variable made a uniquely significant contribution; the development of self-confidence ( $P < .05$ ). The value in the Exp (B) column are the odds ratios which have been calculated on the predicted probability for the membership of 'No' responses. For the development of self-confidence variable, the odds ratio is 3.161. This indicates that students who did not feel that the residential helped them obtain employment, were over 3 times more likely to report little development of their self-confidence on the residential. The self-confidence variable is therefore the strongest predictor of students who felt the residential helped them to obtain employment.

### ***Binary logistic regression analysis to determine the impact of Emotional Intelligence development on students obtaining subsequent employment***

The second set of skills which showed to have a significant relationship with helping students to obtain employment were the 3 emotional intelligence variables. A second binary logistic regression was undertaken to ascertain the impact of 3 emotional intelligence variables on students' perceptions that the residential helped them to obtain employment. This analysis contained 3 independent categorical variables: (1) Developed an understanding of what others were feeling, (2) developed ability to understand own feelings and (3) developed ability to better manage own emotions. Again, the full model containing all 3 predictors was statistically significant  $X^2(3, N = 171) = 13.932, P < .05$ .

The model summary table in Appendix 2, provides the  $R^2$  value which helps determine the amount of variation. The table demonstrates that 10.7% of the variance in the dependent variable can be explained by these three emotional intelligence predictor variables. Again, this is a relatively low  $R^2$  value, but with statistically significant independent variables, there is a relationship between these EI variables and obtaining subsequent employment.

Looking at variables in the equation table in Appendix 2, only 1 variable made a uniquely significant contribution, which was the development of the ability to manage own emotions more

effectively ( $P = <.05$ ). The value in the Exp (B) column contain the odds ratios which tell you about the direction of the relationship. For the ability to manage emotions variable, the odds ratio is 3.574. This indicates that students who felt the residential helped them obtain employment, were over 3 times more likely to also have felt they developed their ability to manage their own emotions whilst on the residential. Developing the ability to manage one's own emotions was the strongest predictor of students who felt the residential helped them to obtain employment.

### ***Binary logistic regression analysis to determine the impact of the use of the residential experience in job applications and interviews***

A third and final logistic regression was undertaken to ascertain the impact of two recruitment process variables on student perceptions that the residential helped them to obtain employment. This analysis contained 2 independent categorical variables: (1) residential experience used in application forms and (2) residential experience used in interviews. The full model containing both predictor variables was statistically significant  $X^2(2, N = 168) = 21.924, P = <.005$ . This means that the model was able to distinguish between respondents who thought the residential helped them to obtain employment and those who did not.

The model summary table in Appendix 3 provides the  $R$  value, which demonstrates that 16.8% of the variance in the dependent variable can be explained by these two predictor variables. This is a bigger effect size than the previous two regression models and indicative of a stronger relationship between these variables.

Looking at the variables in the equation table in Appendix 3, one variable made a uniquely significant contribution, which was the use of the residential experience in interviews ( $P = <.05$ ). The value in the Exp (B) column contain the odds ratios which have been calculated on the predicted probability for the membership of 'No' responses. For the use of the residential experience in interviews variable, the odds ratio is 2.785. This indicates that students who did not feel as though the residential helped them obtain employment, were over 2 times more likely to report not having used the residential experience in interviews. The use of the residential experience in interviews variable is, therefore, the strongest predictor of students who felt the residential helped them to obtain employment.

As the above findings show, most of the international students reported that they developed a range of skills through the residential experience. This involved not just the development of generic employability skills such as communication and adaptability skills, but also enhancing their own EI and cultural awareness of the UK. The development of these aspects coupled with the immersive experiential learning approach with ongoing reflections, appear to have had a profound impact on students' self-confidence levels.

Understanding further the link between the development of these employability skills and abilities, to subsequent employment outcomes, the binary logistic regression tests clearly show a series of significant relationships. Namely, the deeper the level of skill development on the residential, the more likely students are to then obtain employment. Furthermore, the more students use the example of the residential in recruitment processes, again, the more likely those students are in obtaining employment.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this research was to investigate the employability development and subsequent employment outcomes for international students who undertook a 3-day experiential learning residential as part of their postgraduate course. The concept of employability involves more than employment and encompasses the development of skills, capabilities, knowledge and mindset which help a student to transition into the workplace and prosper in employment (Melinda, Ferreira, and Potgieter 2015; Singh and Fan 2021; Yorke and Knight 2006). This study aimed to investigate the interplay between

the development of key employability skills and subsequent employment outcomes, which were the two aspects that formed the two research objectives:

(RO1) to understand the specific employability skills PGT students from the Indian Subcontinent region felt they developed through the residential experience.

(RO2) to determine the effect of the residential on subsequent employment outcomes for the international PGT students.

Whilst a range of employability skills were developed by international students on the residential, three main areas have been identified from the findings: (1) self-confidence, (2) emotional intelligence and (3) reflecting on the residential in employment recruitment processes. The development of key employability skills was found to have a significant relationship with employment outcomes post-residential.

### ***Self-confidence***

Tomlinson (2017) and Tuononen and Hytinen (2022) both highlighted the relationship of self-efficacy and self-confidence to enhanced employability. International students unfamiliar with the host country culture and customs have more of a need for confidence-building initiatives (Telbis, Helgeson, and Kingsbury 2014). This was especially true for the respondents of this study, surrounding a need to build on individual communication and interpersonal skills.

The role that cultural differences play in employability development, coupled with the possession of cultural capital, was mentioned in the introduction (Sanchez-Ruiz, Mavroveli, and Petrides 2021; Telbis, Helgeson, and Kingsbury 2014; Tomlinson 2017). For international students, this is a key part of their employability enhancement. It was evident from the MBA students that the residential helped to break down some of these barriers by developing employability skills following an inclusive approach, thus resulting in increased levels of self-confidence.

The regression analysis supported that those who developed self-confidence on the residential were more likely to report that the residential had resulted in them obtaining subsequent employment. The self-confidence variable was a strong predictor for students reporting that the residential had helped them to obtain work. The development of self-confidence on the residential therefore, had longer-term employability impacts for the MBA students, which is in line with findings from previous researchers (Tomlinson 2017; Tuononen and Hytinen 2022).

This finding provides new evidence to support the development of an underpinning employability skill of self-confidence, for enhancing international students' employment outcomes. This contribution helps to fill the gap in the existing literature pertaining to the development of international postgraduate student's employability (Universities UK International et al. 2020). Given that all the students in this study are from the Indian subcontinent, these findings also contribute valuable insight into the fast-growing Indian market, who are currently neglected in the literature (Kansal et al. 2022).

### ***Emotional intelligence***

The Employability Development Profile (EDP) diagnostic tool developed from the CareerEDGE model by Sewell and Dacre Pool (2010) was selected as the framework for this study given the prominence placed on EI. It is believed to be a strong predictor of employability and career success (Pool, Lorraine, and Qualter 2013; Rozell, Pettijohn, and Parker 2002). Furthermore, given its importance to employability and how culture helps shape an individual's EI (Sanchez-Ruiz, Mavroveli, and Petrides 2021), this aspect was of particular interest in this study.

The findings support that over 80% of the respondents felt that the residential experience has developed their EI skills either well or superbly. The logistic regression showed that students'

development of EI skills on the residential was a strong predictor of student's feelings that the residential helped them to obtain subsequent employment. Students who developed most in EI skills, were more likely to feel that the residential experience helped them to obtain work. Developing EI skills for international students, alongside developing self-confidence, is another key skill that enhances employability and employment outcomes for students from the Indian subcontinent region.

Whilst these findings support the conclusions of Rozell, Pettijohn, and Parker (2002), Sewell and Dacre Pool (2010) and Pool, Lorraine, and Qualter (2013) that enhanced EI skills are a strong predictor of employability and employment outcomes, the findings from this study can pinpoint that this is especially true for international postgraduate students, from countries within the Indian Subcontinent.

### ***Reflecting on the residential in employment recruitment processes***

The adoption of an immersive experiential learning residential meant that the MBA students were developing skills outside of the classroom, in a practical way. Students were required to draw from their previous experiences and to reflect on how their personality traits and characteristic affected their behaviour and actions. The residential was therefore, an inclusive approach to developing employability skills (Morgan and Houghton 2011). For the international students, this approach allowed the development of employability skills pertaining to the individual needs of the student, i.e. not a 'one-size-fits-all'. Furthermore, the iterative self-reflections that took place over the 3-day period facilitated international students to fine-tune their reflective practice, which in turn elicits a deeper learning experience (Kolb 1984).

Just over half of the sample stated they had used the residential experience to some extent in job application forms or interviews. In many of the comments, students explained how they had used this experience to reflect upon their learning of themselves and the development of their employability skills. This ratifies what Tomlinson (2017) postulates; skills developed outside of a formal classroom setting, are more relatable to employment contexts.

Given the benefits to those in the sample who used the residential experience in their CV, application forms and interviews, further work is required to encourage more students to draw upon this experience whilst job-seeking. As shown in Table 4.2.1. a large minority did not use the experience in either job application forms or in job interviews. This suggests, although students developed reflective practice skills on the residential, they might need more help and guidance instead on how to articulate their learning and development on residential and convey this to potential employers. This is a key finding, pertaining to further understanding the employability needs of international postgraduate students.

Overall, 63% of the questionnaire respondents felt that the residential experience had helped them to gain employment. The regression analysis was able to shine a spotlight on the links between the use of the residential experience in recruitment processes (job applications and interviews) and employment outcomes. The use of the residential experience in both application forms and interviews was statistically significant to students' views that this helped them to obtain employment. The use of residential experience in interviews was a particularly strong predictor and for students who did use this experience in interviews, they were significantly more likely to attribute subsequent employment to the residential.

The results raise an important consideration for developing more inclusive approaches within curriculums for developing employability skills of international students. International students are critical for UK HEIs survival, yet UK universities have largely neglected the employability needs of international students (Huang and Turner 2018). Consequently, study experiences in the UK are falling short of international expectations in terms of career support and employment access. The inclusion of experiential learning experiences can provide a solution to this challenge, which can also address the needs of many stakeholder groups. The students themselves have been shown to yield huge skills gains in just a short space of time. Furthermore, embedding such provision within PGT courses will alleviate some of the pressures faced by university careers teams to meet growing

demands from increasing international student numbers. Additionally, as the students were able to use the residential experience in their job applications and interviews, employers may also benefit from student applicants drawing on these experiences as evidence.

In summary, this research demonstrates the clear potential for experiential learning approaches as an effective and inclusive way to develop the employability and employment outcomes of international students, without the barriers of visas or sponsorship that are present with student work placements. This study, therefore, provides an evidence-based solution to Universities UK International (2020) request for more diverse and inclusive approaches to developing international student employability. Subsequently, future employability strategies of HEIs should explore the adoption of this approach in their curriculum plans, as a focused way to develop international student employability.

### **Limitations**

Whilst the findings obtained from this study are insightful, promising and significant, this does not distract from three key limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, this project looked at one postgraduate business programme within one HEI. As such, the findings are limited in their generalisability. The second main limitation was the inclusion of self-reporting questionnaires. Students had to rate their own skill development and students may either have over-estimated their skill development or struggled to accurately rate this. The third and final limitation is the potential power dynamic that may exist between the researchers and the participants. The researchers were also members of the academic teaching team and the participants their students. The researchers tried to accommodate for this by adopting a quantitative approach whereby students completed questionnaires anonymously, but the approach of inviting students to become respondents has resulted in power asymmetry.

Given these limitations, it is recommended that further research draws from wider samples of international students across different programmes, levels and institutions to fully investigate the links between experiential learning and employability skill development. In addition, research that utilises qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, would build on the findings of this research with deeper insight.

### **Conclusion**

International student employability is of central concern to universities worldwide amidst the growing number of globally mobile students. The findings from this study add to a small but growing pool of literature focusing upon international student employability and provide an evidence-based approach for enhancing international student employability without relying upon work placements.

These research findings support a rethinking of the view of industrial placements as a main method for enhancing student 'work readiness'. Instead, the findings encourage the use of experiential learning as an effective and inclusive solution for enhancing the employability and employment outcomes of international students. This is of global significance to all universities as they work towards meeting the needs of a growing international student body. As such, this project rejects the null hypothesis and accepts the alternative hypothesis, which states that due to the inclusive nature of the residential, international students will develop both emotional intelligence and other key employability skills, which will help them apply for, and secure, subsequent employment.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).



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## Appendix

### 1. Binary logistic regression 1 – output

#### Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients

		Chi-square	df	Sig.
Step 1	Step	12.007	3	.007
	Block	12.007	3	.007
	Model	12.007	3	.007

#### Model Summary

Step	–2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
1	213.179 <sup>a</sup>	.068	.093

<sup>a</sup>Estimation terminated at iteration number 3 because parameter estimates changed by less than .001.

#### Variables in the equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Developed self-confidence(1)	1.151	.585	3.868	1	.049	3.161	1.004	9.950
	Developed Leadership skills(1)	–.712	.391	3.313	1	.069	.491	.228	1.056
	Developed communication skills(1)	–.055	.470	0.14	1	.907	.947	.377	2.377
	Constant	–.077	.467	.027	1	.870	.926		

<sup>a</sup>Variable(s) entered on step 1: Developed self-confidence, Developed Leadership skills, Developed communication skills.

### 2. Binary logistic regression 2 – output

#### Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients

		Chi-square	df	Sig.
Step 1	Step	13.932	3	.003
	Block	13.932	3	.003
	Model	13.932	3	.003

#### Model Summary

Step	–2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
1	212.194 <sup>a</sup>	.078	.107

<sup>a</sup>Estimation terminated at iteration number 4 because parameter estimates changed by less than .001.

#### Variables in the equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Developed ability to understand what others are feeling(1)	–.839	.543	2.388	1	.122	.432	.149	1.252
	Developed ability to understand my own feelings(1)	.689	.510	1.828	1	.176	1.992	.734	5.419
	Developed ability to manage my emotions more effectively(1)	1.274	.460	7.669	1	.006	3.574	1.451	8.801
	Constant	–.288	.424	.462	1	.497	.750		

<sup>a</sup>Variable(s) entered on step 1: Developed ability to understand what others are feeling, Developed ability to understand my own feelings, Developed ability to manage my emotions more effectively.

## 3. Binary logistic regression 3 – output

## Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients

		Chi-square	df	Sig.
Step 1	Step	21.924	2	.000
	Block	21.924	2	.000
	Model	21.924	2	.000

## Model Summary

Step	-2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
1	197.066 <sup>a</sup>	.122	.168

<sup>a</sup>Estimation terminated at iteration number 4 because parameter estimates changed by less than .001.

## Variables in the equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Used in interviews(1)	1.024	.403	6.476	1	.011	2.785	1.265	6.131
	Used in Applications(1)	.751	.405	3.429	1	.064	2.119	.957	4.691
	Constant	-1.492	.282	27.948	1	.000	.225		

<sup>a</sup>Variable(s) entered on step 1: Used in interviews, Used in Applications.