Leveraging Employability 'Halo' Factors in the creation of Reputation based Brand Equity; a novel approach for UK Universities

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And for Holly, whose quiet kindness and indomitable spirit we miss everyday …

Abstract

This thesis examines student decision making, focusing on reputation-based brand equity in order to inform the theory and practice of marketing for international student recruitment, in the UK Higher Education sector. Presenting a potential novel model for the building of brand equity by Higher Education institutions, this study looks beyond the opaque factor of ranking and demonstrates the value of adopting an approach to building brand equity which incorporates alternative factors which can be harnessed to build an institution's reputation and ultimately boost its brand equity.

Examining the relationship and distinction between the concepts of 'ranking' and 'reputation' this study challenges highlights specifically the demonstrable potential for institutions to leverage, in the absence of a high ranking, employability related halo factors. The resulting halo effect, defined as the process by which a consumer forms a "consistent and statistically significant set of associations with a brand name" (Leuthesser et al, 1995) is presented as a basis for the formation of a reputation, which in turn could be used to drive the establishment of strong, relevant and resonant brand equity which positively influences decision making.

Employing a Critical Realist perspective and a mixed methods approach, the research employs both surveys and semi-structured interviews. By capturing the testimony of prospective students, this study also seeks to counter a previous tendency in the literature towards over reliance on testimony from current or former university students at the "post

hoc justification" stage of their decision-making journey (Oplatka 2015, p.267). By addressing and adapting established marketing theory to the international recruitment context, this study achieves the original aim of the DBA process, to contribute to the pursuit of a more strategic, research informed basis for the pursuit of international branding and related recruitment activity.

This study is undertaken in the context of the Chinese market, where prospective students, belonging to a collectivist culture, are widely assumed to be highly sensitive to league table rankings. Challenging these assumptions, the importance of halo factors – aspects of an institutions offer not related directly to rankings - are probed through the research to examine their role in the creation of an institution's reputation and their importance to the decision-making process.

Although focused on Chinese students and the UK sector, the novel process presented by this thesis offers insights which could potentially be applied to international recruitment markets with similar characteristics and adapted for application by universities in other destination countries. Similarly, this approach could be nuanced to identify a range of potential halo factors pertinent to other major recruitment markets, through which to leverage reputation and brand equity.

Contents

Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

As an experienced manager working in international student recruitment, an observed lack of a consistent and measured approach to international marketing and branding activities in universities fueled a desire to understand how the sector could 'do better' in practical terms and apply an evidence-based, more tailored and strategic approach to international recruitment.

International students' investment in an overseas education is now worth £28.8 billion a year to the UK alone (Higher Education Policy institute 2021). Similarly, the significant investment in and reliance on income from international students in our universities is well documented, particularly in the current post-Brexit and post pandemic era, with the loss of students from key markets hitting many institutions hard. However, paradoxically many universities continue to fail to explicitly connect the work they undertake researching and teaching marketing as an academic discipline, and the practical marketing activity which they undertake in engaging prospective students:

> We owe it to the universities that employ us, or provide us with essential resources for our businesses, to help, and insist, that they clarify just what the brand of their particular university means, and how it is meaningfully different from alternative providers. It is a disgrace to those who fund these expensive institutions if this is not

done, and an embarrassment to the marketing and branding experts who work

within them. (Jevons, 2006 p.467).

The practice of marketing and branding in UK Universities has developed significantly since

Jevon's article in 2006. However, a lack of a coherent comprehensive approach to

international marketing apparently persists, both in the literature and in practice (Gibbs,

2007, Waeraas and Solbakk, 2008; Chapleo, 2011; Naidoo and Wu, 2011; Durkin et al, 2012;

Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2021). As outlined in section 2.1 below, there are still large

areas of this topic which can and should be usefully investigated further both to address

gaps in the literature, and to breach the gap between the academic and the professional in

this field.

This thesis moves to address this gap, focusing on the factors outside the blunt and lazy

instrument of 'ranking', which can be effectively mobilised by universities to build their

brand in a manner which demonstrates the value which their prospective students are

looking for. Employability was identified earlier in the research journey, as a potential

strength around which institutions could create a resonant brand for the purposes of

international student recruitment. The key assumptions for this research, as laid out in

section 2.7 below, formed the basis for an exploration of the relationship between

employability related factors and the central concepts of ranking, reputation, and brand

equity. This exploration helped to build a clearer understanding of how institutions could

create by virtue of the halo effect, a reputation with relevance and resonance for their target future student audience and crucially in turn, brand equity.

1.2 Research Development

This DBA journey began from the author's belief that universities, whose application of marketing and branding theory is gathering sophistication, should take this further and adopt an approach which considers the international market as a distinct segment and develops its brand in a manner which resonates for it. Many UK Universities arguably, despite being increasingly reliant on the income generated by international students, begin their branding and marketing processes from a UK student – centric standpoint. This lack of a segmented approach across most of the sector, offers a significant opportunity for UK Universities to move ahead of their competitors by adopting a more dynamic and methodical method to their international student marketing and subsequent recruitment activities.

This research has developed in a manner appropriate to the Critical Realist approach, from a broad view of the recruitment process and an early preoccupation with the top-level brand development process itself. As outlined below, from this beginning, this final thesis has become more focussed with each document, on the basis of a growing understanding of the literature and following the analysis of the data gathered through the primary research undertaken for Documents 3 and 4.

The literature review stages of Documents 1 and 2 provided a broad basis for the start of the DBA process, confirming the author's anecdotal belief, based on professional experience that UK universities lack in many cases a measured, strategic approach to marketing practices related to international student recruitment. The literature on this topic was indeed dominated at that time by studies lamenting the failure to apply marketing techniques in universities for the purposes of international recruitment (Maringe and Foskett, 2002; Maringe, 2004; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Ross and Heaney 2007;) and where they were implemented, the apparent lack of 'contextual adaptation' (Durkin et al 2012, p. 153). The view coming from academics, who were operating themselves from within the university context, through the literature, in many cases argued applying marketing techniques from the commercial sector as impractical at best and harmful at worst. Some of the views expressed include the process being simply beyond the resources of universities (Chapleo, 2011), inappropriate as a method of capturing the distinct nature of education (Jevons, 2006) and likely to create a detrimental focus on short term operational goals within institutions (Gibbs, 2007).

Against this backdrop, Document 3 looked at Agents - one specific stakeholder in the process of international student recruitment to explore how with the support of commercial partners, universities might adopt an approach to creating resonant brands which was within their reach. This focus also addressed a significant gap in the literature in our understanding of the role of Agents, often neglected as a stakeholder in the creation of resonant brands. Existing studies focus heavily on issues of regulation and often portraying Agents in an unflattering manner (see Pimpa, 2001; Hayes, 2006; Thomson et al, 2014;

Huang, Raimo and Humphrey, 2016; Yen, Yang and Cappellini, 2012; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018; Feng and Horta, 2021). Agents were even labelled in one case as a "necessary evil" (Thomson et al, 2014, p.114).

Semi – structured interviews were undertaken to attempt to elucidate the relationship between Agents and universities and helped develop a clearer understanding of Agents' influence on prospective international students' choice of university. It also sought to further inform understanding of the role of Agents as potential sources of insight for universities' brand development processes. The significance of the interactions between Agents and universities was framed in the context of the concepts of brand value, brand communication and brand equity in order to further support a clear understanding of how these concepts relate to the Higher Education branding process. Agents are understood by practitioners within the international offices of universities, as being key influencers over students' perceptions of UK University brands. This relationship in turn is attributed as influencing the students ultimate University choice. The primary data gathered for Document 3 however, supported the proposition that Agents, even those representing a relatively small number of university partners, did not seek to influence students' choices. Indeed, in agreement with a number of related enquiries (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, Krasocki ,2002, Cebolla-Boado, Hu & Soysal, 2018; Jiang, 2015;) the results of this study suggested Agents wield a relatively modest amount of influence on the prospective students' decision-making process. Agents were shown however, in Document 3, with their close knowledge of their local international student market, to be a potentially useful and under-utilized source of feedback for institutions in their process of brand creation. Whilst

most University partners were reported to offer incentives to their Agents and others to demand a certain level of performance, very few of those institutions were reported as having utilized this valuable feedback as a means of measuring or developing the resonance of their brands in the local context. Notably those institutions who did so, were private English language providers as opposed to public Higher Education institutions.

A common theme, crucial to the development of the direction of this final thesis, was highlighted in Document 3. All of the respondents interviewed for this document expressed the view that a course that met their clients' expectations was a significantly more significant influential in universities' appeal, than any influence over that decision asserted by the Agents. This opinion was universal regardless of the relationship between universities and those Agent partners representing them to students. This data and insight gathered reinforced the overarching rationale for the pursuit of this DBA topic; the importance of universities investing in the development of strong brands that resonate for and to the students themselves. Brand equity thus emerged from Document 3 as a central theme of this investigation into the appropriate and effective application of branding theory by UK Higher Education institutions. Of further note, and of key importance to the framing of the research undertaken for this final thesis, was the testimony of one of the interviewees which highlighted the common usage of employability as part of UK universities' value proposition. It was noted specifically that less prestigious universities in particular, use employability in the form of work placements as a key selling point, but do not 'tangilise' [sic] this offer. A clearer demonstration of this aspect, in the interviewees opinion, would make institutions more attractive to students seeking a good return on

investment – a tangible demonstration of brand equity in their eyes. This observation

became a central factor in the formation of the research objective for this final thesis,

following the further observations around employability and halo effect factors made in

Document 4. Similarly influential in shaping the direction of the final thesis, during the

development of Document 3, was the identification of marked and significant gap in the

literature relating to investigations into Higher Education marketing based on data gathered

from *potential,* as opposed to current international students. Document 4, focused in on

this weakness gathering data to inform our understanding of the student decision making

process specifically from the perspective of a sample of potential students who had not

before studied in the UK. This approach revealed some surprising results as outlined below.

In Document 4, the further exploration of literature relating to ranking, reputation and

brand equity brought about a lightbulb moment following the discovery and consideration

of the possible potential of the concept of the halo effect first proposed by Thorndike in

1920, in the creation of internationally resonant Higher Education brands. This concept is

described as when a set of associations are formed by a consumer with a brand name,

which are a consistent and statistically significant (Leuthesser et al, 1995) (see section

2.5 below). A refined version of Pinar et al's study into the importance of 'core and

supporting value creation factors' (Pinar et al, 2014) in the creation of high brand equity,

which categorised aspects of the Higher Education experience as 'halo' and 'hygiene'

factors, was used as the starting point from which to investigate this concept further. Pinar

et al's broad factors were modified, to allow the devlopment of a deeper understanding by

breaking them down into sub – factors, comensurate with data taken from the a Global

survey of 180,000 prosective UK students, undertaken by the British Council's between

February 2007 and 2014. The research undertaken at this stage facilitated a clearer

understanding of the factors in each of the assigned categories, concluding that hygiene

factors relating to 'career development' and employability were more appropriately

grouped as halo or reputation enhancing factors. Furthermore, the data gathered as a result

of this approach strongly supported the hypothesis that halo factors which were related to

employability in particular, as indicated by data gathered earlier in Document 3, were a key

decision-making factor and indicator of brand equity, for prospective Chinese students.

Two surprising observations emerged therefore from the data gathered for Document 4.

Firstly, somewhat unexpectedly, given the sample surveyed, and the widely held assumption

that ranking is a key decision-making factor for Chinese students, 'Ranking of the institution'

occupied a comparatively modest 17th place in a list of forty-four factors, well behind

'reputation of the institution' which was rated as the fourth most influential factor. Just

75% of respondents rated ranking as 'Important' or 'Very Important' whereas reputation

was rated across the same categories by 85% of respondents. These findings, although

based on a small-scale study, challenged the assumed importance of ranking as a decision-

making factor when compared to other factors. This unexpected result was made even

more interesting since the two terms are often used interchangeably in the academic

literature and in marketing materials. This opened up in the author's mind another gap in

the literature to be explored – to better understand the meaning attached to the terms

ranking and reputation by students and explore if ranking is more difficult to influence,

could reputation be used as an alternative lever for the creation of brand equity.

Secondly in addition to this surprising apparent 'downgrading' of the importance of ranking, there was a clear emphasis in the responses collected on the importance of factors which would support future employability with all 8 of the employability related factors rated in the top 15 most influential factors our of a total of 44 factors.

Document 5 against this backdrop aims, as outlined below, to bring together and investigate further these findings to establish whether an institution's reputation and the employability related halo factors which apparently support its creation, could indeed be effectively leveraged by institutions to generate resonant brand equity in the eyes of prospective Chinese students.

1.3 Objectives

The objectives of this final thesis thus bring all the learnings gained in the previous documents into focus and satisfying the author's original desire to make a contribution to improving practice in the professional field of Higher Education marketing, by better understanding the academic research. Visa versa, this thesis applies significant professional experience in this specific marketing context, to help address gaps in the academic literature. Specifically, this study is aimed at exploring the process of the formation of brand equity in the context of Higher Education marketing. The role of the concepts of ranking and reputation are examined as part of that process, in a manner which questions the previous lack of definition between and preconceptions as to the importance of these two

factors in the creation of brand equity. The study explores the importance of employability as a potential halo factor through which institutions could build a strong reputation and in turn strong brand equity.

The surprises delivered by the research in Document 4, as detailed above, raise important questions for both the academic and professional fields particularly around the impact of rankings on brand equity. They invite us to consider alternative models, which look beyond rankings, from which to building brand equity. They also highlight the potential strength of the halo effect and the potential to identify halo factors which can be harnessed to build an institutions reputation and ultimately boost its brand equity.

A key weakness identified by this DBA journey is the failure of those framing Higher Education brands across all types of institution, to look beyond ranking as a blunt "risk reliver" (Mourad, Ennew and Kortam, 2011) for students, for the vast majority of whom, return on investment, in tangible terms is crucial. This weakness is exacerbated by a lack of academic studies which help the sector to dissect what 'ranking' actually signals to prospective students. When broken down, the institutional qualities and outcomes for the student, which ranking is assumed to precipitate, as demonstrated in Document 4, arguably fall away.

As detailed in section 2.1 below, this DBA process has spanned two quite different market environments in China as regards rankings. Although always important to this market, since

2022 due to government policy changes, rankings have taken on a more explicit measure than ever, and in the current, post pandemic environment, many Universities outside of the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World Top 100 – 200 rankings have lost and are struggling to regain market share in China. It is more important than ever therefore for universities to understand how rankings are understood and evaluated by prospective students.

Institutions need to understand the true meaning behind the fervour for rankings in order to effectively develop brands which resonate and indeed to develop their offering to deliver the specific outcomes or benefits, which prospective student seek and may assume a 'high ranking' institution automatically delivers for them. It is crucial that this analysis will also consider the distinct context from which international students originate, their differing cultural expectations, the cultural context to which they will return as graduates and the magnitude of their financial and personal investment in studying in the UK. This document will therefore look beyond the opaque factor of ranking and, building on the broad data gathered from the author's experience and in the previous documents, in the manner espoused by Critical Realism, focus in on and attempt to further elucidate the specific priorities of our target student audience.

1.4 Research Question

To further develop an understanding of the factors most important in creating a resonant brand for international students as outlined above, this thesis will address the following research question:

- Can employability enhancing halo factors be leveraged by UK Universities to create a reputation which increases their brand equity in the eyes of prospective Chinese students?

The research question will be responded to by addressing 6 key assumptions as detailed in section 2.7, which were developed following a thorough review of the literature in relation to the concepts of brand equity, ranking, reputation, and the halo effect.

1.5 Structure

The structure of this thesis reflects the research process and outcomes of the research. In Chapter 1, highlights from the previous DBA Documents were presented in a manner which explains the research and researcher's development to date and the findings of those documents which both fueled and focused the objectives and contribution presented in this final thesis. Chapter 2 moves on to review key literature relating to Higher Education Marketing as a discipline, to highlight the starting position from which this Document 5 was launched and to identify gaps in the literature which this thesis strives to address. Each of the key concepts employed in this research is then explored, demonstrating how and why each of those concepts supports the development of the conceptual framework for this research and drives, connects and supports the achievement of the research objectives.

Chapter 3 moves on to explore the research philosophies and research methods considered and selected by the author for this research. The advantages and disadvantages of the various research methods appropriate to the chosen philosophy are presented, alongside a

sound justification for those choices, in addition to details of the methods of data collection

and data analysis employed. Chapter 4 presents a discussion of the findings of the research

undertaken, outlining the manner in which the data gathered was analysed highlighting the

key themes which emerged from the data through a process of thematic analysis. Chapter 5

delivers a discussion of the findings of the research, addressing the key assumptions and

presents a revised conceptual framework which emerged at this stage of the research

journey.   A final section – the conclusion - highlights the contributions of the research and

outlines several areas recommended as avenues for further investigation.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter explores the development of Higher Education Marketing as an academic

discipline, demonstrating the breadth of this body of literature and highlighting suggested

gaps in the academic literature to date. In general terms, the body of literature pertaining

to Higher Education marketing is rapidly growing, however significant gaps remain in the

breadth, relevance and in some cases validity of the literature. As demonstrated below,

despite a growing body of studies, literature drawn from the commercial sector is still

frequently relied upon in studies into this area, in addition to literature from fields of

marketing such as service, tourism and place marketing with parallels to the Higher

Education sector, in order to try and bridge this deficit.

The key limitations in the literature are identified through this review, highlighting the

apparent absence of an approach to the creation of Higher Education brands, which is built

on a thorough understanding of the factors which make institutions, often domestically

focussed brands, specifically resonant in a contemporary multi - national context.   The

review then moves on to focus on the key literature relating the central concepts of; brand

equity, ranking, employability, reputation; and the halo effect, exploring their relationship

with each other, their function in the conceptual framework, and their relevance to

achieving the objectives of this research. The conceptual framework for this thesis, and the

various iterations through which it has evolved since the beginning of the DBA journey are

also presented in this chapter. This iterative process demonstrates how both the author's

thought process and understanding of the important gaps in the literature on this topic has developed.

A mindful attempt has been made to unravel the interconnected concepts of this thesis, in such a way as to explore their significance, whilst acknowledging the manner in which they are interwoven both in the literature, and in the authors' sphere of professional practice. As a professional in the field of Higher Education marketing, the author brings a wealth of contextual knowledge. This knowledge and experience strengthen this review and facilitate a thorough examination of arguments presented in the academic literature, placing and considering them in the context of the field of practice itself.

2.1 The Development of Higher Education Marketing

Higher Education Marketing has a long-established history as a field of academic study. Emerging some 35 years ago as a distinct discipline in the US during the 1970's and early 1980's, it was in its infancy, an 'offshoot' of Health Care marketing with the two industries at that time were perceived to be facing similar challenges. Three specific parallels were identified and still resound with importance in the context of UK Higher Education today; Demographic changes, increased operating costs and resistance within the organisation itself (Hayes 2006, p. 927).

Specific attempts were made as early as 1972 to advocate the shift away from a view of

Marketing as something "synonymous with selling or advertising" and "almost always

viewed as solely a business activity" (Krachenber, 1972) and to propose this activity as one

which could be adapted to the Higher Education sector Krachenberg, an American

academic, championed the notion that; "…[marketing] is a pervasive societal activity that

every kind of organization is engaged in, and generally must engage in" (ibid, 1972, p.369 –

370). Krachenberg's status as a US academic is notable given the strong argument for the

United States as the birthplace of Higher Education Marketing. Her early acknowledgement

of the necessity to recognize different market segments within the Higher Education

market, coupled with an early advocacy for the development of information systems

capable of engaging not only with the data held within them but also equipped to "probe

the social environment" (1972, p. 372), foreshadow a developing interest amongst

practitioners in the field in the importance and strong influence of effective Customer

Relationship Management (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016). However, continued reluctance to

embrace this perspective and the enduring importance of the advocated approach, remains

clear from the many citations of this decades old article, which lament the sector's lack of

progress in embracing fully Krachenberg's lessons well into the 2000's (Condie et al., 2018;

Lund, 2019; Elken, 2020).

Early efforts by academic authors to further Krachenberg's work and provide a 'handbook'

specifically instructing institutions in the appropriate methods for the application of

marketing principles to the field of Higher Education were comprehensive (Kotler and Fox's

1985). However valid criticism was levied at the basic nature of the methods presented and

the lack of evidence presented which would demonstrate to institutions the effectiveness of applying these new approaches (Litten, 1987).   Useful assessments presenting evidence of this mismatch including an absence of a consistent application of international education marketing (Mazzarol and Hosie, 1996). More recently, reflecting on the lack of adherence to marketing principles in its implementation, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka characterised marketing within Higher Education as a sector to be 'undeveloped' and largely "incoherent" in its application (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Similarly, Maringe and Foskett (2002) and Maringe (2004) presented the view that universities were "not yet embracing fundamental marketing concepts" in their recruitment efforts, whilst Ross and Heaney noted that within some institutions academic literature explicitly appealed for "the adoption of marketing principles by university managers" (cited in Ross & Grace, 2012). Indeed, there are no shortage of studies published throughout the late 1990s, 2000s and into the current decade, lamenting the continued lack of effective marketing by universities. Key studies tell an enduring tale of an apparently inconsistent application strategies specific to international marketing (Mazzarol and Hosie, 1996; Grace, 2012; Durkin et al, 2012; James-MacEachern, 2018) failure to successfully apply and measure the impact of marketing activity (Jevons, 2006; Lowrie, 2007; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008; Chapleo 2015) and continued gaps in the literature relating to this field (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2021).

This failure has many suggested causes, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka characterised the implementation of marketing principles to Higher Education as ineffective due to the fact that they were applied "without any significant contextual adaptation" (2006, p. 153). Waeraas and Solbakk portrayed Universities as too complex an entity as to be capable of

expressing a succinct brand proposition (2008). Chapleo's account argues a resistant

institutional culture and a lack of resources comparable to commercial organisations as an

enduring barrier to the application of "branding approaches" (2011, p. 419), echoing Gibbs'

earlier criticism which lamented marketing as a mechanism which is detrimental to the very

form of Higher Education by virtue of "encourag[ing] a foreshortening and a representation

of temporal futures dependent on short-term operational goals" (Gibbs, 2007 p.1001).

Something of a sea change has swept the UK Higher Education sector since the start of this

protracted DBA process in 2012. Despite a slow and inconsistent start against a difficult

internal cultural and economic background within institutions, there is a building emphasis

both in practice and in the literature, on the necessity and desirability of applying marketing

techniques to the sector. This development is arguably driven at least in part as a

consequence of economic and demographic pressures which have prompted a gradual

increase in investment and international activity which started in earnest in the early 2000s

*(*Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001; Stamp, 2007*)*. Most UK Universities now find

themselves in a position of significant financial insecurity, should they fail to engage

effectively with the marketing of their institutions to international students (Marginson,

2002; Cantwell, 2019; Yang, 2022). Scrutiny follows these increased efforts however, as

Chapleo asserts, given the large sums of money spent on branding exercises, universities

must be more accountable in a climate of public spending scrutiny (2011, p.421).

This growing acknowledgment of the financial imperative to adopt a marketing approach to

Higher Education is echoed correspondingly, in more recent years in a broader range of

academic studies focussing on specialist areas of the marketing process, developing and

demonstrating a deepening and broadening of interest within the sector. Le *et al* in their

analysis of the key themes of literature in this area identified 5 key themes in the literature

between 1998 and 2021; HE brands and branding frameworks; Antecedents and

consequences of brand components; Internationalization in branding; communication

strategies; and brand value co-creation with 'the importance of the co-creation of HE brand

value' emerging as the leading focus since 2016 (2023, p. 1). More specific and diverse

examples include; the role of university heritage (Bulotaite, 2003, Wardley et al 2013;

Merchant et al 2015); the role of websites (Opoku et al, 2006; Chapleo et al 2011); the

emergence of brand identities (Lowrie, 2007); and the harmonisation of the brand

architecture of universities (Chapleo, 2011). More recently studies have also emerged

around key areas for development such as the influence of social media (Shu & Scott, 2014;

Motta and Barbosa, 2018; Pringle and Fritz, 2019; Perera, Nguyen and Nyak, 2023). Very

few of these studies however relate specifically to the practice of international student

recruitment, furthermore their focus is on an inward-looking evaluation of marketing

practice within institutions as opposed to reaching out to understand the impact of

marketing strategy on the prospective (much less the international) student audience.

Where studies do attempt to address the viewpoint of international students we can detect

an additional gap in the literature. The vast majority of such studies are based on

population samples from within UK universities who have already made their choice of

institution, an example of an exception to this is being Bennett and Ali-Choudhury, (2009).

This bias in the data which tends to cover current students is arguably a consequence of

convenience. Academics have easier access to the students already studying on campus in

the UK.   This presents an issue for us since the understanding gained through these studies

is arguably based on an overreliance on data gathered from *current* international students.

In a small number of studies, with similar implications, international Alumni have been

relied on in a similar way (e.g., Stephensen and Yerger, 2014; Schlesinger, Cervera, Pérez-

Cabañero, 2017; Schlesinger and Cervera, 2017). Data gathered from current or ex-

students, at Oplatka's "post hoc justification stage" (2015, p.267) presents a significant risk

of bias. Oplatka contends that those international students who are current students are

more likely to express their satisfaction with their university in order to subconsciously

justify their choice and express loyalty. Non-academic large scale commercial studies often

also fall victim to the bias of this approach by surveying alumni and current students. In

order to address this limitation in the literature prospective students were the target

sample addressed in the research for both Documents 4 and 5.

As demonstrated below, UK universities and indeed their global counterparts, have an

opportunity to continue to adopt, adapt and compliment established marketing theory in a

manner which addresses specifically the international student audience and its specific

segments therein. The commercially born concept of brand equity presents such an

opportunity, as outlined below with adaptation this concept can be usefully applied to

specific international student market segments.

2.2 Brand Equity

'Brand equity' is a key concept in this thesis, and fundamental to the further development of an understanding Higher Education branding. This concept provides a helpful basis from which to effectively explore and appreciate the impact of ranking and reputation on the appeal of a university brand. Brand equity is assigned high importance in the marketing process (Kim and Kim, 2004) and as a "key indicator of the state of health of a brand" (Keller, 1993).
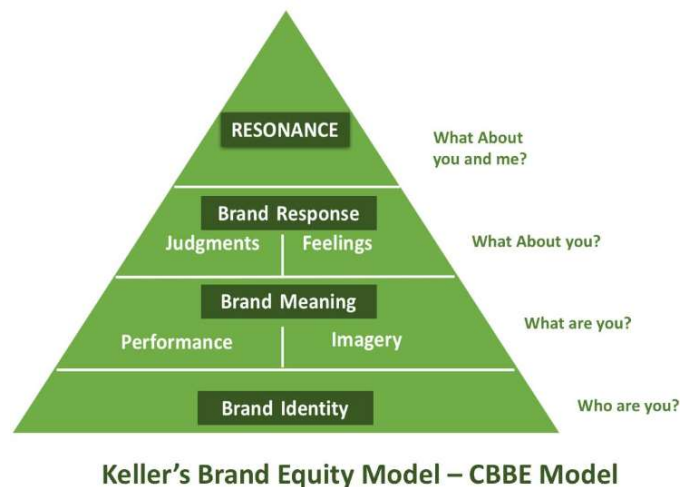

Keller's Brand Equity Model – CBBE Model

Figure 1: Source Keller, 2003

Keller further states;

> Brand equity provides a common denominator for interpreting marketing strategies and assessing the value of a brand; and there are many different ways as to how the value of a brand can be manifested or exploited to benefit the firm (Keller,2002 p. 8).

However, as argued below, in the case of Higher Education marketing in a complex multi -

national context, this model of brand equity it is proposed, could be usefully supplemented

by a segmented approach.   As suggested by the conceptual framework presented below,

"an information economics perspective" (Erdem and Swait, 1998) focussed on the "utility"

of the brand and therefore the potential 'return on investment' for prospective students,

drives this segmentation process. The end aim of this thesis is to address the assumption

that the 'utilitarian' or employability enhancing aspects of a UK University brand, conveyed

through a halo effect driven reputation, could drive the creation of resonant brand equity.

Equally the influence of cultural and institutional factors on the formation of perceptions of

brand equity by prospective students as highlighted by Mourad et al (2019) are explored

and considered, in order to inform the adaptation of this thesis' findings for a range of

international markets.

As one would expect, the process of defining and measuring tangible brand equity, and

adapting existing theory to the Higher Education context, is challenging given the complex

nature of education and the 'product' being marketed. Authors have attempted to

undertake such measurement in a variety of ways. These attempts are not without

challenge. A summary of the literature on Customer Based brand equity by Christodoulides

and Chernatony, looks to the service industry as a close fit analogy, offering

recommendations by virtue of this comparison for the development of brand equity in an

education context. Education is an arguably close fit analogy. They recommend the

"incorpor[ation] (of) dimensions that drive value within the specific industry" (2009, p.61)

and emphasise the importance of "increased utility", or return on investment for participants (ibid, p. 48). Indeed, the research undertaken in Document 4 (see section 1.2 above) suggested that significant drivers of value for those prospective students were employability related aspects. In the context of this thesis their theory supports the assumption that, as suggested in the conceptual framework, the building of brand equity can be supported by creating, an employability-enhancing factor driven reputation.

A number of authors have probed brand equity further and provide a useful starting point for the appropriate and specific measurement of this concept in the Higher Education sector (e.g. Marrs, Gajos and Pinar, 2011; Mourad et al, 2011; Pinar et al, 2013; Nguyen et al, 2016; Dennis et al, 2016; Pringle and Fritz, 2018; Waqas, 2021). The definition adopted for this thesis is Aaker's (1991) characterisation. He presents a definition of brand equity which directly compliments Keller's Customer Based Brand Equity framework, by approaching brand equity from the particular and specific perspective of a prospective international student:

> Brand equity, as applied to higher education, includes awareness of an
> institution, recognition of what an institution is known for, a sense of
> loyalty toward the institution, an understanding of the institution's worth,
> and the desire to pay a premium price to be associated with it. (Aaker,
> 1991)

Unpicking this definition, the "Worth" associated with paying high tuition fees to study

overseas is highlighted, as is "recognition" for a particular characteristic or strength.

Measuring the motivations behind students' decisions about where to study are notoriously

hard to pinpoint given the myriad of factors affecting their choice (see for example:

Mazzarol and Soutar, 2005; Gatfield and Chen, 2006; Sojkin, Bartkowiak and Skuza, 2011;

Wilkins; Shu and Scott, 2014; Abbas et al, 2021; Cheng et al, 2022). However, applying

Aaker's definition presents a helpful starting point from which we can start to assess what

factors potentially support the generation of brand equity.

Closely connected with Graduate employability and outcomes, international Alumni

communities have been presented by some scholars as similarly contributing to universities'

brand equity in a positive manner. Indeed, UK universities commonly present statistics or

various rankings to demonstrate the superior employability prospects of their

graduates. This supports the theory that one method of signalling high brand equity, is

by presenting such statistics which are aimed at indicating a causational and sound

return on investment for graduates (Harvey, 2002; Crossman and Clarke, 2010; Mok et

al 2018; Lin-Stephens, Uesi & Doherty, 2015; Cook, Watson & Webb, 2018; Nilsson &

Ripmeester, 2016; Kang and Mok, 2022). In a Chinese culture specific context this is

presented as an even more significant factor (see Yen et al, 2010; Barnes et al 2010; Shaalan

et al, 2013). The increasing influence and growth in social media, and online social

networking makes the impact of peer reviews even more significant and global in scale.

Excellent examples of this include; Pringle and Fritz, 2018; Lemke, 2012; Bélanger et al,

2013; Galan et al, 2015 and particularly Shu and Scott, (2014) in the specific cultural context

of China. However, care needs to be taken in applying the findings of this research. It is

necessary to acknowledge the difference between studies that represent how Alumni view

the brand equity of their Alma mater (e.g. Rauschnabel et al., 2015; Schlesinger et al, 2023).

Such studies arguably have low validity in terms of what they tell us about the views of

prospective students. A smaller body of literature, which takes into account the brand

equity boosting effect which an institutions Alumni's success can have is arguably useful

however. Alumni with highflying careers, celebrity status, and strong alumni associations

back in their home country or other networking advantages it is argued, do indeed affect

the decisions made by prospective students (Crossman and Clarke, 2010, and Stephenson

and Yerger, 2014). However, the perspectives of Alumni, as discussed above must be viewed

through a lens of 'post hoc justification' (Oplatka 2015, p.267).

A study into the concept of brand equity by Swait and Valenzuela (2006) offers useful

insights into the employability and return on investment aspects of the value propositions of

some UK universities as a supplementary factor in addition to rankings, and how and why

they may indeed convey high brand equity to a potential student audience. The

"information economics view" of brand equity presented by Swait and Valenzuela, aims to

elucidate the influence in the decision-making process of culture. They focus on the

concepts of 'collectivism', 'risk taking' and 'high uncertainty avoidance'. The authors

emphasise the significance and utility "of clarity and credibility of brands as signals of

product positions increase perceived quality, decrease consumer perceived risk and

information costs, and thus increase consumer expected utility" (Swait & Valenzuela, 2006

p. 34). The "believability of the product information contained in a brand" (ibid) creates

brand credibility, which is achieved through clear product information.   Similarly, Swait and

Venezuela present the concept of 'brand credibility' as an antecedent to strong brand equity

and as an effective method of relieving the risk potential experienced by potential

consumers. This concept of clear product information as a key step in the creation of 'brand

credibility' resonates for the Higher Education sector where the lack of information offered

to potential students is lamented by many authors since it often results in a difficult

situation where; "Risk-averse consumers feel threatened by ambiguous and uncertain

product assessments" (Montgomery and Wernerfelt, 1992). Strong brand equity becomes

an important risk reliever, when supported by an unambiguous value proposition, making a

complicated and important decision-making process easier for the consumer. This theory

that has stood the test of time being presented by Erdem and Swait in 1998 and upheld for

example in 2017 by Chen and by Perera et al (2023a).

The definition of brand equity adopted for this thesis follows Aaker's (1991), emphasising

the financial investment made and the 'willingness' of students to spend significant

amounts of capital to gain an association with a 'high equity brand'. This aligns closely with

the idea that the willingness of students to invest in those high equity brands is driven at

least partly as a result of a perception of them as representing a 'low risk' investment. This

is particularly pertinent in the Chinese context where a 'ranking – centric' approach to

'brand equity validation' (Pinar et al, 2014) would appear to offer an effective antidote to

that risk averse behaviour. However, the data gathered for Document 4 suggests this to be

an oversimplification, even in an apparently ranking sensitive market. It is arguably

necessary and desirable to go beyond this blunt instrument, as further explored below, to

inform our understanding of brand equity from a prospective Chinese students' perspective.

Against this backdrop, Cebolla-Boado et al's (2017) assertions regarding the importance of

the halo effect and the 'safety in numbers' approach which consumers adopt as a result is

further supported. Students from China it is argued adopt such an approach to their

selection of a university by choosing an institution in which a large number of other Chinese

students are showing confidence to invest in. It is important to the outcome of this study

that a sound understanding of the importance of both reputation and how the halo of an

insitution is created. Similarly it is crucial to consider the degree to which risk avoidance

and collectivism influence these students' decisions.   This in turn will allow us to

understand how brands can be best created by Universities to answer and ally these

concerns, and ensure their brands have high brand equity for this specific audience.

2.3 Ranking

The focus of this DBA has been preoccupied from the start with the dominant narrative of

ranking used so often by universities operating internationally on the ground in their

marketing efforts. The proliferation, scale of investment by universities and the impact of

rankings on the consumer as explored in the literature, is critiqued below to demonstrate

how and why rankings should be regarded as just part of the tool kit which Universities can

use to develop resonant international brands (Alcaide-Pulido et al, 2022; Yu et al, 2022).

The importance of university league table rankings to prospective students is an ever-

present consideration for all of those engaged in the academic or professional field of

international student recruitment (see for example Dill & Soo, 2005; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Bowman and Bastedo, 2011; Altbach, 2012; Enders, 2015; Hazelkorn, 2016; Brankovic et al, 2018; Allen, 2019; Koenings et al, 2015; Ahlers and Christmann-Budian, 2023). In the specific context of this enquiry, it is essential to understand the nature and influence of ranking as a basis from which to begin to explore the potential utility of its sibling 'reputation' a key concept in the development of this thesis. The distinction between these two terms is key to understanding how the latter might be mobilised.

The number and nature of university rankings has exploded since the beginning of the century with the first global ranking emerging in 2003 from China itself, in the form of the Shanghai Jiao Tong University ranking alternatively known as the *Academic Ranking of World Universities (*AWRU) (Jeremic *at al*, 2011). Since this date not only has the number of global rankings increased but also the range of 'qualities' within institutions which they attempt to measure. It would be reasonable to argue that this Chinese born initiative stimulated a broader growth in, and perceived importance of ranking metrics, as summarised below, given the large numbers of Chinese students who began filtering into majority English speaking countries Universities from the 1990s onwards and in even greater numbers following China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2002. Universities who sought to attract these students quickly recognised the importance of rankings in their decision-making process (Cao et al, 2016).

Shortly after the first ARWU, the year 2004 brought us the Times Higher (THE) and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranking, the two organisations splitting in 2009 after which the

THE launched its own independent league table. The methodology of these rankings varies

considerably, presenting the consumer with a complex and constantly evolving data set by

which to measure institutions relative standing. It is well known amongst practitioners that

the majority of rankings focus on factors which one would expect to be less important to

prospective students (apart from perhaps research students) since "global rankings use

indicators that predominantly measure research or research-related activity; this equates to

100% in ARWU, 85% in THE, and 70% in QS".(Hazelkorn, 2014, p.26). However, the signal of

quality which a high ranking in the appropriate league table apparently conveys to potential

students is similarly well understood (Allen, 2019).

For the research undertaken in this thesis, based on prospective Chinese students, for

whom this metric is generally accepted as holding significant sway, rankings, and the

implications of this concept are particularly pertinent, being viewed by many stakeholders

as a 'meritocratic' vehicle of status (Baltaru, 2018). Connections are further highlighted in

the literature, between collectivist cultures observed amongst students of particular

nationalities, and the tendency to attach high levels of importance and credence to official

global University Rankings (for example see Cao & Meng, 2016; Zhai et al, 2019; Yoo &

Donthu 2002; Koenings et al, 2020; Ahlers and Christmann-Budian, 2023).

Universities cling to rankings, in a manner which legitimises decisions and undoubtedly

create a halo effect, communicating their university's brand equity on a macro level (see

section 2.4 below). As argued by Soysal et al:

While there is insufficient evidence that improving rankings changes universities international recruitment outcomes, they are nevertheless consequential for universities and students as strategic actors investing in rankings as purpose and identity" (2022).

The undeniable influence of global league tables is apparent in the criticism levied at them – they are blamed for

> … promoting isomorphism in higher education sectors internationally by creating narrower constructs of excellence and causing policy 'copying' at national and institutional levels (Deem, Lucas & Mok, 2011 quoted in O'Connell 2015, p. 112).

Similarly, the proliferation and power of global rankings rankings is presented by Hazelkorn as having had a dramatic effect on the higher education sector worldwide, and not just in terms of student flows;

> …there is little doubt their impact has been transformative. They have inspired the restructuring of national systems, reshaping of national priorities, refocusing of institutional priorities, and reorganization of HEIs and departments, in addition to asserting a hierarchy of disciplines (Hazelkorn, 2011, p.21).

Hazelkorn (ibid) goes on to lament the manner in which these rankings have led to the prioritisation of both research over teaching, and graduate education over the education of undergraduates.

Attempts to address this bias in ranking methodologies towards research activity have arguably contributed to the development of an increasing array of attempts to rank institutions by measures other than scholarly output (Marginson, 2007, Hazelkorn, 2016). There is across all these groups an increasing scepticism as to their validity and relevance and by calls for western – biased ethnocentric metrics to be reviewed and reframed in an increasingly global and holistic approach to assessing the 'excellence' which rankings purport to convey. Dufner (cited in Walker, 2004) presents an account of the German sector's viewpoint and response, Nanda (2013) a more global perspective and Raju (2014) and Rana et al (2022) an interesting Indian viewpoint.

In 2023 league tables are beginning to address the historical dominance of the west and to measure performance in relative terms in more focussed geographical contexts, for example the THE and QS's Asia, Latin American and Arab University Rankings. Further examples of the increasing variety of league tables include 'the Young University' rankings for institutions under 50 years old which attempt to address the apparent bias of league tables towards traditional universities and rankings that measure achievements against an array of other criteria, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Teaching Education Framework (TEF) and graduate employability rankings produced both by THE and QS.

Particularly pertinent in the context of this thesis is the impact of external legislative factors which have the potential to hit the 'industry' in waves, affecting the relevance and

importance of these various rankings and often causing dramatic shifts in universities' international cohorts. Since the Covid Pandemic Chinese students have become more rankings focussed than ever, responding to their governments' approach to allocating highly prized residency rights or 'hukou' for leading tier 1 and 2 Chinese cities to graduates from universities ranked in the World's top 50 - 100 ([Shanghai relaxes hukou rules to attract more talent - Chinadaily.com.cn](#)). Major Chinese employers have followed suit by measuring and shortlisting graduates by virtue of the same metric. This change has had a dramatic effect on middle and lower ranked UK Universities with whole cohorts of Chinese students disappearing from these universities in 2022/23.   This example demonstrates starkly the potential of rankings, as a significant factor in decision making both in a country's domestic market (Bowman and Bastedo 2009; Meredith, 2004; Netierman et al, 2022) and internationally (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2017; Findlay et al., 2010; Li, Shen and Xie, 2021). As explored below, a Bourdieusian perspective is given prominence in the context of Higher Education rankings by Heffernan's 2022 volume, rankings are similarly framed as a vehicle of symbolic capital (Soysal et al, 2022) in a process which enumerates and mobilises the value of an institution on an increasingly globalised higher education landscape (Collins and Park, 2015).

Bourdieu's enduring and widely embraced concepts of cultural and social capital are explored by a number of authors in the field as a lens through which to understand the appeal of higher education brands and have a prominent place in studies pertaining to university rankings (Heffernan 2022). Indeed, "from a Bourdieusian perspective, rankings are means for reconfiguring reputation in universities' struggle for gaining symbolic capital,"

(Soysal et al, 2022, p2). Hirsch (1997) Winston (2000) and Frank (2001) lament this situation, characterising it was an "arms race" where the "winner takes all" (in Hazelkorn, 2014). A top ranking can only be won by so many institutions and in turn "rankings have heightened the value of elite institutions and their host nations" (Bagley and Portnoi 2014, p. 18). The 'value' of an institutions ranking "has become a valuable commodity for students, nations, and employers in the search for talent to drive economic growth and recovery" (ibid).

According to Bourdieu, Cultural Capital can be either inherited or acquired, a position that resonates strongly in the specific context of China. Since the opening up of the country in the 1980's citizens of China from a growing middle class have invested their economic capital in acquiring the Cultural Capital attached to an overseas education and the social capital which will result from the networks established during that international experience. Cultural and Social capital have in turn been connected with 'collectivism', as alluded to in section 2.2 above, another key factor which arguably has a significant impact on the resonance of institutions' brands for prospective international students. Cebola-Boado et al, in their investigation into the university preferences of Chinese students, draw directly on Bourdieu's theories, identifying a correlation between the power of collectivism and the legitimacy attached, or otherwise to the 'symbolic capital' carried by a particular university brand;

> …the legitimacy of symbolic capital is largely dependent on a collective of social
>
> actors who are responsible for the validation and amplification of the symbolic
>
> currency" (2018, p. 368).

Furthermore, the Chinese cultural context carries specific connotations with regard to the importance of both cultural capital. Revisiting Bourdieu's ideas on 'inherited' and 'acquired' cultural capital and examining the related Chinese cultural notion of *mianzi* ('face'), it is argued that family and social networks are decisive factors in mature students' orientation towards higher education (Guan and Ploner, 2018). Association with a particular university brand and the networks which that institution opens up to students, is a powerful tool in this cultural context, rankings therefore provide a solid manner in which to measure the utility of a university brand, in terms of the brand equity it possesses and affords its consumers. Rankings endure as a key factor in signalling to a collectivist audience, the symbolic capital or we might say 'equity' of university brands, delivering the desired cultural capital to consumers. As Soysal et al maintain:

> A particular argument has been the cultural role of rankings in constituting strategic and competitive actors and identities at both organisational and individual levels (2022, p.3).

The apparent relationship between collectivisim and rankings as discussed above, is an important one in driving understanding of effective Higher Education marketing, and particularly from the Chinese student perspective. This relationship and the appeal of a particular university for this group of students is hailed as being "dependent on the combination of rankings and endorsement by a large cohort of Chinese nationals" (Cebolla-Boado et al, 2013, p. 368). It is unsurprising that this preponderance of rankings

as a key influence over Chinese students' decision-making would be assumed to perpetuate a cyclical concentration within those universities which scored highly according to this metric, of Chinese students. Increasing numbers of Chinese students graduate from high ranked Russell Group Universities (Ianelli & Huang, 2013). Chattalas et al (2008), similarly examined this example of a halo effect, focussing on collectivist cultures, and observed the same phenomenon, albeit in a different context to Higher Education in their study into what they term as the 'country of origin effect'. Consumers they concluded who belonged to characteristically collectivist cultures were more likely to exhibit homogenous and somewhat stereotypical views. These consumers they contended applied a 'halo view' to products with origins in particular countries. This study therefore corroborated Mazzerol and Soutar's higher Education specific notion of the a 'pull' effect exerted by institutions from specific countries (see Yu et al, 2023 for an interesting update on the changes to the hierarchy of factors).

Rankings, whatever the cultural context of the prospective student undeniably both drive and are enhanced by "strategic organisational decisions and investments" (Soysal et al, 2022) and clearly carry significant weight given the apparent tendency of a wide range of stakeholders beyond the students themselves to trust in and defer judgement to these rankings (Bagley and Portnoi 2014, p.18).

The ubiquitous nature of rankings has led many to lament the failure of rankings to support the true mission of education and to measure and reflect the qualities which represent a good university (Altbach, 2012; Billaut et al., 2009; Huang, 2012; Collins&Park, 2015; Ringel et al, 2021), rankings are similarly and extremely pertinently

for this study (see section 2.4 below) labelled as inadequate as a valid measure of 'reputation' (Vidaver-Cohen, 2007).

The lack of literature relating to the relationship between university rankings and the resonance for potential students of university brands internationally, is only exacerbated by the proliferation of different ranking metrics. Despite arguably unhelpful attempts to create a 'meta ranking' (Luque-Martinez & Faraoni, 2020) the absence of one defining ranking metric (Cebolla-Boado et al, 2017). Furthermore, the common juxtaposition of the concepts of reputation and ranking without sufficient definition, in the literature and professional sphere of marketing and branding of Higher Education, adds to this lack of clarity around to the true impact of these concepts on the creation of resonant brands for the international audience. The value of an institutions brand is thus aptly described by as "determined by the widespread belief in its legitimacy and its legitimate value despite often nebulous approaches to its measurement" (Myers and Bhopal, 2021).

Crucially the rapid popularisation of the QS Ranking in the Chinese market, due to the government and societal changes described above have left us with an outdated understanding of the true impact of rankings when they are cemented by government policy in such a manner. Although rankings have always been accepted as important to Chinese students, the current climate is arguably very different, where preference has been overtaken by policy. This has left a gap in the literature which new research, such as that undertaken here is required to develop a clearer understanding of the importance and meaning of rankings to prospective students particularly in terms of employability.

The employability enhancing halo factors referred to in the conceptual framework

emerged from a review of the literature relating to employability. This review brought to

light a distinct dearth of studies which were able to demonstrate a statistical link

between attending a high ranked University and subsequent employability.   This is a

surprising gap in the literature given that employability is referred to as the main

motivation for studying abroad by international students (Gribble et al., 2015; Soares &

Mosquera, 2020 cited in Fakunle, 2021).

Clearly, recently evolved Chinese government policy has created a publicly acknowledged

mechanism in some industry sectors, for the filtering of job candidates. This filtering is

dependent on the apparently transparent factor of the QS ranking of the university from

which they graduated. This, as outlined below has changed the debate somewhat and

leaves us with an additional challenge. Despite this apparent causal relationship

between ranking and employment prospects, the academic literature on this topic is

somewhat limited. This is partly due to a lack of data which directly correlates the

ranking of universities with employment outcomes, exacerbated by the lack of an

accepted definition of what 'employability' actually means, particularly in an

international context (Huang, 2013, and Cao, 2017). In the context of this thesis,

employability and the enhancement of this factor is defined as the difference in

employment and career prospects between a non-UK graduate and one who has

graduated from the UK system. This thesis focussed on identifying the most important

employability related halo factors are for Chinese students, thus leaving the definition of

this concept broad and ready for further definition according to the data gathered here.

The major gap, relevant to this thesis in the literature is due to the fact that a significant

number of the studies on this topic were published before the changes implemented by

the Chinese government and the growing tide of QS ranking-mania which has gathered

momentum since the early 2020's and particularly in the wake of the Covid pandemic.

The academic studies are largely divided into two foci – one demonstrating the lack of

evidence for the definitive benefits of attending a high-ranking university for one's

employability and the other emphasising the importance of 'soft' skills. The power and

importance of a specific cultural context in driving employability works in tandem with

the blend of 'hard' and 'soft' skills which are demanded of graduates, allowing them to

achieve more positive post-graduation employment outcomes (Li, 2013). The concept of

'Su zhi', translated as 'human quality' in English, reveals the value which Chinese students

attach to the rounded experience which they expect to gain as a student in the UK. This

'Su zhi' they believe will make them more resilient as graduates and more attractive in

terms of the 'soft skills' which they bring to the Chinese job market (Huang & Turner,

2018). This in turn is perceived as having a positive influence on their employability

prospects (Fakune, 2021) and arguably in Bourdieu's terms, the "cultural capital"

afforded to them by this experience.

The next section examines reputation as a distinct concept from ranking, now so closely

connected with employability to inform the conceptual framework of this thesis. This

approach supports the framing of the research in a manner which promotes a clearer

understand of the meaning, value and potential of reputation.

2.4 Reputation

Reputation emerged from the research undertaken for Document 4, as an important decision-making factor and is presented in this thesis as a vital building block in the creation of brand equity. Evaluating the impact and potential of reputation in Higher Education marketing requires us to first establish a definition of the term. Authors Plewa et al., 2016; and Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2019 lament the lack of consensus in the literature, searching for a definition in the literature and in the commercial sector, reveals the frequent use of terms such as 'trust', 'trustworthy' and 'pride'. In the specific context of Higher Education marketing, Sung and Yang present a helpful definition, adopted for this thesis which stating that:

> … the reputation of an organization refers to public perceptions of the organization shared by its multiple constituents over time (Sung and Yang, 2008, p. 363).

A dearth of studies which address how reputation can potentially be created and managed by institutions rather than being 'signalled' and dictated by external factors including rankings or membership of 'branded groups' - such as for example the Ivy League, Great eight or Russel group - is somewhat apparent (Bunnell et al, 2021; Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al 2018; Myers and Bhopal, 2021). An enduring perceived lack of comfort within universities, around the application of branding principals to the Higher Education context has distracted the field further from understanding the process itself (Arnett, German and Hunt, 2003; Maringe,2005; Gibbs, 2007; Gibbs et al, 2009; Naidoo, 2011; Wilson, 2012; Guilbault, 2016; Provini, 2018; Smolentseva 2020; Branch & Christiansen, 2021). Furthermore, and important in the context of this thesis, studies which consider

'reputation' as a driver of brand equity, which could in turn be used specifically to drive

student recruitment are notably scarce.

Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, there persists a gap in our understanding of the

contributing factors of and correlation between reputation and the resulting resonance (or

otherwise) of that brand to prospective students (Plewa *et al*, 2016).   One of the major

challenges in tackling this distinction is, whilst rankings, although increasingly complex and

controversial in their number, nature and validity, as seen above, can be easily and

quantifiably defined against a set of prescribed quantitative criteria, reputation cannot.

Ironically, the Times Higher's (THE) 2022 'World Reputation Rankings'

([https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2022/reputation-](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2022/reputation-ranking)

[ranking](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2022/reputation-ranking)) attempts to supplement the previously empirical, positivistic approaches of its

traditional league tables, to formulate a new measure of the value of institutions by

attributing a quantitative measure to a hitherto ill-defined and stubbornly qualitative

metric. Echoing scholarly attempts to measure reputation by canvassing the views of

academic staff (Miotto et al, 2020), this ranking is based on the results of a process of

approaching 'experienced, published authors 'to name no more than 15 universities that

they believe are the best for research and teaching in their field'. Indeed, whilst THE's

attempts to distinguish between ranking and reputation are welcome in terms of

highlighting the difference between the two concepts, it is important to recognise, as this

thesis demonstrates, that reputation is a much more complex concept than the THE

Reputation Ranking, generated from the opinions of a small arguably non – representative

sample of published scholars, would suggest. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the two terms in such a manner by the THE appears both ironic and reductive.

The THE's reputation league table relies heavily on the perception or 'sentiment' of academics themselves towards their academic peers, resulting in a metric which is extremely narrow, institutionally interoceptive and incongruous with the manner in which Higher Education marketing has evolved as a consumer (i.e., student) centric discipline (Struweg & Wait, 2022). Indeed, 'sentiment' has been adopted as a comfortable alternative term, alongside 'Perception management' (Elsbach, 2003), and 'brand image' terms which are more frequently applied to service marketing in an effort to understand the factors influencing the opinions of consumers or external stakeholders towards a particular brand (Panda et al 2019; Alcaide-Pulido et al, 2017).

Despite an observed lack of distinction, in both universities' marketing collateral and in the academic literature (Soysal et al, 2022) the accepted importance of reputation (Findlay et al, 2010) is demonstrated by the growing body of literature dedicated to its examination (see Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al 2018). Indeed, Souto-Otero and Enders (2017) in their functionalist study or the importance of ranking to student choice, suggested that reputation may indeed be "more important than ranking in informing and influencing students" in some cultures. However, it should be noted that that same study concluded that in collectivist societies such as China (defined according to Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010), high importance is attached to educational performance signaled by metrics

such as rankings and that in their assessment reputation therefore may be of less significance.

Importantly, this lack of differentiation echoes the lamentations of Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al in their literature review on the subject of Higher Education image and reputation. As Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al conclude, understanding "exposure to different stimuli, (and) the employment of different cognitive filters" is crucial in understanding the process of forming reputation (2018). Furthermore the broad range of factors contributing to 'image' and 'reputation' formation highlighted by Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al's review, point to a lack of consensus and focus, citing for example visual identity (Alessandri et al. 2006) familiarity and recommendations from others (Matherly, 2012) and internationalisation (Delgado-Márquez et al., 2013). Beneke (2011), echoing the significance of ranking as noted in section 2.3, characterises reputation similarly as a risk reliver for students. The students in their study are presented as relying on reputation to measure the brands effectiveness in guarding against risk in all its forms; functional risk, physical risk, financial risk, social risk, psychological risk and time risk (p.34).

Arguably, these aspects of 'image' and 'reputation' building relate closely to those areas of activity described in Keller's Customer based Brand Equity model. It is the gaps in the literature on this topic which Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al (2018) identified that are important. Of particular pertinence to this thesis is the noted dearth of studies which address specific market segments. As the authors noted one thing that was missing from

the literature reviewed, was due - acknowledgement of the importance of geographical variation in the creation of institutional reputations (ibid).

Soysal et al (2022) take the investigation of this definition further, in a highly original, comprehensive and focussed study. They concur with Sung and Yang's assessment and enhance it in an attempt to both define and measure the impact of these distinct factors, and to relate these directly to the effectiveness of universities international recruitment efforts. The authors present results to demonstrate a clear distinction between the terms and contend that reputation as opposed to ranking is key to the effective recruitment of international students. Their empirical study adopts a longitudinal approach to establish the importance of these two factors, with a bivariate analysis of data taken from 88 UK universities to identify a correlation between changes in universities' rankings and their resulting enrolment trends. They found that 'university prestige' a term used interchangeably with 'reputation', was positive and statistically significant, while changes in QS Rankings were not a statistically significant predictor for [the number of enrolments by] international students (Soysal et al p.7). Success in international recruitment they conclude is based on a more stable and long-lived reputation as opposed to changeable rankings positions (ibid, p.8).

These recent findings interestingly support and concur with the conclusions drawn from primary research undertaken in Document 4, which asked students to rate factors influencing their choice of institution and demonstrated that for the sample studied, 'reputation' was recognised as clearly viewed as a distinct factor, separate from ranking.

Furthermore, reputation was valued by respondents in that Document 4 research, as significantly more important than published rankings in students' decision-making process (see figure 8 below). Despite its originality, there are limitations to Soysal et al's study, which measures success in relation to 'reputation' by counting the institutions number of international students, a blunt measure of a complex concept, which does not take into account other factors affecting student choice, which may have influenced recruitment efforts of an institution either positively or negatively. Furthermore, outside of membership of the Russel Group and historical league table performance, other factors are not considered as having potential to building reputation – unhelpful to universities looking to build their appeal who are neither Russel Group members nor historically highly ranked. There is certainly further scope for investigation, particularly given the focus of the study on Russell Group institutions.

Longevity is highlighted elsewhere as a key factor where "Long Term Brand Reputation" and credibility relies on being a brand being long lasting, trustworthy and intransient (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009), "reputation' being distinctive from 'image' which is driven by internal aspirations, is instead a reflection of 'stakeholder perceptions" (Plewa et al, 2016). And whilst Soysal et al (2022) assert that date since founding is not a significant factor in an institutions 'reputation' we see this in practice in university marketing materials with prominent statements of their early 'founding' dates which act as a proxy for their legitimacy as reputable, trustworthy institutions, sometimes in the absence of a high ranking or membership of the Russel Group or its international equivalents (Boliver, 2017).

The more qualitative reputational factors, as a bi product of this race to the 'top' which relies on achieving metrics which often bear little relation to the educational experiences or outcomes of students, may get lost in the process of establishing a resonant brand. In the field of international recruitment within universities insight is drawn from a variety of surveys which also find their way into the academic literature. Souto-Otero and Enders (2017) use one such source in assessment of the 'International Student Barometer survey'. Analysing data at a micro level they reached the conclusion that reputation, in addition to other factor including fee levels and teaching quality is in fact more important in informing and influencing student choice than rankings. In a similar manner Plewa et al's 2016 study concluded that reputation, in the eyes of current international students was dictated by the distinct manner in which resources were configured. Notably their study established that the antecedents of a high reputation were very different for domestic and international students, particularly referencing the importance of those areas of the university's offer which impacted everyday experiences and interactions for international students and consequently promised to deliver positive experiential and educational outcomes. The analyses undertaken in both these studies echo the findings of Document 4, which suggested that rankings were not only a distinctly separate factor to reputation in influencing student choice but also a significantly less important one, with a range of other sub-factors rated as more important and as potential contributors to a halo effect (see section 2.3 above).

As alluded to above, a 'surprise' phenomenon was presented by the data gathered for Document 4 where the Chinese subjects studied placed reputation above ranking in terms

of influential factors over their decision-making process in opposition to the argument

commonly presented on this subject for example Cao & Meng (2016); Zhai et al (2019); Yoo

& Donthu (2002); Koenings et al (2020); Ahlers and Christmann-Budian (2023). This points

to the potential for universities to attempt to address the gap identified by Lafuente-Ruiz-

de-Sabando et al (2018) in approaches which fail to take specific market contexts into

account. As outlined in the conceptual framework (figure 5) reputation may prove a key

factor in building resonant brand equity in a manner which is specific and resonant for this

explicit market segment. It is anticipated that this reputation is most strongly signalled, as

Document 4 suggested, by factors relating to future employment and careers and therefore

to the social and cultural capital, associated with high brand equity, and the return on

investment with which graduates of such an institution can reasonably expect to be

rewarded.

2.5 The Halo Effect

The exploration of literature relating to the key concepts of brand equity, ranking, and

reputation brought about a lightbulb moment, when the possible impact of the halo

effect, first proposed by Thorndike in 1920, on the successful creation on internationally

resonant higher education brands, came into view. This concept adopted for the

framing of the research undertaken in Document 4, offers many possible avenues of

investigation for this topic and became a key part in bringing all the pertinent themes of

this review together and in the forming of the conceptual framework of this final thesis.

Commercially focussed studies describe the concept of the halo effect as the process by which a consumer forms a "consistent and statistically significant set of associations with a brand name" (Leuthesser et al, 1995). Although not designed to specifically address or examine the halo Effect, Marginson and van der Wende's 2007 study on institutional rankings presented a neat illustration of the halo effect in action. In their study subjects were asked to rank Law Schools in the United States. Interestingly, respondents rated Princeton's Law School in the top 10 of all Law Schools in the US. This result was produced, despite the fact that in actual fact this institution, although well known for its academic prowess in general terms, does not actually have a Law School. Princeton's institutional halo created assumptions and positive correlations in the mind of the consumer, as to the nature and standing of its constituent parts. This halo effect it is thus demonstrated, could potentially be adopted as a proactive tool for the building of brand equity through the creation of a reputation – by being 'known for' a particular aspect which creates the same positive correlation.

The halo effect as observed above presents a gap in the literature, absent as a feature of deliberate focus in existing major studies concerning the creation or measurement of the resonance of Higher Education brands in the UK. The halo effect phenomenon has been noted by scholars examining the 'reputational' force of the halo effect on the UK sector as a whole. Butt et al (2016) relate the phenomenon, looking specifically at the relative strength of the halo effect in terms of its' extension or otherwise to overseas branch campuses of institutions with their origins in developed and developing countries. They conclude that the halo effect pervades across geographical boundaries in the case of universities from developed nations. In such cases the branch

campus is assessed as having a reputation on par with its main campus identity. The universality of this effect is challenged however by scholars seeking to understand the impact of culture on perceptions of branch campuses, for example by Sin, Leung and Waters (2017) who contend that the value of Trans National Education (TNE) in the eyes of participants varies according to geography. In their study TNE was held in higher regard in Malaysia than in Hong Kong. This study reminds us of the complexity of the factors impacting upon perceptions of any brand and particularly one as complex as that of a university, even before one moves on to consider how that brand is translated in the context of TNE.

Mazzerol and Soutar (2002) present an alternative type of halo factor again in the context of the sector as a whole. Their 'push – pull factors' work by virtue of the halo of the UK Higher Education sector in general act as a generic UK wide 'pull' to which international students are drawn. This theory is based on the perceptions of certain nations' education systems as being reputable by virtue of their belonging in that 'group' – they are seen as off high quality as a result. The literature suggests a strong basis for the effectiveness of the halo effect in international education terms and has as a result been key to developing the conceptual framework for this thesis, around the halo principle and the impact and importance of this concept to the development of resonant brands by individual institutions.

2.7 Key Assumptions

6 key assumptions regarding the decision-making process of prospective Chinese students were derived from the above review of the literature, and the research undertaken in

previous documents, shaping the development of the conceptual framework as outlined below and consequently the direction of the primary research undertaken for this thesis:

Assumption 1: Ranking is an important factor in choosing a UK university

The literature review clearly demonstrated the proliferation and prevalence of ranking as a means of differentiating institutions. The proliferation of and scale of investment in rankings and emphasis by some governments, particularly in China on the value of rankings as a means by which to categorise the worth of graduates naturally leads institutions to assume that ranking is a key decision-making factor.

Assumption 2: Graduates of high ranked universities have enhanced employability

In the Chinese context particularly, both the literature and policies of the Chinese government suggest a strong correlation between graduation from a high-ranking university and enhanced employability. Missing from the literature however is a comprehensive account of, beyond the legislative measures in place which impact Chinese students, in what way and indeed if, higher ranked universities do indeed support their graduates, both generically and in China specifically to achieve greater success in employment.

Assumption 3: Improving employment prospects is an important motivator for study in the UK

Closely related to assumption 2, 'return on investment' as an aspect of motivation was also highlighted in the literature in addition to studies emphasising the value attached by prospective students to the development of 'soft skills' as a consequence of studying overseas and the perceived value of those skills in the labour market.

Assumption 4: Reputation is a distinct and independent factor from ranking

A gap in the literature relating to the distinction between these two concepts was clearly evident. Understanding what reputation specifically means to prospective students is key to achieving the aims of this research and to furthering our understanding of how institutions can use reputation in the absence of ranking as a means of creating brand equity.

Assumption 5: Employability related halo factors are not necessarily characteristics of high-ranking universities

The importance of employability related factors in student decision making was highlighted in the research undertaken in Document 4. The literature review revealed a lack of exploration to date of the practical reasons for perceptions of high ranked universities as a means of improving employability. This assumption will help to probe prospective students' perceptions of the link between a high ranking and the aspects of an institution's offering which will improve their employability in practical terms. The results of this challenge will prove important in understanding how universities might shape their offering to use employability in the absence of a high ranking, around which to form a halo and consequently a strong reputation.

Assumption 6: Enhanced employability is a key factor in demonstrating 'brand equity'

The definition of brand equity adopted for this thesis particularly emphasises the importance of awareness, positive association and an understanding of 'worth' in relation to the required investment in overseas study. As outlined in this chapter, the literature suggests a close association between the brand equity of an institution and the resulting

career prospects of its graduates as a demonstration of this 'worth' and as testament to the awareness of a particular institutions value in developing competent, work ready graduates.

These assumptions helped to focus the research undertaken in this thesis and will be addressed to inform the answer to the key research question of this thesis:

Can employability enhancing halo factors be leveraged by UK Universities to create a reputation which increases their brand equity in the eyes of prospective Chinese students?

2.6 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework has been updated many times through this DBA process as outlined in section 1.2 above. This process underpinned the formation of research objectives and questions and supported the development of an initial, albeit now significantly evolved, conceptual framework, which as highlighted below, focussed firmly on the process of brand learning.

The initial conceptual framework developed for Document 1 (see figure 2 below) was inspired by Cheverton's virtuous circle of action and reaction in order to highlight the importance of brand 'learning' through a cyclical and interactive relationship between brand activity and customers (Cheverton, 2006, p.21).   This early framework also sought to highlight the influence of students' experience of a brand on the strength and resonance of that brand itself. Students were characterised as 'consumers' and as having a substantial

part to play in the strengthening, or otherwise of a brand, to future consumers through their sharing of that experience with others.
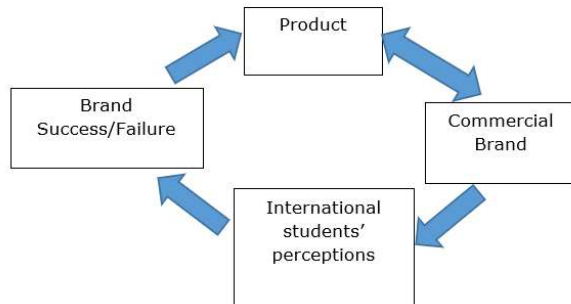

Figure 2: Initial conceptual framework from Document 1 and 2

This framework, was useful in shaping the direction of future documents and it is notable that this focus on the importance of students' perceptions of university brands has remained at the centre of the final conceptual framework adopted in this thesis. The initial framework which was retained for Document 2, evolved through two further iterations as detailed below, and settled in a developed form as demonstrated in figure 4. Following the analysis of the results gathered through this thesis, the conceptual framework evolved once more, as outlined in section 5.6 (figure 11).
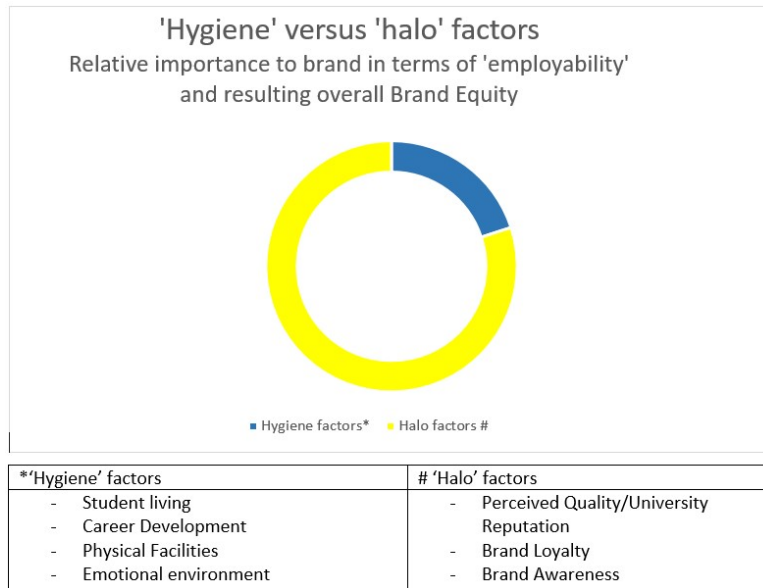
As a result of the deeper understanding of the key concepts gathered through the DBA process, a revised conceptual framework (see figure 3 below) was developed for Document 3, with an adapted version of Booms and Bitner's 7P's approach. This revised framework also acknowledged the potential limitations of the marketing – mix approach, as highlighted by various studies (See Goi, 1999 for a useful summary). As a result consideration was given to, and inspiration drawn from, a range of alternative frameworks such as the 'Brand

Touchpoint Wheel' approach (Khanna et al, 2014). Meanwhile the emphasis on the

importance of the interaction between institutions and prospective students and their

perceptions, as an influential factor in the building of a resonant brands, was once again

maintained.
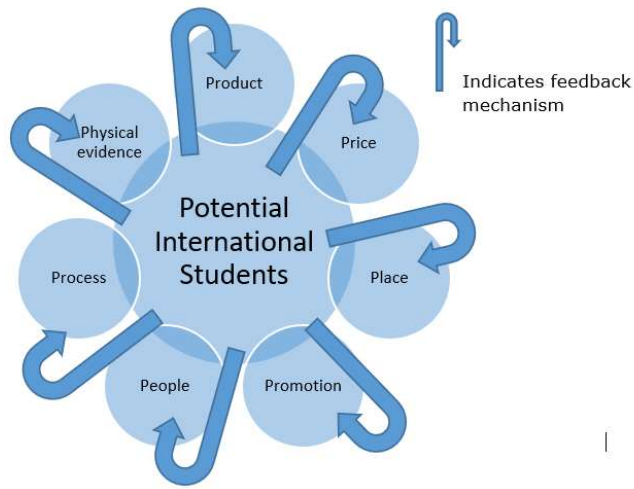
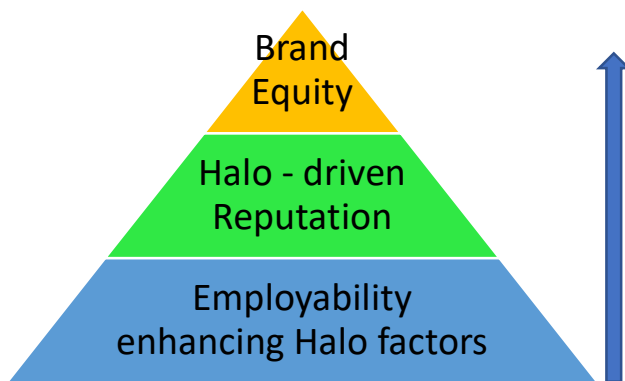*Figure 3: Revised conceptual framework for Document 3; revised 7P's (Booms and Bitner 1981)*

In Document 4, the further exploration of literature relating to ranking, reputation and

brand equity brought about a lightbulb moment following the discovery and consideration

of the possible potential of the concept of the halo effect first proposed by Thorndike in

1920, in the creation of internationally resonant Higher Education brands. Building on the

revelations of Document 3, a new conceptual framework was developed to support the

exploration of this concept and role of halo factors in the process of building resonant brand

equity (see figure 4 below).

'Hygiene' versus 'halo' factors
Relative importance to brand in terms of 'employability'
and resulting overall Brand Equity

■ Hygiene factors*   ■ Halo factors #

*'Hygiene' factors	# 'Halo' factors
- Student living - Career Development - Physical Facilities - Emotional environment	- Perceived Quality/University Reputation - Brand Loyalty - Brand Awareness

Figure 4: Document 4 Conceptual Framework

A refined version of Pinar et al's study into the importance of "core and supporting value

creation factors" (Pinar et al, 2014) in the creation of high brand equity, which categorised

aspects of the Higher Education experience as halo and hygiene factors, was used as the

starting point for the conceptual framework illustrated above (figure 4). Pinar et al's broad

factors were modified, to allow the devlopment of a deeper understanding by dividing them

further into sub – factors, closely correlated with categories which were established in the

British Council's Global survey of 180,000 prosective UK students, undertaken in 2014. The

research undertaken at this stage promoted a better understanding of the factors in each of

the assigned categories, concluding that hygiene factors relating to 'career development'

were more appropriately grouped as 'halo' or 'reputation' enhancing factors. Furthermore,

the data gathered as a result of this approach strongly supported the hypothesis that halo

factors were a key decision factor for prospective students.

The conceptual framework for this final thesis was driven by the literature review and findings of the author's research to date and emphasised the importance of leveraging employability enhancing factors in creating a halo on which institutions can build reputation and by this means achieve strong brand equity in the eyes of prospective students. This strong brand equity may result in a brand which resonates for and becomes attractive to and even aspirational for prospective international students.

Figure 5: Conceptual Framework for Document 5

The building blocks of Keller's 'Consumer based Brand Equity Pyramid' (Keller, 2022) offer a solid basis for Higher Education institutions to build brand equity in general terms. Indeed, most universities approach to generic marketing, which begins almost universally from a UK student – centric viewpoint, already engages with a process which closely mirrors Keller's pyramid (figure 1, section 2.2). What is missing in the application of that approach to building brands which resonate internationally, is an understanding of the distinct risk against which international students, and in this case Chinese students, are seeking to guard. As a compliment to established general models of brand equity employed in commercial branding practice (see section 2.2), the above framework focusses specifically on mobilising the factors most resonant for Chinese students, and most pertinent to

facilitating an additional method of brand equity building, in the current ranking – centric environment.   Building brand equity on the basis of a reputation which promises good future outcomes in terms of employment and careers, acts as the ultimate risk reliver, in a market where the obsession with rankings is explicitly tied to future employment prospects. Such an approach specifically disrupts the status quo – where ranking is otherwise arguably the strongest denominator from the prospective students' perspective - of brand equity allowing universities, particularly those who are not highly ranked to develop internationally resonant brands.

Brand equity generated in this way, based not so heavily on judgments relating to empirical rankings, could offer an opportunity for universities to achieve high brand equity on the basis of a reputation, driven by halo effect factors which demonstrate that the employment enhancing benefits which Chinese students are, as suggested by the outcomes of Document 4, arguably prioritising.   The key to generating brand equity in this way it is proposed, is the effective mobilisation of the halo effect in a manner which builds and supports reputation.

The very nature of brand equity in this specific context, "an understanding of the institution's worth, and the desire to pay a premium price to be associated with it." (Aaker, 1991) and something viewed as acting as a 'risk reliever' (Mourad, Ennew and Kortam, 2011) relates closely to a return on investment. This suggests that the reputational factors which are important to prospective students as a distinctive stakeholder group, are likely to be most effective and result in strong brand equity if they relate to the promise of the limiting of this risk, and the generation of a future employability and financial return.

Chapter 3: Research Philosophy, Design and Methods

3.1 Introduction

Research philosophy is discussed in this section, providing an explanation for the

epistemological approach selected for this study. An appraisal of the methods adopted in

order to reflect that methodological approach, and an explanation for their selection, is

grounded in the context of the research objectives and research questions. The

epistemological approach adopted for this research is Critical Realism and, in a manner

highly appropriate to the application of a Critical Realist approach, the research undertaken

for this final thesis employs mixed methods. Pertinent qualitative and quantitative data has

been gathered throughout the DBA process culminating in a mixed methods approach in

this final document. The data gathered has been analysed in a manner which has allowed

the researcher to adopt a reductive approach, which acknowledges the pre-existing complex

structures surrounding the particular context of the study. By gathering respondent data

directly from the prospective students acting from within this context, the agency of these

stakeholders or actors on the Higher Education marketing stage, is squarely and crucially

acknowledged and explored.

3.2 Critical Realism

The critical realist approach has emerged, through the process of the DBA, as most

appropriate to the research objectives and context of this thesis. As Brian et al neatly

summarise, many of the 'constructs' of higher education "do not necessarily resolve

themselves neatly into things that we can operationalize and measure" (2007, p.49). As an

approach characterised by value – laden research which emphasises the necessity to acknowledge bias as a result of factors such as world views, upbringing and cultural values, Critical Realism stands out as a highly appropriate research philosophy, given the particular context of this enquiry. In contrast to Direct Realism, which advocates an extreme positivist approach, Critical Realism "focuses on explaining what we see and experience, in terms of the underlying structures of reality that shape the observable events" (Saunders et al, 2019, p. 147). Furthermore, critical realism: "leverages elements of both positivist and interpretivist paradigms to formulate a relatively new and alternative approach to knowledge development" (Wynn & Williams, 2012, cited in Mukumbang, 2023).

Applying:

> … a critical realist perspective can contribute to a critique of some of what currently
> counts as 'evidence-based' while at the same time not abandoning the idea of
> evidence altogether" (Clegg, 2007, p.415).

Such an approach appropriately looks "for the underlying causes and mechanisms through which deep social structures shape everyday organisational life" (ibid, p. 148) and

> … assumes that social systems are the outcome of multiple types of processes that
> cannot be reduced to one another but are emergent at different levels or strata of
> reality… (Tuominen & Lehtonen, 2017).

Vincent and O'Mahoney go on to describing the strengths of Critical Realism, reinforce this view and lament the 'flawed dichotomy' between objectivist and interpretivist approaches and their strict allegiance therein to the quantitative or qualitative empirical methods aligned to their approaches. They go on to describe good Critical realism in a manner which reflects the nature and spirit of this DBA with its mix methods approach and in light of complex the cultural and organisational contexts in which the actors whom it seeks to understand better operate as Vincent and O'Mahoney state:

> CR scholars assume the existence of an objective ('intransitive') world that has powers and properties that can be more accurately known as a consequence of scientific endeavour but recognise that knowledge is a subjective, discursively bound (i.e., transitive) and constantly changing social construction (Vincent and O'Mahoney 2018).

They go on to assert that;

> … careful methodological practices form a bridge between our epistemological knowledge and ontological reality: good research means we can understand the world better (ibid).

Similar Sayer emphasises the key strength of Critical Realism as its advocacy of the employment of appropriate methodologies which "depend on the nature of the object of study and what one wants to learn about it" (Sayer, 2000), whilst Mukumbang states critical

realism is a valid and flexible approach since it "leverages elements of both positivist and interpretivist paradigms" (Mukumbang, 2023).
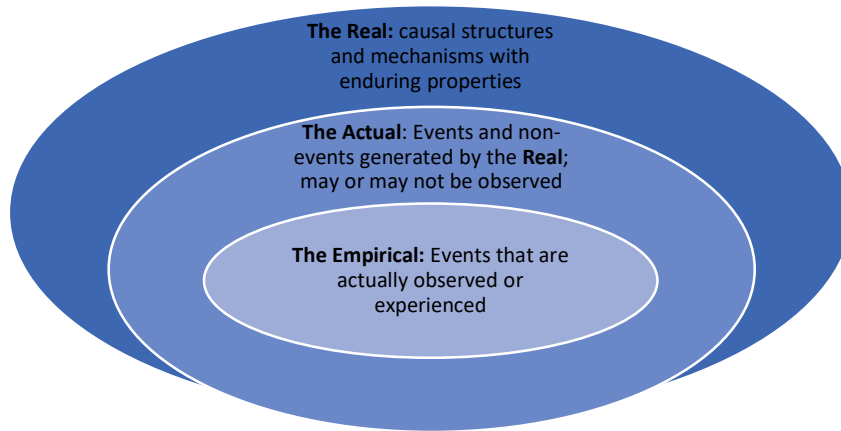
Figure 6: Critical Realist stratified ontology, Source: Developed from Bhaskar (2008) (cited in Saunders et al 2019, p. 148)

Figure 6 above is a representation of critical realist stratified ontology, which fits well the context, structures and processes influencing the choices of the prospective students examined in this study. The relationship identified between 'The Real', 'The Actual' and 'The Empirical' demonstrated by Bhaskar, supports the adoption of such an approach. 'The Real' represents the social context or contexts within which the subjects of this study are operating – for example legislation implemented by the Chinese government or employers which give preferential opportunities to students graduating from QS top 100 ranked universities. 'The Actual', represents the forming of perceptions around certain Higher Education brands by virtue of the influence of 'The Real' – i.e. one university is 'superior' and delivers better return on investment compared to another since its ranking means its

graduates have better future career prospects due to its QS ranking and other associated

benefits   The resulting actions - 'The Empirical' - denotes the value judgements and

consequent choices that prospective students make in their decision-making processes

accepting a particular brand (Higher Education Institution) as the right choice for their

future as demonstrated by the increasing number of prospective students making such

choices. Previous documents have highlighted the importance of the phenomena of social

capital, the halo effect, collectivism and risk aversion - all factors within the broader context

of the decision-making process, all 'deep social structures' as described as central to the

critical realist approach by Saunders et al above. The primary research undertaken for

Document 5 is designed in a manner which attempts to apply this approach in order to

probe 'The Real', 'The Actual' and 'The Empirical' aspects of the student decision making

journey.

3.3 Retroduction

Critical realism is commonly associated with 'retroduction' or an abductive approach to

reasoning and the identification of a:

> … surprising phenomenon in the present and [a] move backwards … to identify the
>
> underlying mechanisms and structures that might have produced it" (Reed 2005,
>
> cited in Saunders et al 2019, p. 156).

Employing this method facilitates the asking of 'why' questions in a manner appropriate to the Higher Education sector and its institutions, when such phenomena are observed (see Shahjahan et al 2023) and provides a method appropriate to effectively examine the influences of higher Education within broader cultural and societal contexts (Boughey, C. and McKenna, S., 2021).

The somewhat 'surprising' phenomenon observed in the course of this DBA process, as outlined in section 2.5, is that reputation was consistently rated by respondents in Document 4 as a potentially more important decision-making factor, than ranking itself, by prospective students from an apparently ranking sensitive market. An Abductive approach allows us to move on in this final thesis, to unpick this revelation.

Similarly, an abductive approach is appropriate in terms of the opportunity, which it offers for a different contextual approach to that which is adopted in the established literature (Saunders et al, 2019). Working in this manner the research will allow us to look at broader structures around prospective student decision-making, avoid the "post hoc justification" pit fall (Oplatka 2015, p.267) and ensure that appropriate consideration is given to the factors most influential in making brands resonate for potential students. These distinctions will in turn facilitate a more thorough evaluation of the factors, which most strongly contribute towards the creation of high brand equity and an internationally resonant brand.

3.4 Research Design and Methods

Critical realism is rightly described as "highly ecumenical" in its approach to data collection maintaining that the researcher's choice of methodology should 'depend on the nature of the object of study and what one wants to learn about it' (Sayer 2000, p19). True to the nature of research undertaken for this thesis, Critical Realism embraces both qualitative and quantitative methods including the semi – structured interviews, literature reviews and questionnaires - it is "methodologically pluralist and inclusive" (Vincent and O'Mahoney,2018).

The research question tackled by this thesis builds both directly on the quantitative primary research undertaken for Document 4, and findings of the qualitative research undertaken in Document 3. This process is supported by the author's contextual knowledge – a supporting factor in successfully adopting a Critical Realist philosophy – of the Higher Education sector gathered over a period of almost 20 years. The 'surprising phenomenon' unveiled in Document 4, as outlined above, prompted further research, to further explore these earlier observations and to gather more data to support our understanding of the possible value and meaning of the concept of reputation as a potential vehicle for brand equity. Applying inductive reasoning, and embracing a mixed methods approach for this final thesis, a questionnaire was administered first, both to begin to clarify areas of enquiry not satisfied by the research undertaken in Document 4 and to gather further detailed information on which to frame questions for a consequent series of semi – structured interviews. These interviews were specifically designed to explore the meanings behind the

quantitative data gathered in the previous questionnaires, which appeared to fly in the face

of the accepted norms of Chinese students' perceptions of the absolute importance of

ranking to brand equity.

The primary research undertaken for this thesis therefore, was designed to produce a

deeper analysis of the causal mechanisms which result in rankings persistence as an

accepted key decision-making factor, to discover 'the actual; and 'the real' behind this

phenomenon. Furthermore, the research was designed to gain additional data to elucidate

the gaps left by Document 4, which suggested a number of areas requiring clarification

before conclusions could be reliably drawn. One of these areas related to the concepts of

ranking and reputation and the potential lack of distinction in students minds over how

these differ. As previously outlined, the responses in Document 4 rated reputation as

significantly higher in terms of importance to students' decision-making processes when

grouped together in a series of different factors. And yet, countless studies tell us that

ranking is a highly significant decision-making factor for Chinese students see for example

(Allen, 2019; Cao & Meng, 2016; Zhai et al, 2019; Yoo & Donthu 2002; Koenings et al, 2020;

Ahlers and Christmann-Budian, 2023). This concurs with the authors extensive experience

of the 'active and the real' nature of the Chinese student recruitment market as inherently

ranking sensitive. The further research undertaken for this thesis therefore sought to

'check' the 'surprising phenomenon' unveiled by Document 4, to measure their relative

importance of ranking and reputation in direct opposition to one another. Similarly, the

research undertaken was intended to elucidate further understanding of the apparent

importance, of specific employability related factors to both the decision-making process and in the development of a university's reputation.

Following the gathering of the quantitative data for this thesis, as described in section 3.6 below, interview questions were shaped to further investigate, qualify and give meaning to the apparent confirmation of the importance of specific employability related factors. Similarly, the interviews were designed to further delve directly into perceptions of and vehicles for institutional reputation, in a manner designed to confirm the validity of the proposed conceptual framework. The end aim to this process was to address the research questions as outlined in section 1.4 and ultimately identify recommendations for the creation of a novel mechanism for the development of internationally resonant Higher Education brands.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Appropriate ethical considerations were applied to the conduct of the research at all stages. Participant information sheets were shared with participants of both the questionnaire and interview stages to inform them of the nature of the research, sharing details of how information would be anonymised and stored according to appropriate ethical and legal standards and conveying their right to withdraw from the research should they wish to do so at any stage. The questionnaires, conducted through Qualtrics were anonymous and filtered participants to ensure that none were under 18, no identifiable personal data was collected.

Interview participants were asked to give written consent in standard format including for the interview to be recorded and were invited to join on a platform comfortable for them – all chose to use Microsoft Teams. They were informed prior to the interview that the session would be recorded and transcribed and were reminded of this prior to the recording commencing. All of the transcripts were anonymised using initials to identify the responses as distinct from one another for the purposes of thematic coding and representation in the thesis.

3.6 Sampling

Research undertaken for this thesis as suggested above, continues to focus on Chinese students as a specific group, in order to maintain the "understanding and insight which has already been generated" (Harrison and Reilly, 2011, p.12). The rationale behind this approach was to provide further insights and meaningful data as described above, to further understanding of the factors most important within this cultural context to the formation of brand equity. In this way the impact of cross-cultural factors which are known to influence what some authors present as the process of consumer-based brand equity formation (Erdem et al, 2006; Yoo and Donfu, 2002; Chatzipanagiotou et al, 2019) could be minimised.

However, it must be acknowledged that the 'Chinese' market consists of a myriad of different regions, cultures, languages and regional characteristics and corresponding

differences in cultural values. Soares statement "validated instruments for measuring cultural values are scarce", continues to hold weight and therefore as previously held in previous documents, and as he advocates Nationality is:

> … used as a proxy for culture since members of a nation tend to share a similar language, history, religion, understanding of institutional systems, and a sense of identity (2007, p.282).

The data produced by the study also offers a starting point from which to begin to understand what factors may also be important in the formation of brand equity in the context of other cultures or within other nationality groups (as demonstrated by Buil et al, 2008). Again, the authors' access through partner Agents to a large, highly relevant sample of prospective students from mainland China has been helpful in finding a sample large and representative enough to limit bias and produce data which should offer findings which are reliable and generalisable (ibid).

As alluded to in Chapter 2, previous studies have almost exclusively used current students as the basis for research of this kind. Through accessing prospective students, who have not yet had contact with their chosen University, this study both eliminates that bias and addresses the gap in the literature. As with the previous document, the survey was designed with controls that were aimed at identifying different levels and subjects of study, gender and age to help identify correlations between different factors and potentially open the way for further research into identified trends (Moskal, 2018 for example suggests

differences in employment trends post-graduation between genders specifically amongst

Chinese graduates). The first stage of the research used probability cluster sampling, with

surveys being distributed to prospective UK students on the databases of recruitment

Agents with whom the author's institution was partnered. This method allowed access to a

large sample size and a population with a full range of different characteristics. It is

acknowledged that there are potential limitations to the use of this sampling method. The

sample reached through the recruitment Agents in this manner would not necessarily

accurately represent the whole population of potential UK students, being confined to those

subjects who had engaged the services of the Agents in question. To mitigate this limitation

as much as possible, the Agents selected to send out the questionnaire were those with

offices in multiple tier 1 and tier 2 cities in China with a broad geographical reach. In

hindsight, although the approach taken was intended to provide a broad geographical

sample, it would have been beneficial to record the location of the participants within China

to measure differences in responses in relation to their location and the corresponding

policies impacting on the career and life prospects of students from that region or city,

particularly those relating to the 'Hukou' system.

 The qualitative stage of the research also involved Agents reaching out once more to their

database to locate prospective students, however the process employed at this stage would

be best described as non- probability, self – selection sampling since the participants were

required to meet specific criteria as described in section 3.9 below and were selected for

participation in the interviews on this basis.

3.7 Quantitative Data Collection

Questionnaires were used to carry out the first stage of the research for this thesis and specifically designed to clarify and further probe the data gathered in the DBA process to that point, as outlined above. This data was then used specifically to further refine the questions posed in the second, qualitative stage of the research, as outlined in section 3.7 below. The strengths of such a quantitative approach are well documented. In contrast to a qualitative approach where "the informant does different things with words and stories" (Maseide 1990, cited in Silverman, 2011, p.174) the data gathered through a questionnaire can be analysed, measured and compared, arguably satisfying the ambition to reflect 'objective facts' which contribute to 'knowledge' (Bryman and Bell, 2011). As Bryman and Bell rightly emphasise 'research that appears to have the characteristics of a 'fact finding exercise' should not be dismissed as naïve empiricism' (ibid, p.10). The relative ease of selecting, targeting and reaching a larger sample is similarly apparent, delivering the prospect of increased validity and generalisability. The anonymity of the questionnaires, a link to which was distributed by a third party is also beneficial in encouraging more open and honest responses from the subjects and reduced bias by keeping the researcher "separate from the subjects he or she observes" (Sachdeva, 2008, p.36).

Taking into account the number of 'new' Chinese students studying in the UK in 2021/22 (97,170 according to the latest available HESA data) and in order to offer a sufficient comparison to the results gathered from the previous sample, a target sample of 600 was set as with the previous document with the aim of a minimum response rate of 25%. This

was set in line with Buglear's (2005) scale of 20% response rate as 'poor' and 40% as 'good'. As proved very successful in Document 4, this 'target sample' was accessed through recruitment Agents in China with whom the author's current employer works closely. Responents were filtered by the survey to ensure that they were prospective students or 'prospects' seeking postgraduate study and distributed from larger agents who attract a broad range of clients with the aim of achieving a representative sample across a range of subject areas and with a balance of genders. Given that studies suggest gender correlates with differences in employment trends post-graduation specifically amongst Chinese graduates (Moskal, 2018), the balance of genders will ideally reflect the demographic of Chinese students in the UK. Indeed, the latest HESA statistics data for new students with Chinese nationality enrolling at UK Higher Education institutions – which was 59% female versus 39% male (and 2% other) in the 2021/22 academic year. In this way the outcome of the research is more likely to reflect the proportionate effect of gender on the prospective Chinese student's expectations of their future institution.

The overriding rationale for employing questionnaires in the case of this thesis was to address, as highlighted in section 3.4 above, specific queries presented by the results of Document 4. This first step allowed the authors assumptions to be more robustly, specifically and reliably tackled in the subsequent semi-structured interview phase. The questionnaires were designed in Qualtrics with a majority 5-point Likert scale for questions aimed at establishing hierarchy of influences and with one question requiring a determinant response as to the most important of two factors – comparing directly the concepts of ranking and reputation. As was the case in the previous document, a 5 point rather than a

7-point scale was chosen. Since most Chinese students were expected to access the survey

on their mobile phones to access the survey.   A 7-point scale in Qualtrics does not fit and

displays clearly on a standard mobile phone screen. The decision was taken therefore once

again, to sacrifice granularity, in favour of the prospect of making the survey more

accessible and as a result achieving a higher response rate resulting in a potentially larger,

arguably more representative sample. As proved successful in the first iteration,

respondents had the option to view and respond to the survey in either English or Simplified

Chinese. The survey was once again translated into mandarin by a native Mandarin speaker

with sector experience. A first test round was trialled with 6 current students to gain

feedback on the questions and lay out. No major changes were made to the survey to

ensure that the meaning which was intended was conveyed as far as possible consistently in

both Chinese and English.

3.8 Quantitative Data Analysis

The data from the questionnaires was 'cleaned' to ensure all the responses were from

eligible respondents according to the profile outlined in section 3.6 and were all complete.

The statistical profile of the respondents was compared with the HESA record, as outlined in

section 3.6 above, to establish the suitable comparability and validity of the group who were

reached in the study as a source from which to frame the questions for the qualitative phase

of the study.

The survey was distributed to an equal sample size (600) as that for Document 4 in which 249 responses were recorded 62.2% (155) of which were valid. The response rate for Document 5 was much smaller – with 150 responses just 22% (n=33) of which were valid against the same criteria. Notably, many more of those in the sample before cleaning of the data, were current UK students (n.65, 48.15%) than was the case in Document 4 where none of the students reached in the sample were currently studying in the UK. This had a dramatic impact on the reach of the survey as whole, with only 60 of the remaining 68 at this stage stating that they were planning to study in the next 2 years.

It was anticipated that due to a declining interest in study overseas due to the Covid pandemic at the point at which the survey was conducted, that the target sample may be more difficult to achieve, indeed the initial response rate was almost identical to that achieved in the process of researching Document 4, but with far less valid responses. The sample although small meets the minimum threshold as 'Statisticians have … shown that a sample size of 30 or more will usually result in a sampling distribution for the mean that is very close to a normal distribution' (Saunders et al, 2019, p.300). As demonstrated in section 4 below this was indeed the case of the data gathered which exhibited a low standard deviation. Furthermore, the profile of respondents correlated as broadly representative in comparison with the total population outlined in the HESA data. In terms of gender 67% of respondents were female against HESA's 64%, 26% of respondents were male against a HESA figure of 35% and a higher 'prefer not to say' of 7% against 0.07% in HESA's category of 'other', the latter category not being directly comparable and accounting potentially for some of the overall deviation. In terms of subject of study, 36% of the

sample were planning to study Business related subjects, against HESA's 33%, with a higher

number in Media of 18% against 4%. This higher proportion of Media students was similarly

reflected in the data gathered for Document 4, and likely due to the fact that those Agents

working with the University through whom the connection was made to send out the

questionnaires has a strong reputation for media so is likely to be a focus of those agencies.

In terms of age group there was a close correlation with 97% of respondents falling into the

18 – 34 age bracket against HESA's 99%.

The questionnaires as highlighted facilitated a clearer focus for the qualitative phase of the

research, building on the research undertaken for Document 4 in several key ways with the

aim of designing more effective interview questions for the second stage of the research for

this thesis. The questionnaire was designed to address the following points:

A. Examine the surprising results from Document 4 which suggested reputation was
   more important than rankings

The question of the relative importance of ranking and reputation was approached in direct

opposition with: 'When choosing a UK University which is more important to you'? This was

in contrast with the approach in Document 4 which required participants to evaluate the

importance on a scale of 1 – 5 of a long list of factors including ranking and reputation.

When asked to choose one of the two factors, contrary to the data gathered in Document 4

which rated reputation far above ranking as an influential decision-making factor, 81.82% of

respondents rating ranking as more important. Far from disproving the theory that ranking

is not the overriding decision-making tool which prospective students rely on, this

contrasting response highlighted the need to probe further the meanings behind this

apparent paradoxical response. It was also clear from this data that in the follow up

qualitative research it was necessary to clarify what the relative terms ranking and

reputation meant to prospective students to ensure that their responses to questions on

these two terms were relevant and therefore valid.

B. Establish the importance of enhanced career prospects as a significant factor in the

decision to study in the UK and the perceived relative impact of specific career

enhancing factors

Document 4 identified halo factors relating to employability as having the highest mean

rating in terms of influence over choice of institution compared to all factors. The

questionnaire undertaken for this thesis probed respondent's views on the importance of

career enhancement as a motivation to study in the UK in general terms and the relative

perceived impact of specific identified employability related halo factors on their future

career prospects. The survey indicated that 82% of respondents rated improved career

prospects as very or extremely important indicating a high level of agreement with the

statement – similar to that expressed by the much larger sample in Document 4 (73%).

Similarly, respondents in the latter survey expressed a strong level of confidence in ranking

as a predictor of career prospects – with ranking being rated as the top indicator with a

mean of 3.58/4, followed by 'the university is well known in my country' (3.52/4) and 'reputation' 3.42/4). Indeed, the latter two it could be argued are closely related.

Notwithstanding the Chinese context and influence of the QS rankings over employment prospects in some sectors and situations the data collected across the two sets of questionnaires in Documents 4 and 5, particularly given the relatively small number of responses elicited in the second iteration, was crying out for further investigation, to attempt to establish whether indeed the halo factors relating to employability and career enhancement could indeed be mobilised as a means of creating a reputation which would yield brand equity and resonance in the Chinese market.

The data gathered in the questionnaire stage therefore in some ways provided clarity for the direction of the interview stage but also highlighted the gaps in meaning which could be usefully addressed by the semi – structured interview method.

3.9 Qualitative Data Collection

Semi - structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate technique by which to approach the qualitative research undertaken for this thesis. This choice of method is further supported by the logical assessment of the semi- structured interview as having "remarkable potential" with its "unique flexibility", which makes it "sufficiently structured to address specific dimensions of [the] research question while also leaving space for study

participants to offer new meanings to the topic of study" (Galletta, 2013, pp. 2-3). Whilst it

is accepted that an interview cannot provide a mirror image of reality, the way in which this

method "creates openings for a narrative to unfold, while also including questions informed

by theory" (*ibid)* was particularly important with this group of participants in encouraging

responses which could be used to deepen our understanding of the surprising data gathered

in Document 4.

'Reciprocity' is further noted as an important and useful technique in supporting the

achievement of the research objectives, one facilitated by the choice as Galetta suggests, of

the semi – structured interviews:

> Carrying out your interview relies on two orienting tasks: the first is to listen closely
> to the participant for points in need of clarification and further generation of
> meaning; the second is to locate and place on hold points in the interview to which
> you may return later for elaboration or on which you may invite the participant to
> critically reflect. These processes reflect the reciprocity you as a researcher offer the
> participant during the interview (Galetta, 2013, p. 2-3).

In the case of this particular thesis, this specific strength of the semi structured interview

was important in allowing the author to return to points raised, in order to encourage the

interviewees to critically reflect on the value of ranking in practical terms for them in

opposition to employability enhancing factors and the concept of reputation. Galetta goes

on to advocate this method:

Such an approach also leaves a space through which you might explore with

participants the contextual influences evident in the narratives but not always

narrated as such (*ibid*).

Galletta's statement holds significance in the context of this research and supports the

selection of the semi-structured interview, particularly in light of the topic addressed.

University rankings are known to be a pervasive topic in China in terms of the views adopted

of both domestic and international institutions. The data gathered in Document 4

suggested that contrary to the common hype surrounding rankings, prospective students

may in fact value other expressions of brand equity more highly when directed challenged.

Employing semi – structured interviews as a method of clarification, meaning generation,

and critical reflection in a manner highly appropriate to a Critical realist perspective, will

therefore provide an appropriate means of further informing and framing our

understanding of the appropriate means by which universities can achieve brand equity

which resonates for this audience.

The author's cultural and linguistic knowledge of the respondent group proved helpful in

Document 3, working with Taiwanese Agents to understand their influence on the brand of

UK Universities. In the same manner the author's experience of working with prospective

Chinese students in a professional capacity for the last 20 years will be beneficial to this

process as Baker states:

Interviewing is understood as an interactional event in which members draw on their cultural knowledge, including their knowledge about how categories of members routinely speak (2004, p. 132).

Similarly, the authors experience of working in China over 2 decades and knowledge of the Chinese culture and language was helpful in developing appropriate the research tools and avoiding as much as possible by virtue of this experience and understanding, some of the potential problems of an otherwise possibly ethnocentric approach, as cautioned by Alvesson and Skoldberg below:

… value – judgements, interpretations and a whole host of – often subconscious or non-reflected – choices as regards language, perspective, metaphors, focus, representation and so on pervade the whole research process (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000, p. 168).

Huberman and Miles further emphasise the importance of placing data gathered through the interview process in its rightful context; 'Individuals' narratives are situated in particular interactions but also in social, cultural and institutional discourses which must be brought to bear to interpret them' (2002, p. 256). Being able to "read between the lines" of narratives which are shaped by "established cultural standards" of the respondents (Schmitt, cited in Silverman, 2004, p. 134) both in terms of the language of their culture, and that language associated with the specific context of UK Higher Education in China, will allow the interviewer to push for clarification which might otherwise have been masked. Similarly,

the authors sound working knowledge of Mandarin Chinese meant that the respondents

were able to supplement their answers in Chinese where they struggled to convey their

meaning in English and they were encouraged to do so where they wished to, and in

instances where clarification was needed.

Despite the authors experience and ability in Mandarin, it is prudent to acknowledge that

"in qualitative research, power imbalances in data collection are inescapable" (Kim 2022)

and "ethical dilemmas related to power dynamics" (Belina 2023). Prospective students,

using a second language, speaking online to a clearly western University representative

(regardless of in what language) are arguably likely to be influenced, particularly in the

context of the topic (being related to education) and the 'unique' Confucian cultural

influences inherent in the participants background (Kim, 2022).

In general terms, the limitations of the semi – structured interview are well documented,

reliability and dependability are acknowledged as particularly pertinent to this particular

project due to the small sample size which arguably limits generalizability. However, other

forms of generalizability it is proposed by Buchanan cited in Saunders et al, nonetheless

demonstrate the potential value and quality of this type of qualitative research:

> …findings from one qualitative research setting may lead to generalisations across
>
> other settings where for example characteristics of the research setting are similar or
>
> where learning from the research setting can be applied in other settings (Buchanan,
>
> 2012 cited in Saunders et al 2019, p. 216).

As outlined in section 3.6 above, the sample used for the semi – structured interviews was accessed by the same method, through Agents in China. Semi – structured interviews were undertaken online, with a target group of subjects selected using self-selection sampling, whereby volunteers were screened for participation until the target number of interviewees was achieved. The participants who were selected were required to meet specific criteria, in order to attempt to mirror as closely as possible, the Chinese market as a whole, as represented by the latest HESA data as outlined in section 3.7. None of the subjects had previous experience of studying at degree level in the UK, and their subject of interest aligned broadly with the Chinese market as a whole with its 73/27% split between the Arts and Sciences. Indeed, three out of five of the interviewees were interested in Arts and the remaining 2 STEM. The interviewees were of a similar age – 19 to 23 – the age bracket which accounted for 58% of new Chinese students in the UK in 2021/2, according to the same HESA data set. The balance of genders in the market 60% female versus 39% male and 1% 'other' was reflected less accurately in the sample with 2 females and 3 males after one interviewee had to be replaced at short notice with another respondent.

3.10 Interview Questions

The interviews, building on the research undertaken in the previous documents, were designed to gather information regarding the views of prospective Chinese students towards UK University brands. The questions were designed based on the themes which emerged through the literature review and correlated with the specific objectives of the

research as outlined in section 1.4.   The questions were constructed in such a way as to
elucidate the interviewees understanding of the concepts of reputation and ranking, extract
views on the relative importance of these concepts, and crucially the reasons behind the
importance given to each of those concepts. Similarly, as explained in section 3.8 above,
employability which was identified as a significant halo factor for prospective students in the
quantitative research undertaken in Document 4, and in the first stage of research for this
final thesis, was probed further. In this manner the interviewees were encouraged to
critically reflect on the relative importance of employability enhancing factors of a
university's offer compared to the importance of their future university' league table
ranking. The 'Reciprocity' referred to as a beneficial aspect of the semi – structured
interview by Galetta (2013, p. 2-3) was brought into play here particularly in the case of
question 7 below.

Question	Question	Addresses assumption
1	Tell me what you know about UK University rankings? What is a university 'ranking'?	1
2	Do you think ranking is different from reputation? Why? What gives a university a good reputation?	2
3	How important is ranking when you are choosing your future university in the UK? Why?	1,3
4	What are your main reasons for studying in the UK in the future? What benefits do you think this will have?	3
5	Do you think graduating from a UK university will improve your employment prospects?	2
6	(If yes) How important is this in your choice of university?	2, 5

7	What experiences, support or opportunities at your chosen University will help you improve your employment prospects? For example, careers service, placement or internships, alumni networks or expert professors in your field of study?	4, 6
8	What is most important to you – that your future university has a high ranking? Or that it will give you these things (responses to question about) related to improving your employment prospects? And why?	4

Open and probing questions, the 'why' being probed again where participants did not openly offer this information, were used to allow participants to present their views holistically and facilitated 'asymmetry' in the transcripts "where the interviewee talks more than the interviewer is highlighted as a sign of 'quality'" (Brinkman & Kvalw, 2005, cited in Leavy, 2014).

The interviews were undertaken online via Microsoft Teams. The duration ranged from 22 to 38 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim from the recording, not relying solely on the automatic transcription facilitated by Teams to maximise accuracy and reliability. The transcriptions were undertaken immediately after the interview by the author, checked for accuracy through listening and re-listening to the audio and subsequently annotated to indicate long and short pauses, and 'non - verbal utterances' in the manner advocated by scholars such as Riessman (1993). Long extracts of the data gathered are included in the below analysis to minimize the opportunity for subjective inferences and to "satisfy the need for low inference descriptors" (Silverman, 2011 p. 365).

All but one of the respondents used a mixture of English and Chinese through which to convey their answers, with interviewees visibly more relaxed in being able to express themselves in this manner.

Summary

The mixed methods approach adopted for this thesis proved useful in refining the focus of the semi – structured interview phase, despite the relatively low response rate experienced at the survey stage. The design of the semi – structured interviews was useful in gaining further insights also into the data gathered for Document 4, tackling key questions which emerged from the quantitative data gathered at that stage and which were crucial in moving towards a more comprehensive understanding of the views of prospective Chinese students – allowing the researcher to evaluate the research assumptions more holistically.

An approach appropriate to the critical realist philosophy and the nature of the data gathered was applied in order to achieve 'validity' and 'reliability'. As highlighted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), in the case of qualitative research the criteria of validity and reliability – measurements most commonly used in the interpretation of quantitative data and in the positivist tradition - should not be applied in such a rigid manner as to make it difficult to achieve quality and credibility. Indeed, they assert that the in – depth methods of qualitative research allow researchers to ground their findings through the collection of rich data. Indeed, in conducting this research the author strove to achieve Lincoln and Guba's criteria of 'dependability', 'credibility' and 'transferability'. Accordingly, 'dependability' was achieved by the advocated method of recording the changes and producing an account of

the emerging research focus which is dependable in so much as it can be understood and therefore evaluated by others. 'Credibility' was achieved by employing techniques such as the checking of data and interpretations (the use of a reciprocal interview technique) and ensuring that preconceived notions about the topic of study did not unduly influence the analysis of the data by acknowledging these and challenging them through the data analysis process.

As described in section 4.1 below, the data gathered through the interviews was analysed using Thematic Analysis and involved a 5-step process of coding – an effective method through which themes occurring through the interviews were identified and compared against earlier research findings, the academic literature and addressed against the key assumptions of this thesis.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Thematic Analysis

The critical realist approach and the nature of the research questions addressed in this thesis lend themselves to the application of thematic analysis, an approach hailed as a "foundational method for qualitative analysis" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Such an approach has been applied below to the analysis of the data gathered at the semi – structured interview stage of this research.

A five-step approach to Thematic Analysis, designed specifically for the critical realist approach is advocated by Fryer with the 'aim of producing causal explanations' (2022). The five stages of the model which Fryer advocates are outlined below:

Step 1: Develop your research questions	Identify the experiences and/or events of interest, and develop one or more causal research questions.
Step 2: Familiarize yourself with the data	Skim read a large proportion of the data.Make notes on initial thoughts and questions.
Step 3: Apply, develop and review codes	Apply descriptive codes to the data using a data-led approach.Develop these codes by processes of standardization (use the same wording for similar codes) and consolidating (use theoretical terms to unite different codes).Review codes by assessing their validity.
Step 4: Develop and review themes	Develop themes (causal explanations of experiences/events).Review themes by assessing their validity.
Step 5: Generate conclusions and reports	Reflect on the overall analysis and review the validity of conclusions.Consider how to best communicate the conclusions.

Figure 7: Source: Fryer, 2022

Fryer's approach is apt, given its development as part of a study undertaken in a similar

context to this thesis, looking at students views of Higher Education in Kenya. It provides a

useful model due to similarities in context and in its aim, which ultimately seeks to produce

causal explanations for decision making – this can be usefully applied to this thesis which

explores the decision-making process of Chinese students, which will in turn inform the

brand equity development process.

Following the process advocated by Fryer (2022) the data was skim read, with initial

observations being recorded, then an 'initial coding' of the interview transcripts was

undertaken in order to allow the author to apply descriptive codes and "scrutinize and

interact with the data as well as ask analytical questions of the data" (Thornberg and

Charmaz, p. 156, cited in Fitz 2013). These 'codes' were assessed for their validity and

consequently themes – the 'causal explanations of experiences and events' were identified

from within the responses. This process was strengthened by adherence to the principle

that "analysis of interview data made more credible – by seeing interviews as exhibiting

behaviours rather than 'experiences" (Silverman, 2017).

Five key themes were identified as running through the interviews were: ranking significance

and hierarchy, company perspectives of rankings, reputation, career enhancement and the

importance of work experience, and social responsibility/making a difference as a measure

of graduate success. Many of the themes were revealed through the coding process to be

interrelated however they are explored in turn in the below section in a structured fashion in

order to help begin to address the research questions and support understanding of the key concepts of this research.

4.1.1 Ranking significance and hierarchy

Ranking, one of the key concepts of this thesis was logically central to the interview questions and emerged unsurprisingly as one of the key themes within the responses. The observations made in the previous Document 4 which brought into question the importance of ranking to Chinese students – in direct disagreement with accepted assumptions in the academic and professional spheres - were addressed head on. The participants all acknowledged the importance of rankings in their decision-making process in the first instance.

All of the participants when asked what they knew about UK University rankings and what a ranking is, immediately cited the QS Ranking without prompt – unsurprisingly given the Chinese governments published reliance on this ranking for various functions. As noted in section 2.3, the number and nature of rankings have been dramatically increased in the past decade particularly. The respondents' awareness of rankings matches well with the sector's continued engagement with that process, suggesting that reference to rankings by prospective students is somewhat inevitable and this tendency must be addressed head on by universities, particularly those who do not have a strong position in the rankings to which their audience refers.

The importance of the QS ranking was characterised in the most black and white terms as

their sole point of focus by two respondents (HN):

> *My understanding of the rankings is through QS ranking which I have seen on the*
>
> *internet QS brands on the Internet. So I know Universities with high ranking for us*
>
> *Chinese students are better.*

And YK:

> *I only know about the QS, you know, and then it is for all it is for schools in all over*
>
> *the world and QS is the most, the most ranking I'm focused on.*

The fact that all respondents mentioned the QS ranking without prompting and in some

cases explicitly stated that the QS as a metric on which they would rely strongly in their

decision-making process supports the arguable tendency described in section 2.2 for

students from collectivist cultures such as China to tend towards risk adverse decisions.

Awareness of and belief in the importance of pursuing an education in a QS top 100

university for Chinese students, due to government legislation and company hiring practices

in that country comes as no surprise. Once again this presents a significant challenge for the

many universities outside of this QS ranking bracket.

In more general terms ranking was seen as an objective measure available as part of the decision-making process where other factors were more difficult to demonstrate:

Because I think the ranking is er ranking is the only, only things that can make, make the school comparable. The other, the other things about reputation or the environment. It can't be compared. (YK)

Interestingly this respondent (YK) gave a numerical answer to the importance of ranking, citing this for him as '*seventy percent'*. In direct contrast to that respondent ZF, who acknowledged the importance of rankings to companies in the recruitment process (see 4.3 below) still expressed ranking as having low importance for their decision making:

But for me I think it's thirty percent, I think… Hmm And the the the another one I think is more about the teacher who just er connect with me and the research we have done I think is more important for than ranking

This viewpoint related to the prospective student's future ambition which he shared as being to take a Doctoral degree in the future. Similarly, other respondents shared a more nuanced view of rankings, acknowledging the importance to them of subject based metrics in relation to their specific interests:

Well, in my understanding, well, the ranking of universities may be helpful in some cases such as subject ranking and comprehensive ranking. But I think sometimes, uh, even if it is a school with a higher overall ranking, it may not necessarily be specialist in this field just have better resources. On the contrary, I think schools with higher subject rankings are. (CH)

And when asked specifically how important ranking was to their choice of UK University CH similarly responded:

It might depends on like I I would not focus on the general rank, but I will might consider the rank of my major. Then I would tend to choose in the high rank, but I will also consider like because I'm if I'm trying to master degree or something then it also depends on the professor. I I really appreciate and where he is.

Academic specialization was emphasised by CH as an important decision-making factor for him as a student with specific interest in an academic career. Interestingly the acknowledgement suggested by this response that overall rankings do not necessarily indicate that an institution will satisfy the needs of a particular student, looking to follow a particular career path, supported the argument that aspects of a university's brand can be used as a halo around which to build. This acknowledgement also demonstrated a sophistication in the subjects understanding of aspects beyond rankings and thus supported

the potential for universities to mobilise parts of their offer – such as academic expertise or indeed employability - with resonance for their target audience.

Furthermore, when asked what their main reasons for studying in the UK were, and how this would benefit their future (non-specifically) four out of five participants mentioned the significance of the QS rankings unprompted specifically in a global context, as a way of measuring the standards of a particular country as well as an individual institution. Respondent CH cited the UK's recognition and attraction for them in general terms as a boost to their employability in China as a consequence of its superior performance in international rankings:

I think studying in the UK will be of great help to my future employment because in the context of international rankings UK Universities have more recognition in China.

As did respondent HN:

Because Chinese schools are not very good in the world rankings, so we will trust UK Universities more.

The prowess of UK universities' ranking position as a homogenous group was further noted by respondent C:

The UK University will be in the highest levels compared with like er like UK or

America University will be in the highest level. That turns to like Canada and

Australia, then turns to other places will be like this in a hierarchical system.

When describing the relative rankings of universities in different countries however one

respondent (C) expressed the view that UK Universities with similar rankings to Australian

universities would be held in higher regard and as 'superior' due to the reputation of UK

Higher Education in general terms. This comment was interesting in terms of an

unprompted allusion to reputation (before that concept had been introduced to the

interviewee) as a factor which could, in certain circumstances outweigh a statistical ranking

(albeit in the case of a small variation in rank). Indeed, this identification of UK Universities

as superior in quality due to the presence of more UK Universities in the QS rankings,

highlighted another potential use of the halo effect since the suggestion driven by the

responses gathered indicated that by virtue of being in the UK all UK universities were

viewed as sitting under this quality umbrella. This effect reminds us of the studies

conducted into the halo effect in action in branch campuses and TNE provision as

highlighted in section 2.5 above, supporting the contentions of Butt et al. (2016) who argue

for the importance of such an effect in the impactful marketing of these overseas extensions

of universities. This is another potential example of the halo effect in action and a tactic

often seen employed in practical terms by bodies such as the British Council who celebrate

the quality and consistency of the UK offer in their marketing campaigns. This was

particularly the case in the early days of the opening up of routes to study for Chinese

students by the Chinese government (see Harvey & Williams, 2010) anecdotally suggesting the apparent success of such initiatives.

It was clear however that all the respondents, when initially questioned about their awareness of rankings held the view that rankings (specifically QS) were both a global measure and one that they apparently considered as a measure of 'recognition' promoting 'trust' and confirming an established 'hierarchy'. This importance was cited by one respondent as more important in China, compared to other countries due to 'cultural differences':

> *My future plan will be probably back to China then in the general environment in China, the ranking are still very important and some like in like Australia or UK and maybe the ranking might not be very important. So that's maybe the cultural differences. (C)*

In summary, the responses demonstrated a strong awareness of rankings as a measure of institutions and confirmed the importance in the Chinese context of the QS ranking specifically. The cultural importance of rankings was also specifically references, supporting Assumption 1, that ranking is an important factor in choosing a UK university.

4.1.2 Company Perspectives of rankings

One of the noted consequences of policies around the QS rankings in China is the application of students' alma maters QS ranking as a blunt tool for sifting applications for jobs at state controlled and larger private companies and as such this theme emerged from the interviews undertaken as a prominent one, featuring in each case as a significant factor in the students' consideration of their future choice of institution. All of the respondents included when asked why rankings were important in their choice of university cited of the impact of rankings on their future employment prospects – referring specifically to the companies or 'bosses' or 'companies' as considering this as a factor in selecting employees:

Hmm, I think it's a good idea because if you want to have a better degree and and have a and prepare for your work in the future, and many of the er boss of the worker they more compare they more concerned about the ranking you know？(ZF)

My understanding of the rankings is through QS ranking which I have seen on the internet QS brands on the Internet. So I know Universities with high ranking for us Chinese students are better. After studying in the UK and returning to the country, we can have a higher academic qualification and be more recognized by some employment companies more, so we will choose some universities in the UK. (HN)

For Chinese companies they have the University in UK has more recognition degrees

than the China, China University. (CH)

Respondent (C) noted that the importance placed on ranking depends on the type of
company:

…views from like companies in China or something like that, but it depends on the

like, what types of company but I have heard that it's like most HR they will have the

forms of university then usually they will first consider like UK university then they will

consider like QS ranking or something. (C)

In summary the views on company's perspectives on the importance of rankings was firm
but unsophisticated – all of the respondents acknowledged this as a factor without
prompting but only one alluded to the view that this may be dependent on the type of
company selecting the graduates. Ranking was seen as a factor impacting on future career
prospects and supported assumption 2 that prospective Chinese students believe graduates
of high ranked universities have enhanced employability, by virtue of employers'
perceptions of the validity of ranking as a measure of a student's ability and potential.

4.1.3 Reputation

Reputation was a particularly strong theme identified during the interview stage. The questions posed in the interviews were designed to build on the understanding of the importance and potential of the concept of reputation, developed from the research undertaken in Document 4 and in the quantitative phase of the research for this thesis. As outlined in section 3.9 above, the questions were designed to probe the meaning and relative importance of reputation from the prospective students' perspective. Respondents were specifically asked if they thought reputation was different from ranking, why and as a follow up what gives a university a good reputation. The responses to this point were, not unexpectedly lacking in clarity, perhaps due to the intangible nature of the very concept of reputation. However, all of the respondents acknowledged in their own manner a distinct difference in the two discrete terms.

One very colourful response alluded to the abstract nature of reputation in specific terms:

> *Well, I think reputation, uh, is quite a bit more, uh, abstract painting. A ranking is more specific. He can rank the school in some professional fields. Just give a ranking. But reputation often relies on, uh, teachers and students of the school working together to create a level of recognition that is shared by everyone in society. (CH)*

This reference to the 'level of recognition' which is 'shared by everyone in society' echoes extremely closely the definition of reputation adopted for this thesis – namely that "the

reputation of an organization refers to public perceptions of the organization shared by its multiple constituents over time" (Sung and Yang 2008, p.363).

One respondent specifically noted that reputation was dependent on the history of the university – its longevity and gave an example of the researchers' institution:

> *I think, mm，it's not the same of ranking and reputation. I think ranking is just about the time, like you, how How many fruits you have？In the just in the area how much fruit you have is about your ranking，but I think the reputation is about er all the time. You establish the university and Leicester from nineteen twenty-one. (ZF)*

Interestingly this connection between age and reputation is an aspect of Higher Education branding which was been identified as having potential for further investigation in terms of its relative influence on perceptions of quality and reputation (Bulotaite, 2003, Wardley et al, 2013; Merchant et al, 2015).

The 'Nobel prize winner' effect was alluded to by one respondent who correlated reputation with influential graduates:

> *It could give us high academic standards, and there are many scientists we know they are graduated from them. (C)*

And a second alluded in a similar manner to respondent (C) to contributions to society as a way for universities to develop their reputation:

Well. First of all, I think the most important thing is to have a good academic environment. And secondly, we should make some contributions in some, uh, important areas for, uh, the country and society. Then. More still. Maybe solve some difficult problems could the. Uh develop the reputation. (CH)

One respondent demonstrated a potential grey area between influence of ranking and reputation or a potential overlap of the influence of these two factors – respondent HN having previously cited ranking as an important factor in gaining better employment (section 4.3 above) alluded to reputation in the same manner.

Because we are considering that we will return to our own country in the future and then we will have a better future. The University with a good reputation can help us to find better employment have a better future and development. (HN)

The importance of reputation was alluded to by one respondent in vivid terms, with pride and ownership or belonging being seen as key concerns dictating the desirability of an institution.

I think, uh, a good one is that the university has a good reputation. Well, for us

students in this kind of university, first of all, it is something to be very proud of,

because after all, this is our own university, and it is also a place where we live. Uh,

after all, if you don't have a good reputation, then it will be, uh, in our future,

whether it is work or life, it will often be for us. Very disadvantageous (CH)

In a similar manner to this response, one respondent cited similar concerns around

reputation:

Reputation. I think er the reputation is hmm. It is also important, but it is the it is the

basis things if if a university have some have some bad news and then some,

something that is not good. I think we cannot. Think about we can we cannot choose

it. I think because it is, it is the basic bottom line. (YK)

The responses which covered the theme of reputation were largely intangible with only one

of the respondents mentioning, without prompting, that reputation was measured by the

'outcome' in terms of the students in career terms.

I think we need to see hmmm the uh the differences between the input part and the

output part. If the differences is very large and I think it is a good reputation, and if

it's not, it is bad reputation. I think it is of the level of student who is graduated is the

outcome. I see the differences. Is the increased level of this of this is the reputation, it

is the most important things. (YK)

When pushed for clarification the respondent confirmed that he was alluding to the

graduates of the University and when asked to quantify what 'success' meant for those

graduates and what the indicator of a good reputation was therefore, he stated: *I think the*

most important is, is a good career.(YK)

The responses clearly showed a lack of uniformity as to the distinct meaning of 'reputation',

however the answers given alluded in many cases to association with the university as a

known entity – be that for its research outputs in a specific topic area or as the home of

Nobel prize winning academics. Association with a university with a strong reputation was

hailed as important by the respondents, and equally negative should that university have a

bad reputation. The responses suggested that reputation was indeed regarded as a 'distinct

and independent factor from ranking' in line with assumption 4. Furthermore, the emphasis

on the importance of positive association as a benefit of attending a university with a strong

reputation, closely aligned with one part of Aaker's definition of Brand Equity as adopted for

this thesis, namely the '*recognition of what an institution is known for, (and) a sense of*

loyalty toward the institution' (Aaker, 1991).

4.1.4 Career enhancement, employability and the importance of work experience

Like the concept of reputation, the influence of employability enhancing factors was specifically probed by the interviewer with work experience emerging as a key aspect of employability enhancement. As seen above, this theme emerged as a consequence of reputation explicitly for one respondent, and indeed a range of opportunities and experiences were cited as those which would improve future career prospects. However, improved employment prospects were not universally cited by all the respondents as a motivation for studying in the UK:

I don't know whether it will give me, I don't know. I don't know whether it is good or not for me to er to get career prospect in the future, in when if I graduated from the UK University. (YK)

In contrast to this response (HN) stated confidently:

After studying in the UK and returning to the country, we can have a higher academic qualification and be more recognized by some employment companies more, so we will choose some universities in the UK.

Focussing more on the academic experience respondent (C) noted:

> *I have learned many knowledge about history. But in I think in UK I can learn like in a traditional European ways of researching then you at least in my master degree it would give me the abilities of doing independent research or something*

When asked what experiences or opportunities provided by UK universities would facilitate these improved prospects there were a range of responses including general careers advice, a better understanding of opportunities in the UK and the mechanics of the UK jobs market, internships featured strongly as demonstrated below. When specifically asked to compare the relative importance of the benefits for future career, such as work experience which a university may provide (following discussion of these aspects), with a university's ranking, four out of five respondents stated that these experiences (the nature of which they defined in their own way) were more important than ranking:

> *Uh, I think the working experience is more, more important, I think. When I enter this school and I will be more focused on the working experience. And I will like to do some working experience rather than study in in the room all the day.* (YK)

> *I think, yeah, I think it experience is more important (thank ranking) because it allows us to learn some real knowledge. That is, sometimes it may be our future work life.*

Well. It is what is required, not necessarily, it is just the knowledge learned in our

textbooks. (CH)

So for me, for the question, I think the answer is the other things [more important

than ranking] (ZF)

The importance of internships and other career enhancing activities was noted by all

respondents in some form with explicit examples such as:

The internship opportunity is very important. Whether you choose to continue your

path in the UK or choose to return to China, your work experience is very valuable.

(HN)

It's give students a chance to practice and prepare for their job in the future. I think

it's really important (ZF)

I think maybe providing, like internship programmes or something then this will

rapidly improve the abilities in working I think. (C)

'Soft skills' were also highlighted by two participants. One shared their view of the importance of connecting with wider society during their time in the UK as a means of improving future employment prospects:

> *I know the university in UK and also other countries is more social and the student have more chance to connect with social better for us in the students in China erm we just live in the university and eating in university studying in university and research but we do not have many time to connect with other things* (ZF)

The other emphasised the value of common sense:

> *Uh, common sense and stuff like that, I think these things will be used by me in the future, uh, at work. Well, of course we are many companies and many enterprises. Well, these things will also be taken into consideration when recruiting.*(CH)

Crucially two of the respondents expressed views which appeared to be connected directly to their future career plans and their desire to enter academia or at least to progress to PhD level study. Both of those respondents elicited views about the superior importance of subject level expertise when asked about the importance of career enhancing factors:

Personally I think. If the university could provide me more chance to improve my personal ability it will be better because like ranking is not everything like even even in like for example in history like even the university they have a very high rank in history, but there are still many tiny classifications within this major. Then we can choose from the one which is best for us, best for our area we we want to go deeper in. (C)

Despite the universal expression of the view that ranking was an important a factor the above examples show the importance of work experience and other career enhancing factors (including an environment suitable for budding academics) when prospective students were encouraged to consider their evaluation in this manner through a probing question.

Extremely pertinent to the objectives of this research was one respondent's expression of the lack of information he felt was available as regards the career enhancing work experience on offer by universities, and his subsequent reliance in the absence of that information on QS rankings as the 'only standard' influencing his decision making.

When I choose the school, I don't know whether the work experience they were bringing to me, so I the only standard I will I will take a look is the QS and is the ranking. But when I get into this school, I think the career future is becoming more and more important. (YK)

The 'reciprocal' nature of the questioning undertaken in the interview process as advocated by Galetta (2013) proved particularly helpful in probing the value which respondents placed on employability and career enhancing factors in opposition to ranking. As demonstrated in the findings, views shared by 4 out of 5 of the respondents suggested that, in line with Assumption 1 enhanced employability was a factor in their overseas study decision, impacting on their view of which university held brand equity according to this perception. Employability therefore stood out as an important concept around which universities could build a halo, representing their institution as having strength in this regard and for this particular audience of students a factor around which a halo and subsequently a resonant reputation could be constructed.

4.1.5 Social responsibility/making a difference as a measure of graduate success

Related to the concept of employability and the manner in which universities prepare graduates for their future place in the world, the theme of contributions to society in a manner which is socially responsible and makes a difference to society, either in China or in the wider world was mentioned un promoted by 3 out of 5 respondents when discussing the definition of successful graduates. As noted in section 4.4 above, one respondent (CH) noted the necessity to:

> *make some contributions in some, uh, important areas for, uh, the country and society*

Similarly, when discussing motivations for overseas study, respondent (HN) noted their specific career aims and intention to make a contribution to improvements in the chosen field of study:

The direction I want to study is computer science and network engineering because I think a country's network security is very important. I think in this era of information confidentiality, the Internet is a very transparent place, and it is very important if we can improve its security protection.

In one case this theme was closely interconnected with that of reputation. When respondent (YK) was asked to qualify a statement which suggested that their view was that an institutions measure of reputation was based on the success of its graduates (as noted in section 4.4 above) they responded:

The career is is a symbol of that, a person who do something to make the world. To to do something for the world is the career. And I think a person is useful if, and only if they do something for the world.

This drive to make a difference in the world emerged as an interesting and potentially insightful theme for further consideration in the development of brand equity, in relation to both the concepts of employability enhancing halo factors and reputation. For those universities able to demonstrate a strong sustainability agenda, this could be another aspect

around which to build a halo, reputation and brand equity for those students who feel

strongly about their future alma maters approach to such matters.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This section will discuss the findings of the research in relation to the research questions as outlined in Chapter 1. The key assumptions identified in section 2.7 regarding the views of prospective Chinese students will be addressed to develop a clearer understanding of the findings of this study and their implications for the overall research question:

Can employability enhancing halo factors be leveraged by UK Universities to create a reputation which increases their brand equity in the eyes of prospective Chinese students?

Each assumption will be addressed in the overall context of the key concepts of the conceptual framework to highlight the findings of the research. The theme of brand equity will be addressed last, in order to allow a logical presentation of how the findings of the research support the structure of the conceptual framework. It should be noted that the assumptions in many cases counter sect the key concepts of this thesis, however they have been placed under that concept which is judged to hold most logical relevance for that assumption. Building on the findings of research undertaken in the earlier stages of the DBA process, this discussion will demonstrate how the research has supported the development of an understanding of the supporting concepts of ranking, employability and central concepts from the conceptual framework of reputation, the halo effect and brand equity. In this way the implications of the research findings for the evaluation of the

conceptual framework of this thesis, supported by content from the literature review where appropriate, will be thoroughly examined.

5.2 The importance of Ranking in the decision-making process

Assumption 1, Ranking is an important factor in choosing a UK university.

The double-edged sword of rankings as outlined in the literature review is an enduring aspect of Higher Education marketing and one which arguably can have a negative impact on the shape and focus of universities in all countries. Whilst acknowledged as being just part of the marketing tool kit (Alcaide-Pulido et al, 2022; Yu et al, 2022) the importance of rankings in China is well documented and absolutely well-known as an apparently prominent factor to professionals working in the field (Cao et al, 2016; Cebolla-Boado et al, 2018). Feedback emerging from the sector for the 2023 intake illustrates strongly the impact of Chinese government policy and the apparent strong preference of Chinese students for universities with a high QS ranking. This observation, not yet supported by official HESA statistics which are released up to 2 years behind, presents an apparently significant challenge for many UK universities as those within the QS ranking top echelons embrace their position in the Chinese psyche with more aggressive approaches to recruitment in the face of falling numbers of international students entering the UK from elsewhere.

Against this background, and significant to the development of this research project were the results gathered during Document 4, which yielded somewhat surprising results in

contrast to both the literature and sector trends. As demonstrated in figure 8 below 'The

ranking of the university' as a decision-making factor was rated by prospective students in a

very surprising low seventeenth place with a mean rating of 3.95/5 - with a standard

deviation of 0.96. The research undertaken for this final thesis built on these findings by

addressing the concept of ranking as a decision-making factor directly with the interview

participants to attempt to understand potential explanations for the data gathered

previously.

Halo and Hygiene Factors from low to high importance

Factor	Value
O Relatives/friends have studied	2.37
O There are a high number of students from my home country	2.37
O There are a low number of students from my home country	2.68
O The University has an Alumni Association in my country	3.12
O The University has Nobel Prize winners	3.12
O The University is Research Focussed	3.34
H Low tuition fees	3.37
O The University has many World Class Academics	3.46
H Availability of Scholarships	3.51
O Alumni from the University are influential	3.52
O The University's Graduates are loyal to the University	3.54
O The University is one of the first to come to mind when I...	3.56
H Institution location	3.66
O I will be proud to be a graduate of this University	3.7
H Expectation of parents	3.72
O The University is well known in my country	3.75
O The University's graduates are proud of the University	3.75
H Accommodation price	3.76
H Catering services on campus	3.81
H Good Sports facilities	3.81
O The University name is instantly recognizable	3.81
H Modern quality accommodation	3.83
H Access to high quality books and journals	3.85
H Long opening hours in the library	3.88
H On campus facilities and Accommodation	3.9
H Guaranteed Accommodation	3.91
H Cutting edge equipment for my area of study	3.92
O The Ranking of the University	3.95
H High quality modern study spaces	3.97
H Graduation rates	3.99
H A High number of students graduate successfully	4.04
H Availability of Support Services	4.08
H Graduates from this University earn a high salary	4.08
H Career prospects	4.08
H Proximity of the accommodation to campus	4.09
H The University offers internships	4.1
H The University will give me access to contacts in my...	4.12
H The University has a High employability ranking	4.14
H There is careers advice and support available	4.19
H The University offers experiential learning opportunities	4.19
O Institution reputation	4.23
H Friendliness of the University	4.28
O Quality of the course	4.31
H Safety of the accommodation and campus	4.38

Figure 8: Document 4 – halo and hygiene factors explored – "How important are the following factors to you

when choosing which UK university you will study at in the future?"

Awareness of rankings, and particularly the QS was undeniably universal and front of mind

for interview participants both as a measure of individual institutions and as a general

delineator of international hierarchies within the global Higher Education sector. 'Recognition' and 'trust' and a means of 'comparison' were used as adjectives to describe rankings suggesting a perception of reliability and transparency. There was an acknowledgement by one respondent of the importance of subject rankings as a more granular measure depending on specialist areas of interest, however this same respondent also clearly expressed an understanding of the apparent importance of the QS World ranking in general terms as an important factor in future employment specifically. Indeed, ranking (by default QS ranking) was seen by all respondents as a key method by which companies measured graduates and acknowledged as an important factor to varying degrees. One respondent giving ranking a 70% rating in terms of its importance to his decision-making process. These findings highlight the enormity of the challenge for universities outside of the QS top 100 in attracting Chinese students and the importance of adopting a more nuanced approach to their marketing strategies. The black and white nature of this challenge suggested by the authors experience in the field and supported by the albeit small scale research undertaken, is new to the sector following changes in Chinese domestic policies. The impact of this situation if not tackled strategically by universities will continue to impact on the sustainability of those institutions now struggling to attract students from the world's biggest market.

A focus on employability it is indicated by the research undertaken does emerge as one such potential strategic approach. Indeed, echoing the importance of employability suggested in the results for Document 4 (figure 8 above) when challenged to compare the importance of ranking specifically against employability enhancing factors, four out of five interview

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respondents rated the employability enhancing factors as more significant in their decision making than ranking. This suggests that although ranking does indeed endure, as per assumption 1, as an important consideration, importantly for universities the potential indicated by the conceptual framework for employability to be leveraged, even in markets where ranking is assumed to be the overwhelming decision-making factor.

5.3 Attendance at a high-ranking university as a pre-cursor to enhanced employability

Assumption 2: Graduates of high ranked universities have enhanced employability

As noted in the literature review, recently changes in Chinese government policy has created a well-known method, for the filtering of job applications, dependent on the QS ranking of their university. Indeed, as noted in the above section, those prospective students interviewed for this thesis were acutely aware of the connection between rankings (specifically QS World rankings) and the hiring practices of Chinese companies. This apparent expression of confidence in the value of rankings as a factor in delivering enhanced employability, and indeed the resulting concentration of Chinese students now studying in top QS ranked institutions, contrasts directly with the literature which in many cases declares the absence of evidence of such a direct correlation (Huang, 2013, and Cao, 2017; Huang & Turner, 2018).

This lack of evidence is particularly problematic in the post pandemic period and following the Chinese government policy changes which have themselves arguably inspired a new

level of dedication to (QS) rankings as a decision-making factor amongst Chinese students. This is due to the fact that there is very little literature which approaches this specific period and topic sufficiently. Indeed, graduates coming through this wave of change are starting to seek employment in many cases back in China, however 'evidence' of the power of rankings in this regard has not yet been presented by researchers in this area. This presents an interesting opportunity for further research into the outcomes of students now graduating and seeking employment under this new era of QS importance, research which may further support the potential power of an employability driven reputation for universities in the creation of brand equity.

Furthermore, and very interestingly, respondents in agreement with the focus of the literature published prior to the Chinese state driven dramatic rise in profile of QS rankings, alluded to the 'soft skills' gained by an overseas education and their importance in enhancing their future career the Chinese labour market (Li, 2013; Cebolla-Boado et al, 2013; Hao, Wen and Welch, 2016). This appreciation for the experiential benefits of a UK education in employability terms strongly suggested an awareness that ranking, although important potentially in opening doors to careers in particular contexts may not support the development of skills and qualities valued by employers in China and indeed elsewhere in the world. As highlighted in section 5.2 above this supports the notion that such factors could potentially be used to leverage reputation and create brand equity, an important consideration for universities seeking to improve their practice in recruitment

Assumption 3: Improving employment prospects is an important motivator for study in the UK

The data collected for Document 4, strongly indicated that careers related factors were important to prospective students; the ratings for the importance of 'high employability ranking' (μ=4.14) were higher than that for 'University ranking' in general, (μ =3.95). When asked in that research 'How important is it to you that studying in the UK improves your career prospects?' 73% rated this factor in the two highest categories of 'very important' or 'extremely important' with only 1 respondent (0.065%) rating career prospects as 'not important at all'. The interviewees expressed a broader range of views, two expressed the importance of improving employment prospects as a 'very important' motivator, however for the remaining three respondents the experience of studying in an alternative academic environment and gaining the 'soft skills' alluded to above (Li, 2013) dominated their apparent motivation for choosing to study in the UK.

However, similar to the respondents in this thesis, Doc 4 suggested a lukewarm view of the specific career benefits of graduating from a UK university and a lack of confidence in post-graduation prospects.

Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviat	Variance
It will be easier to get a job after graduation	1	5	2.28	0.8	0.64
My salary after graduation will be higher than that of my peers with no UK degree	1	5	2.55	0.75	0.57
It will be easier to get promoted than before	1	5	2.36	0.74	0.54
I will be more likely to get a job in my chosen field than before	1	5	2.07	0.66	0.44
I will have better English skills than before	1	5	1.6	0.66	0.43
I will have a better network of contacts for future career/business than before	1	5	2.08	0.72	0.52
I will have more opportunities for further study than before	1	5	1.94	0.69	0.47
I will have improved personal skills such as independence and resilience	1	5	1.67	0.65	0.43
I will have a better understanding of culture outside of my own country than before	1	5	1.67	0.64	0.41
1 = Strongly Agree, 5 Strongly Disagree					

Table 1: Do you agree with the following statements about the benefits of graduating from a UK University?

As demonstrated in table 1 above, the mean responses reflected a low level of confidence in employability related benefits with an average mean score of 2.02 out of 5. This lack of confidence is echoed in the literature for example (Hao and Welch, 2012; Phan, 2021; Xiong and Mok, 2020). Indeed, in reality even though Chinese students are now seen to be flocking like never before to top QS ranked universities, not all students will be able to access these institutions for a variety of reasons. High levels of graduate unemployment creates an assumed demand for a university experience which will offer soft skill advantages to those not attending a prestigious institution. The potential for universities to exploit this demand seems obvious. Further academic study of this particular context may yield findings which would support institutions in creating an offering which is tailored to that audience and in turn a reputation for facilitating better employment prospects.

Furthermore, and significantly for universities, this apparent contrast between the stated high importance of career enhancement (high) and the stated expectation of improvement in prospects which was low, supports the assumption that improved prospects is a motivator. Italso helpfully indicates that this may be lacking as an element of university's

brand messaging – which could be improved and leveraged as a means of building

confidence in this aspect and as a consequence brand equity.

5.4 The importance of reputation and its distinction from ranking

Assumption 4: Reputation is a distinct and independent factor from ranking

As alluded to above, the data gathered in previous stages of the research journey strongly

indicated that reputation was considered to have a distinctively greater influence on

decision-making than ranking in the eyes of prospective students. This drove the pursuit of

the assumption that reputation was indeed viewed as a distinct and independent factor and

potentially key to the building of brand equity.

However, the responses gathered in the pre – interview questionnaire stage suggested,

contrary to the Document 4 data presented in figure 8 above - that when placed in direct

opposition ranking was rated as more important than reputation as a decision-making

factor. Although from a relatively small sample, 82% of the respondents at this stage rated

ranking as more important than reputation.   This result may have been due to the nature of

the question – Document 4 deliberately placed ranking and reputation as factors in a long

list whereas Document 5 posed a determinant one or the other choice. In addition to this

question, the survey asked subjects to rate the employability halo factors identified during

the Document 4 research in terms of their importance in demonstrating a good reputation

(figure 9 below).
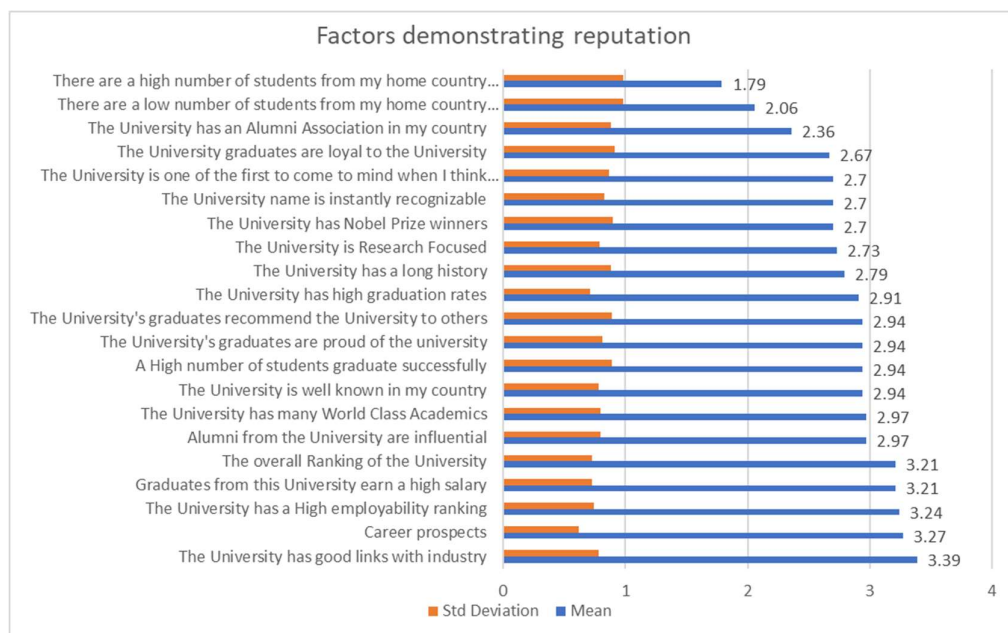
Figure 9: responses to "Think about reputation. How important are the following factors in demonstrating that a UK University has a good reputation?" rated from 1=Not important, 2= Moderately important, 3=Very important, 4=Extremely important

Interestingly links with industry, career prospects, a high employability ranking and graduates earning a high salary were rated as the top 5 indicators of a good reputation. This data, based on a small but representative sample suggests a tendency amongst prospective students to relate future employability to reputation and indicates this association is one which could be built upon by universities.

The interviews were useful in attempting to address this assumption. Indeed, the strong awareness of rankings demonstrated by the students' responses at interview stage contrasted with their limited attempts to define (unsurprisingly since academics have also largely failed to reach a satisfactory definition of reputation (see Plewa et al, 2016; Del-Castillo-Feito et al, 2019). Reputation was likened by one respondent to an 'abstract

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painting' whilst others noted longevity as a factor which portrayed a strong reputation -

echoing Bulotaite's (2003) argument about the power of heritage in branding. Similarly,

scientific achievement on a scale warranting international notoriety was mentioned as a key

indicator of reputation by one respondent, echoing one of the halo factors adapted from

Pinar et al's for Document 4: 'The University has Nobel Prize winners'.

Notably, one respondent shared a definition uncannily similar to the one adopted for this

thesis stating that reputation is the 'level of recognition' which is 'shared by everyone in

society'. This echoes extremely closely Sung and Yang's assertion that "the reputation of an

organization refers to public perceptions of the organization shared by its multiple

constituents over time" (2008, p.363). Ultimately all of the respondents clearly articulated

that there was a difference, whether they were able to articulate the nature of this

difference clearly or not.

In summary, reputation appeared from the data to be multi-faceted and somewhat

intangible in the eyes of the prospective students but to have positive associations linked to

future employability and career prospects. This suggested the potential for employing

reputation as an aspect of brand equity, which may prove helpful as Soysal et al found in

their study where 'university prestige' and 'reputation' were shown to be positive and

statistically significant predictors of international enrolments, whereas changes in QS

Rankings were not (Soysal et al p.7, 2022).

Assumption 5: Employability related halo factors are not necessarily characteristics of high-ranking universities

As highlighted in the section above, data gathered at the survey stage suggested that employability was seen as an indicator of a good reputation. Reputation and ranking it was established through the survey and interview stages of the research, as distinct concepts. The interview stage of this research particularly attempted to reveal what factors behind a university's brand were perceived as likely to have a positive effect on their future employability. Furthermore, the respondents were encouraged to reflect on if high ranking institutions offered these kinds of employability enhancing experiences and support, and finally whether the ranking or the factors they had identified as key to career success were most important to them in their choice of university.

The respondents gave a clear indication of the factors which they believe will improve their employability, citing careers advice and internships as two examples, whilst universally having acknowledged the power of ranking as an opener of doors to opportunities in some sectors of the labour market. Even those who did express sense of the value of ranking in future employment prospects also conceded the importance of internships, careers advice and soft skills. These factors highlighted by the participants as important in employability terms are not necessarily typical of high ranked universities – indeed internships which featured most heavily in respondent's answers, although increasingly offered by some

Russel Group and top QS universities (certainly in Australia) are commonly associated with post 92 and more modern universities particularly in the UK.

As noted above, when asked directly to reflect on whether a high ranking, or employability enhancing factors were more important the responses broadly agreed with the literature which highlights employability as the main motivating factor for study abroad in general (Gribble et al, 2015; Soares & Mosquera, 2020 cited in Fakunle, 2021). Indeed, when asked to choose three of the respondents cited experience as most important, one acknowledged the importance of both ranking and these experiences and one cited ranking as having priority. Notably the interview sample included two students who were interested in further study after their Master's degree rather than a career in commerce. This mix of respondents reflected the sector as a whole – i.e., not all students will go on to work in those industries which value high ranking or require this to open doors and offered an insight into the potential value and importance of differentiation when developing brand equity on the basis of employability. The effectiveness of employing the halo effect as a method of creating reputation, although warranting further investigation was supported by the data gathered in Document 4, which showed the clear importance of those aspects categorised as halo factors in student decision making.

Assumption 6: Enhanced employability is a key factor in demonstrating 'brand equity'

This is the key assumption for this thesis, since the overarching premise of the conceptual framework is that brand equity can be created by leveraging employability enhancing halo

factors, creating a reputation on the basis of these factors, which is powerful enough to generate brand equity for Chinese students and achieve the resonance needed to appeal to them. The data gathered, supported by the literature reviewed, suggests that there is indeed potential for generating significant brand equity by leveraging employability.

As noted above, it is acknowledged in the literature that employability is a key motivator for overseas study (Fakunle, 2021), suggesting that an institutions brand equity, the 'worth' of that institution, is likely to be signalled to prospective students, to a significant degree by an indication of enhanced employability as an outcome.

Referring back to the definition of brand equity applied to this thesis:

> *… awareness of an institution, recognition of what an institution is known for, a sense of loyalty toward the institution, an understanding of the institution's worth, and the desire to pay a premium price to be associated with it.* (Aaker, 1991)

Brand equity when characterised as 'awareness of' and 'recognition of what an institution is known for' tallies with the definition of reputation applied to this thesis which focusses on "public perceptions of the organization shared by its multiple constituents over time" (Sung and Yang 2008, p.363). In agreement with the literature on this subject, the prospective students whose views were canvassed through this thesis and the research for the previous

document clearly valued enhanced employability and the types of activity undertaken by universities to deliver this, as indicators of a good reputation and as key motivators in their decision-making thought process. Indeed, as demonstrated in figure 9 above, career enhancing factors were associated by prospective students with a 'good' reputation. Insightfully, one of the respondents actually defined and measured a university's reputation specifically in terms of the outcomes which its students are supported to achieve.

5.6 Revised Conceptual Framework

The findings of the research undertaken for this thesis, which built on and helped to refine the findings from the previous documents pointed strongly to the need to develop further the original conceptual framework for this document as presented in section 2.6. The new conceptual framework presented in figure 10 below, demonstrates more clearly the key contribution of this research to the practice of international higher education marketing and recruitment. The framework shows the relationship between hygiene factors, halo factors, reputation and brand equity in a manner which serves to demonstrate how Higher Education institutions can use the halo effect, in the absence of a high ranking, as a means of attracting international students.

This framework illustrates the importance of hygiene factors which, as highlighted in this research and in the literature, fulfil the basic needs and expectations of prospective students and form the first step, the bedrock of the decision-making process. This new framework also demonstrates the way in which halo factors both form and support an institutions reputation and in turn support brand equity.   Importantly the necessity to embed the halo factor across the institutions offering to create a more stable reputation and more stable brand equity is also laid out – a narrow offering

lacks stability and leads to the formation of a reputation not likely to support brand equity if scrutinised.
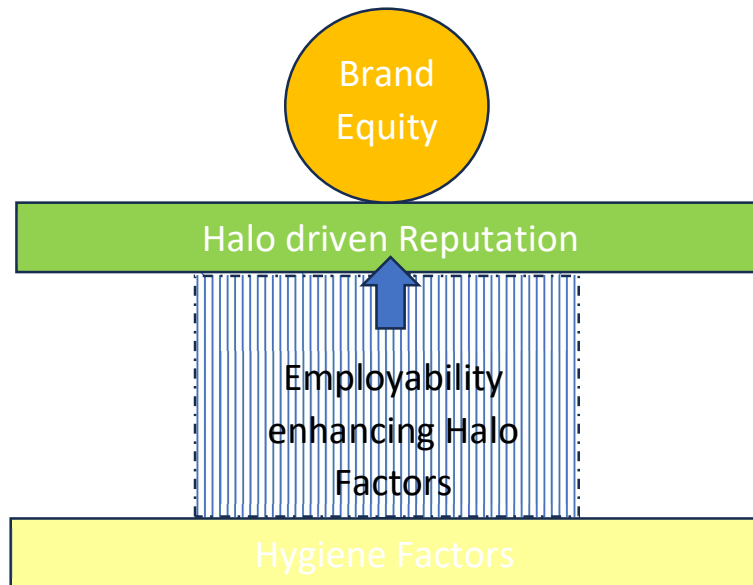
Figure 10: Revised Conceptual Framework

The revised conceptual framework can be explained as follows. In the absence of a high ranking position, which might otherwise signal brand equity - particularly in the case of a Chinese student concerned about their future prospects in light of the societally endorsed importance of the QS rankings - employability enhancing halo factors, as illustrated are the basis on which an alternative reputation can be built and supported. That reputation in turn supports prospective students' perception of the institution as one which can satisfy their ultimate aim in seeking higher education and hence, in accordance with Sung and Yang (2008) hold strong brand equity in their eyes.

The shape of the conceptual framework is deliberate, demonstrating the potential instability of brand equity balancing on a reputation built based on halo factors which if not embedded broadly into an institutions' offering may not carry sufficient weight to support the reputation. As demonstrated by the striped rectangle, the more broadly this or indeed any other halo factor is embedded into the overall fundamental offering of the university the more stable the reputation will be and thus the brand equity – the surety which students have in the ability of their chosen institution to pay back on their investment as demonstrated through this research - will also be more stable and enduring in the eyes of the audience.

Depending on the market being targeted, an institution must consider which halo factors are important to its target audience to build a reputation on the basis of those characteristics and subsequently offer brand equity to that particular group of students. This aspect of the conceptual framework allows potential for further research into what the resonant halo factors would in fact be for different groups of prospective students and whether employability is indeed a universal factor.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations for further study

This chapter offers concluding remarks on the research, revisiting and evaluating against the research objectives and questions. The limitations of the research and the many possible avenues for future research in this area are then highlighted to demonstrate the significant potential for both the further advancement of literature in this area and its potential practical application to the author's field of professional practice.

6.1 Reflection on the research objectives

From the very beginning of the DBA process, the overarching aim of the research undertaken has been to contribute to our understanding of the creation of internationally resonant Higher Education brands. Focussing on the UK Higher Education sector, the author was particularly determined to through this research, contribute to the pursuit of a more strategic, research informed basis for the pursuit of international branding and related recruitment activity. Taking a multi- stakeholder approach to the research through the process, which included Agents as well as prospective students, informed by a significant period of professional practice in international recruitment, the final stage of this final thesis focussed on the prospective students as the central source of insight into how resonance could potentially be achieved through the creation of strong brand equity. The DBA process was undertaken in an iterative fashion, embracing the critical realist philosophy and arriving at the final research question for this thesis, which proved central to addressing the original desire to uncover the antecedents of brand resonance:

Can employability enhancing halo factors be leveraged by UK Universities to create a reputation which increases their brand equity in the eyes of prospective Chinese students?

The potential of reputation, an enduringly ambiguous concept for the Higher Education sector, was strongly suggested by the research. Reputation was acknowledged as important and importantly by the Chinese students concerned in this study to be intimately connected with the employability of the graduates which a university produces. The ambiguous and fluid nature of reputation as a concept, suggested its potential as a vehicle for differentiation for universities and employability an obvious focus around which to construct it. The branding potential of the halo effect is neatly demonstrated by examples such as the self-styled 'groups' of universities known as the Russell Group in the UK, the Australian Group of 8 or the US Ivy league.

The research undertaken for this thesis looked in detail at the impact of halo factors more specifically as a vehicle for brand equity demonstrating the positive impact of factors signalling enhanced employability in the student decision making process. A strong reputation, the data gathered suggested, was signalled by indicators of enhanced employability and enhanced employability was noted, both in the literature and primary data as a key decision-making factor. Creating a halo for one's institution and a reputation as an institution which delivers enhanced employability would appear therefore to be a sound potential model for achieving brand equity – particularly in the context of the Chinese market where risk averse students are preparing to return to an extremely competitive job market, characterised by enduring high youth unemployment.

The focus on rankings acknowledged to be an effective if blunt 'risk reliever' for students from collectivist cultures such as China (Mourad, Ennew and Kortam, 2011) has arguably prevented UK Universities from looking outside the rankings box and investing in and committing to the creation of a reputation with a different focus and appeal. The 'university prestige' and 'reputation', which have been demonstrated as positive and statistically significant as a predictor for international enrolments, while changes in QS Rankings were (Soysal et al, 2002) warrants as continued below, further consideration. This is particularly true for those universities struggling to compete internationally on the basis of ranking, in China and other ranking sensitive markets.

Significant in developing our understanding of the appropriate levers which can be used to develop brand equity for the Chinese market was the apparent conflict portrayed in the responses of interviewees. They were on the one hand acutely aware of the power of ranking as a blunt mechanism through which companies recruit and their government allocates residential permits, but on the other shared views of the importance of the more tangible aspects of the university experience – such as internships and careers guidance which would make them more prepared for the world of work. Building a reputation as an institution which provides these crucial building blocks for graduates' careers would arguably create for these students, represent a good return on their investment and thus strong brand equity.

Indeed, as demonstrated by the participants who expressed their intention to follow academic career paths not potentially blocked so bluntly by QS rankings, not all Chinese students will be seeking a residential permit for a tier 1 city and not all Chinese graduates returning from the UK will fit into the vacancies offered by government departments and companies who use the QS ranking as their acid test. 'Long Term Brand Reputation' a term taken from the commercial sector is resonant here, credibility (a supporting factor in consumer-based brand equity) relies on being a brand being long lasting, trustworthy and intransient (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). Outside of inevitably transient rankings therefore it makes sense for universities to build reputations on the basis of reputational factors such as employability, given their demonstrable appeal.

6.2 Significance of the research

The overarching aim of this DBA journey was to mobilise academic theories and knowledge in this field, to inform and improve the professional practice of international student recruitment in UK universities. This thesis presents some useful lessons for the sector and a new model which could be usefully employed both in the academic pursuit of the topic and as a means of improving the practice of recruitment professionals working side by side with those academics in the UK's universities.

This research has added to our understanding of the potential for UK universities to look at how they can effectively create brand equity for the Chinese market, how reputation could be harnessed as a distinct and important part of that process and how a halo developed on the basis of specific factors, meaningful to potential students in a manner specific to the context of that market, could potentially be central to this process.

The conceptual framework for this thesis, the research undertaken has suggested, is a potentially valid and useful one to inform the creation brands that resonate for particular international markets. In the case of China, given the particular characteristics of this market, the creation of a reputation based on employability as the shining halo of the institutions offer would appear to be a useful tool to supplement the generic brand equity process through which university brands are generated. This approach is highly relevant to several major international student markets for the UK, and indeed for universities in other competitor countries. Furthermore, such a framework which focusses on the building of reputation as a means of creating brand equity could indeed be adapted to create a halo around other aspects of the institution's characteristics. These might be academic excellence, industrial relevance, sporting prowess, strong social responsibility – depending on the particular appeal of these halo factors to students in that particular market.

From a more academic standpoint, this thesis has attempted to begin to address several gaps in the literature, including our understanding of reputation and ranking as distinct factors in student decision making and the relationship between them. Secondly the paucity of studies which based their assessment of student decision making hierarchies on

data gathered from potential students, as opposed to those at the post hoc justification

stage (Oplatka 2015) was addressed in this thesis, although admittedly on a small scale, by

focusing on gathering data specifically from that group. The advancement of our

understanding of the topic at hand and the usefulness of that research in its application to

the professional sphere of Higher Education marketing and recruitment could be

significantly strengthened and more valid in practical terms for the profession, if these two

aspects were more clearly understood and considered. Bluntly put the survival of the UK

Higher Education sector, under current conditions, relies in many countries and particularly

the UK, on the lifeblood of international student recruitment. The further pursuit of a

clearer understanding of the process of building brand equity which is resonant for

international students as a specific group, and groups, is crucial in ensuring the continued

success of the UK Higher Education sector. As this study demonstrates the advancement of

knowledge in this area is arguably best achieved through academic study, empowered by an

on the ground understanding of the mechanics and complex contexts brough by professional

experience

6.3 Limitations of the study

The research carried out for this thesis was small in scale and although useful information

was gained through the research undertaken at this stage and throughout the DBA process,

claiming generalisability through a relatively small sample, in the context of such a large and

complex topic and geography is challenging. However, the research particularly in the

latter, qualitative stage delivered varied, surprising and valuable insights appropriate to the

pursuit of an enquiry in the Critical Realist tradition and suggested potential for research to probe this phenomenon further.

A lack of distinction in the literature regarding the definition and measurement of 'reputation' also made this aspect of the research challenging, particularly in relation to the quantitative research undertaken to understand the importance of reputation relative to other factors from the prospective students' viewpoint. This is an acknowledged weakness of the research but also points to future opportunities, as outlined in the below section, for further scholarly endeavours in this specific area.

Similarly, the approach to measuring brand equity adopted would be refined with hindsight, to include more in-depth consideration of the methods proposed by scholars to measuring this concept. Aaker's 'brand equity *Ten'* (cited in Gill & Dawara, 2010) for example offers a 5-dimensional approach to applying such a measurement whilst this study arguably focused on the 'associations/differentiation' dimension of that scale, to understand how institutions could achieve brand equity by virtue of associations/ differentiation achieved by a halo effect which would emphasise those particular aspects of the university's brand which resonated for the prospective student.

Another challenging and limiting aspect of the study relates to the challenges associated with appropriately navigating the cultural aspects of the Chinese market relevant to this type of study. Doing so should be noted as crucial in generating meaningful research. The

concept of 'face' so talked about in the literature (Guan and Ploner, 2020) and cultural

expectations around filial piety is extremely difficult for a non - Chinese (even one with

significant experience of living in this cultural context) to fully understand. Layered further

in the context of education – again with significant and specific cultural connotations for the

Chinese market in view of the importance of Confucianism the data and meanings which we

gather are doubly vulnerable to misconceptions.

6.4 Recommendations for further study

As highlighted in the introduction to this thesis, the body of literature relating to this topic

has grown exponentially in breadth and depth. There are still many more avenues for

research in this area which remain underexplored, and several specifically indicated by this

study.

Our understanding of reputation its meaning and potential are underdeveloped in the

literature and as outlined above, offer a rich seam of potential for universities to harness

and present particular aspects of their offer. An area of enquiry which was beyond the

scope of this study, but which on many occasions distracted the author from focus, are the

concepts of economic, cultural and social capital and their relationship to the concept of

brand equity. Although alluded to briefly in this study these concepts offer significant

potential, particularly when applied in a manner which examines their impact and indeed

potential across different cultural contexts. The thorough exploration of these concepts

would potentially reveal some very interesting new insights into the process of creating

brand equity and internationally resonant brands.

The focus of this study was solely on China and although the study offers useful

transferrable insights for markets with similar characteristics there remains significant

potential for further study into the brand equity creation process for markets with very

different characteristics. This is particularly the case for those source countries where the

UK sector is struggling to compete with the US, Canada and Australia and indeed the many

regional education hubs and TNE offerings now scattered around the world.

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[International students are worth £28.8 billion to the UK - HEPI](#) viewed 08/01/2022 10:26

University Reputation

Start of Block: Block 1

Thank you for taking time to complete this survey. It will take around 9 minutes to complete. All responses are anonymous.

- -

Q1 How old are you?

○ Under 18 (1)

○ 18 - 24 (2)

○ 25 - 34 (3)

○ 35 - 44 (4)

○ 45 or over (5)

Q1 请问你的年龄范围

○ 18 岁以下 (1)

○ 18 - 24 (2)

○ 25 - 34 (3)

○ 35 - 44 (4)

○ 45 岁或以上 (5)

Q2 What is your gender?

○ Female (1)

○ Male (2)

○ Other/prefer not to say (3)

Q2 你的性别是什么？

○ 女性 (1)

○ 男性 (2)

○ 其他/不想说 (3)

Q3 Are you a citizen of the People's Republic of China?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Q3 您是中华人民共和国公民吗？

○ 是 (1)

○ 否 (2)

Q4 Are you currently studying at a UK University?

○ No (1)

○ Yes (2)

Q4 你目前在英国大学学习吗？

○ 没有 (1)

○ 是 (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Are you currently studying at a UK University? = Yes

- -

Page Break ——————————————————————————————

Q5 Have you previously graduated from a UK University?

○ No (1)

○ Yes (2)

Q5 您毕业于英国大学吗？

○ 没有 (1)

○ 是 (2)

- -

Page Break ——————————————————————————————

Q6 Are you planning to study at a UK University within the next 2 years?

○ Definitely yes (1)

○ Probably yes (2)

○ Might or might not (3)

○ Probably not (4)

○ Definitely not (5)

Q6 您是否计划在未来 2 年内在英国大学学习?

○ 肯定会 (1)

○ 可能会 (2)

○ 可能或不可能 (3)

○ 可能不会 (4)

○ 肯定不会 (5)

Skip To: End of Survey If Are you planning to study at a UK University within the next 2 years? = Definitely not

Page Break

Q7 Which of the following best describes your current work/education status?

○ Full time student (1)

○ In between study (gap year) (2)

○ Employed (3)

○ Unemployed (4)

○ Other (5)

Q7 以下哪项最能说明您目前的工作/教育状况？

○ 全日制学生 (1)

○ 学业间歇中（现有学业结束和新学业开始前的实习过渡期） (2)

○ 在职人员 (3)

○ 失业中 (4)

○ 其他 (5)

Page Break

8 What level do you plan to study at in the UK?

○ Masters Degree (1)

○ Bachelors Degree (2)

○ PhD/Postgraduate Research (3)

○ Undergraduate Foundation (4)

○ Pre Masters (5)

○ HND (6)

○ MBA (7)

○ Other (8)

Q8 你打算在英国学习什么类型课程

○ 硕士学位 (1)

○ **学士学位** (2)

○ **博士/研究型**硕士课程 (3)

○ **本科**预科课程 (4)

○ 硕士预科课程 (5)

○ 苏格兰高等学历课程 (6)

○ **工商管理**硕士课程 (7)

○ **其他** (8)

Page Break

Q9 What subject area are you planning to study in the UK?

○ Business & administrative studies (1)

○ Media, publishing, journalism (2)

○ Education (including teacher training) (3)

○ Languages and linguistics (4)

○ Engineering & technology (5)

○ Computer science (6)

○ Law (7)

○ Social studies (economics, politics, etc.) (8)

○ Historical & philosophical studies (9)

○ Biological sciences (10)

○ Architecture, building & planning (11)

○ Creative arts & design (12)

○ English language (13)

○ Mathematical sciences (14)

○ Physical sciences (15)

○ Medicine & dentistry (16)

○ Agriculture & related subjects (17)

○ Veterinary science (18)

Q9 您打算在英国学习哪个学科领域？

○ **商业与行政研究** (1)

○ **媒体、出版、新闻** (2)

○ **教育（包括教**师培训） (3)

○ 语言和语言学 (4)

○ **工程技术** (5)

○ 计算机科学 (6)

○ **法学** (7)

○ **社会研究**（经济学、政治学等） (8)

○ 历史和哲学研究 (9)

○ **生物科学** (10)

○ **建筑、建筑和**规划 (11)

○ 创意艺术与设计 (12)

○ 英语语言学 (13)

○ **数学科学** (14)

○ **物理科学** (15)

○ **医学和牙医学** (16)

○ 农业及相关学科 (17)

○ 兽医科学 (18)

Q10 When choosing a UK University which is more important to you?

○ The University's Ranking (1)

○ The University's Reputation (2)

Q10
在选择英国大学时，哪个因素对您更重要？

○ 大学排名 (1)

○ 大学的声誉 (2)

Q11 Which of the major league table rankings do you feel is most influential in your choice of University? Please rate in order of importance 1= most important 6=least important

_____ The Times Higher (1)
_____ Guardian (2)
_____ The Complete University Guide (3)
_____ QS World University Rankings (4)
_____ Shanghai Rankings (5)

Q11 您认为哪个主要排行榜排名对您选择的大学影响最大？请按重要性排序 1=最重要 6=最不重要

_____ 英国高等教育报 (1)

_____ 英国卫报 (2)

_____ 完整大学指南 (3)

_____ QS 世界大学排名 (4)

_____ 上海交大大学排名 (5)

Q12 Think about reputation. How important are the following factors in demonstrating that a UK University has a good **reputation**?	Not important (1)	Moderately important (2)	Very important (3)	Extremely important (4)
The University is Research Focused (1)	○	○	○	○
The University has many World Class Academics (2)	○	○	○	○
The overall Ranking of the University (4)	○	○	○	○
The University has a High employability ranking (5)	○	○	○	○
There are a high number of students from my home country studying there (6)	○	○	○	○
There are a low number of students from my home country studying there (7)	○	○	○	○
The University's graduates are proud of the university (8)	○	○	○	○
The University's graduates recommend the University to others (9)	○	○	○	○
The University graduates are loyal to the University (10)	○	○	○	○
The University has Nobel Prize winners (11)	○	○	○	○

The University has an Alumni Association in my country (12)	○	○	○	○
Alumni from the University are influential (13)	○	○	○	○
The University is one of the first to come to mind when I think of UK Universities (14)	○	○	○	○
The University is well known in my country (15)	○	○	○	○
The University name is instantly recognizable (16)	○	○	○	○
The University has high graduation rates (17)	○	○	○	○
A High number of students graduate successfully (18)	○	○	○	○
Career prospects (19)	○	○	○	○
Graduates from this University earn a high salary (20)	○	○	○	○
The University has good links with industry (21)	○	○	○	○
The University has a long history (22)	○	○	○	○

Q12 关于大学声誉，您认为以下哪个因素可以说明英国大学有良好声誉?

	不重要 (1)	中等重要 (2)	很重要 (3)	极其重要 (4)
大学以研究为核心 (1)	○	○	○	○
大学拥有许多世界一流的学者 (2)	○	○	○	○
大学综合排名 (4)	○	○	○	○
该大学的就业能力排名很高 (5)	○	○	○	○
在那里学习的学生很多来自我的祖国。 (6)	○	○	○	○
在那里学习的学生很少来自我的祖国。 (7)	○	○	○	○
大学毕业生以大学为荣 (8)	○	○	○	○
大学毕业生向他人推荐大学 (9)	○	○	○	○
大学毕业生忠于大学 (10)	○	○	○	○
这所大学有诺贝尔奖获得者 (11)	○	○	○	○
大学在我的国家有一个校友会 (12)	○	○	○	○
大学校友有影响力 (13)	○	○	○	○
当我考虑英国大学时，这所大学是我第一个想到的 (14)	○	○	○	○
这所大学在我国很有名 (15)	○	○	○	○
大学名称一目了然 (16)	○	○	○	○
大学毕业率高 (17)	○	○	○	○

大量学生成功毕业 (18)	○	○	○	○
职业前景 (19)	○	○	○	○
这所大学的毕业生薪水很高 (20)	○	○	○	○
大学与行业有良好的联系 (21)	○	○	○	○
大学历史悠久 (22)	○	○	○	○

Q13 Read the following statements about the benefits you will gain from attending a University with a **good reputation compared to one without**.	Extremely unlikely (26)	Somewhat unlikely (27)	Neither likely nor unlikely (28)	Somewhat likely (29)	Extremely likely (30)
My salary after graduation will be higher than that of my peers who attend a University without a good reputation (4)	○	○	○	○	○
It will be easier to get a job after graduation (1)	○	○	○	○	○
I will be easier to get promoted in my career (5)	○	○	○	○	○
I will be more likely to get a job in my chosen field (6)	○	○	○	○	○
I will have better English skills than before (7)	○	○	○	○	○
I will have a better network of contacts for future career/business (8)	○	○	○	○	○
I will have more opportunities for further study (9)	○	○	○	○	○
I will improve my personal skills such as independence and resilience (10)	○	○	○	○	○

I will have a better understanding of culture outside of my own country (11)	○	○	○	○	○

Q13 阅读以下陈述，了解**与没有声誉**的大学相比，您从声誉良好的大学中获得的好处。

	极不可能 (26)	不太可能 (27)	不太可能也不不太可能 (28)	有点可能 (29)	极有可能 (30)
我毕业后的薪水会比我在名声不佳的大学上的同龄人高 (4)	○	○	○	○	○
毕业后找工作会更容易 (1)	○	○	○	○	○
我会更容易在我的职业生涯中得到提升 (5)	○	○	○	○	○
我将更有可能在我选择的领域找到工作 (6)	○	○	○	○	○
我会有比以前更好的英语技能 (7)	○	○	○	○	○
我将为未来的职业/业务拥有更好的人脉网络 (8)	○	○	○	○	○
我会有更多深造的机会 (9)	○	○	○	○	○
我将提高我的个人技能，例如独立性和韧性 (10)	○	○	○	○	○
我会对自己国家以外的文化有更好的了解 (11)	○	○	○	○	○

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Q14 How important is it to you that studying in the UK improves your career prospects?

○ Extremely important (1)

○ Very important (2)

○ Moderately important (3)

○ Slightly important (4)

Q14 在英国学习对于改善你的职业前景有多重要?

○ 极其重要 (1)

○ 很重要 (2)

○ 中等重要 (3)

○ 有点重要 (4)

Page Break

Q15 How much impact do you think the following characteristics of your future UK University will have on your career prospects after graduation?	No impact (1)	Minimal impact (2)	Some impact (3)	Significant impact (4)
Ranking of the University (1)	○	○	○	○
World Class Academics (4)	○	○	○	○
Good Reputation (3)	○	○	○	○
Research Focus of the University (5)	○	○	○	○
The University is well – known in my country (8)	○	○	○	○
The University logo is instantly recognisable (9)	○	○	○	○
The University is one of the first to come to mind when thinking of UK Universities (10)	○	○	○	○
Nobel prize winners (11)	○	○	○	○
Influential Alumni (13)	○	○	○	○
Alumni association in my country (14)	○	○	○	○
Graduation rates (16)	○	○	○	○
Offers paid internship/placement (17)	○	○	○	○
Offers experiential learning opportunities (18)	○	○	○	○
Career advice and support available (19)	○	○	○	○

High graduate employability ranking (20)	○	○	○	○
Higher salary amongst graduates (21)	○	○	○	○
Access to industry contacts (22)	○	○	○	○
Cutting edge equipment (related to my field of study) (23)	○	○	○	○

Q15 您认为未来您就读的英国大学具备以下哪个特点将影响您毕业后的职业前景?	没有影响 (1)	影响最小 (2)	一些影响 (3)	显着影响 (4)
大学排名 (1)	○	○	○	○
世界一流的学者 (4)	○	○	○	○
良好的声誉 (3)	○	○	○	○
大学研究重点 (5)	○	○	○	○
这所大学在我的国家是众所周知的 (8)	○	○	○	○
大学标志可立即识别 (9)	○	○	○	○
想到英国大学，这所大学是首先想到的那组大学之一 (10)	○	○	○	○
诺贝尔奖获得者 (11)	○	○	○	○
有影响力的校友 (13)	○	○	○	○
我国校友会 (14)	○	○	○	○
毕业率 (16)	○	○	○	○
提供带薪实习/安置 (17)	○	○	○	○
提供体验式学习机会 (18)	○	○	○	○
提供职业建议和支持 (19)	○	○	○	○
毕业生就业能力排名很高 (20)	○	○	○	○

毕业生薪资很高 (21)	○	○	○	○
行业内联系人网络 (22)	○	○	○	○
尖端设备（与我的研究领域相关）(23)	○	○	○	○

- -

Q16 Do you agree with the following statements about the benefits of graduating from a UK University?	Strongly Agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly Disagree (5)
It will be easier to get a job after graduation (1)	○	○	○	○	○
My salary after graduation will be higher than that of my peers with no UK degree (2)	○	○	○	○	○
It will be easier to get promoted than before (3)	○	○	○	○	○
I will be more likely to get a job in my chosen field than before (4)	○	○	○	○	○
I will have better English skills than before (5)	○	○	○	○	○
I will have a better network of contacts for future career/business than before (6)	○	○	○	○	○
I will have more opportunities for further study than before (7)	○	○	○	○	○
I will have improved personal skills such as independence and resilience (8)	○	○	○	○	○

I will have a better understanding of culture outside of my own country than before (9)

○   ○   ○   ○   ○

Q16 您是否同意以下有关从英国大学毕业的好处的说法？

	非常同意 (1)	同意 (2)	既不赞成也不反对 (3)	不同意 (4)	强烈反对 (5)
毕业后找工作会更容易 (1)	○	○	○	○	○
我毕业后的薪水会比没有英国学位的同龄人高 (2)	○	○	○	○	○
升职会比以前容易 (3)	○	○	○	○	○
我将比以前更有可能在我选择的领域找到工作 (4)	○	○	○	○	○
我比以前具备更好的英语技能 (5)	○	○	○	○	○
我将为未来的职业/业务拥有比以前更好的人脉网络 (6)	○	○	○	○	○
我将比从前有更多的机会进一步学习深造 (7)	○	○	○	○	○
我将提高个人技能，例如独立性和适应力 (8)	○	○	○	○	○
我将比以前更好地了解自己国家以外的文化 (9)	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix 2 Sample Interview Questions

The following interview questions were be used to support the further understanding of data gathered in documents 3 and 4 and to interrogate the assumptions for this thesis.

Question	Question
1	Tell me what you know about UK University rankings? What is a university 'ranking'?
2	Do you think Ranking is different from Reputation? Why? What gives a university a good reputation?
3	How important is ranking when you are choosing your future university in the UK? Why?
4	What are your main reasons for studying in the UK in the future? What benefits do you think this will have?
5	Do you think graduating from a UK university will improve your employment prospects?
6	(If yes) How important is this in your choice of university?
7	What experiences, support or opportunities at your chosen University will help you improve your employment prospects? For example, careers service, placement or internships, alumni networks or expert professors in your field of study?
8	What is most important to you – that your future university has a high ranking? Or that it will give you these things (responses to question about) related to improving your employment prospects? And why?