

## **Try Before You Buy: A small business employer (SME) perspective of international student mobility in England**

The value of experiential Work Based Learning (WBL) techniques, such as short-term internships, in the UK curriculum is well documented (Brodie and Irving, 2007; Wilson, 2009 & 2012). WBL is viewed by some practitioners as integral to providing students with invaluable practical and soft skills to succeed in increasingly competitive graduate employment (Thompson, 2016; Hunt and Scott, 2018). In addition, with internationalisation and globalisation dramatically transforming the higher education landscape over the past couple of decades (Knight, 2013), attracting international students has become a strategic priority for English universities (Warwick, 2016; Wilson 2009). This is also evidence in government policy making concerning international student migration and retention (Pedro, and Franco, 2016). However, research identifies tensions in internationalisation pursuits of British universities and raises questions about their strategies to facilitate international student experience and mobility (Crawford and Wang, 2016; Cheng et al., 2016). For example, these studies indicate that there are intercultural barriers hindering international students' career aspirations and development and their ability to secure employment, both during WBL and graduate employment (Leask and Carroll, 2011; Reynolds and Constantine 2007).

Despite the need to understand international students' experience within the British higher education system and improve their employability, there is relatively little research exploring the phenomenon. Studies investigating student mobility and employability predominantly focus on the 'home' student population (Silva et al. 2016) but they overlook international students and their pursuit of employment. The research on international students to date has investigated the personal and internal barriers that international students face and how those influence their ability to adapt to the English education system (Cheng et al, 2016; Coates and

Dickinson 2012). Apart from few studies focusing on student and education administrators' perspectives (Joseph and Joseph, 1997; Quaye and Harper, 2014), there is no previous research exploring the perspectives of potential employers, particularly of small business employers (SMEs), that recruit international students and how these perspectives shape prevailing stereotypes of international students in the UK. Research shows that SMEs are integral to UK economy especially in the post-Brexit context (Sterling, 2017), because of the role they play in employment creation and innovation (Storey, 2016). These studies and market data suggest that SMEs are becoming a significant force that shape government policy making. Therefore, research investigating small business employer perceptions of international students, how they engage with international students, and what challenges exist in the recruitment process will not only shed new light on our understanding of the employability and mobility of international students but also inform social, urban and economic policy making.

Adopting an interpretive and hermeneutic (Arnould and Fischer, 1994) research process that uses semi-structured in-depth interviews, we seek to address this gap in research by investigating small business employer discourses relating to international student employability. In so doing, we draw from reflexive semi-structured interviews with 18 small business owners in the North East of England to address three research questions. First, what prevailing perceptual discourses of international students and of their employability during work-based learning exist among British small business employers? Second, what key dispositions do these employers have of higher education institutions and their strategic commitments in recruiting, preparing and promoting international students for employment? Third, how these prevailing discourses influence international students' employability? North East is an important region to focus as unemployment rates are historically lower in the North East compared to other regions (Regional Labour Market, 2015). The region has seen

unemployment rates rise more recently (Chronicle, 2019), thus, reinforcing its position as a region policy makers' attention to improve joblessness and increase its contribution to GDP. Specifically, in the context of this study, statistics show that the North East has the least number of international students competing internships/placements whilst competing their academic degrees (ONS, 2017). Therefore, our focus on North East of England also brings an economic and political relevance to the study.

Next, we review literature covering work-based learning, employment and international students' experience and mobility followed by a detailed discussion of the data collection, analysis and interpretation. We then address our research questions by triangulating findings from data and extant literature. Finally, the conclusion summarises key contributions of the paper and discusses limitations and avenues for future research.

## **Literature review**

Placements have been a regular aspect (Bennett et al, 2008) of undergraduate degree programmes in the UK for more than 40 years. Work-based learning (WBL) in Higher Education is emerging as 'a distinct field of practice, supported by relevant pedagogies and concepts of curriculum'; universities are increasingly turning their attention to work experience and graduate employability (Lester and Costley, 2010, 561; Mason et al, 2003).

A number of reports and papers discuss WBL and the range of approaches that facilitate it (Wilson Review, 2012, 37-41; Brennan and Little, 1996, 7; Blackwell et al 2001, 281-282).

Interest in a variety of WBL opportunities has grown (Wilson, 2009, 2), with students appreciating the opportunity to gain experience and skills that generally have a positive impact (Murakami et al, 2009). Foster and Stephenson (1998) outline different definitions that consider placements, sandwich courses, work experiences and WBL for students and employees. Crebert et al (2004) categorise three approaches: the value of the placement to the

student, academic staff's perceptions of placement, and benefits to students in terms of their careers. At one end of this spectrum students become learners at work where the placement 'services' the academic course; at the other end the focus is on the needs of employers and employees. 'Formal work placements bestow significant benefits on both the students and the firm'; advantages include easier transition into employment, a stronger vocational identity and increasing self-confidence (Bennett, 2008, 105-106).

One conclusion is that there are several competing agendas relating to WBL; these include employer demands, the race for competitiveness, skills, training at the expense of a universal education, and government policy driven by 'a perceived need for the U.K. to compete internationally in order to survive as an economic power' (Foster and Stephenson, 1998, 156). However, a caveat is that WBL is 'potentially limiting if the opportunities provided by the workplace do not form a good match to learners' aspirations, suggesting that work-based programmes can be disempowering vis-à-vis conventional university learning by trapping the learner into an employer-driven or instrumental agenda' (Lester and Costley, 2010, 569).

The focus of research falls on many aspects of the placement experience; for example, skills development (Crebert et al, 2004), the employment of critical reflection methods (Boud et al, 2004; Moon, 2005) and a range of other pedagogical tools, the format and delivery of academic support, career progression and student satisfaction more generally (now exemplified in the Teaching Excellence Framework and National Student Survey). An additional theme is the investigation of international students' experience of WBL in the United Kingdom, as well as employer responses to hosting such students; this is an area where little research exists and there is a need to increase our understanding. A meta-analysis of literature on mobility concluded that "the link between mobility and employment has been little researched" (King et al, 2010, p.2); whilst the focus of King's study is on UK students'

experiencing international placements, the same could be said of foreign students coming to the UK.

Global research has helped to shed some light on placements and international students. For example, Gribble (2014) suggests that international students are increasingly interested in acquiring work experience in the host country, now being considered as “critical as the devaluation of credentials undermines the value of foreign degrees” (Gribble, 2014, p.1). However, they face challenges such as lack of a formal programme, barriers to identifying opportunities for placement, English language proficiency and certain skills.

Furthermore, international students generally target larger organisations for employment as they lack knowledge of SME workplace cultures, which are drastically different from one to another (Jenkins, 2004). For example, research shows that SMEs differ vastly on their approaches to employment (Abraham et al., 2015), attitude towards corporate social responsibility (Jenkins, 2004), information processing (Stoica, Liao and Welsch, 2004), and internationalisation strategies (Dimitratos et al., 2016). Whilst larger organisations may have procedures in place to supplement international employers’ progress through the ranks (Attrill, Lincoln and McAllister, 2016), research shows that small business employers may be “reluctant to take on international students due to concerns over their English language skills and their capacity to ‘fit in’” (Gribble, 2014, p.2). Accordingly, international students must educate themselves not only about the host country’s culture but also of the diverse internal cultures of SMEs they are applying (Nunes and Arthur, 2013). Such cultural complexities could be difficult to comprehend for international students who are already in a new cultural context. As a result, it may make SMEs less attractive to international students, therefore, it is suggested that international students would be assisted by tailored programmes to suit their needs, augmented by university student support services (Nunes and Arthur, 2013). Also,

employers should be more “open-minded about hiring people with international experience and see the benefits of a diverse workforce” (Arthur and Flynn, 2013, p.28).

In addition, student support services could help students to build networks and be introduced to prospective employers; students need to be better connected. This is echoed by Shen and Herr (2004) who advocate facilitating better networks for international students and a careers service that is more proactive in establishing links between businesses and international students, as well as mentoring from students who have already undertaken work or placements; better tracking systems could also result in a clearer picture of progression. Furthermore, internships that develop students’ career prospects would help to develop a network leading to possible employment (Arthur and Flynn, 2013).

Despite making several pertinent observations, Gribble is forced to conclude that there is not enough research relating to international students and placement learning, whilst some of them are not fully aware of the value of work experience to their studies and prospects. Australian employers have expressed their concerns regarding the “work readiness” of international students and their limited knowledge of local work culture and the English language and yet have “misconceptions” regarding the potential of such students. However, “those employers who do take on international students on placements... are often very satisfied”, pointing to one Australian study that suggested 75% of international graduates “met or exceeded employer expectations” (Gribble, 2014, pp 6-7). Gribble concludes that universities need to prepare international students for post-study employment and establish productive links with employers but that further research needs to focus on the role of employers (a point echoed by Nunes and Arthur, 2013) and industry, participation rates, types of WBL programmes, and a focus on specific subject areas such as health sciences and accounting. However, it should also be acknowledged that there “is the perceived difficulty

and resource implication of finding suitable placements for all students, particularly when the cohort includes international students” (Smith et al, 2008, p.75).

The United Kingdom is a net importer of international students; for example, in 2014 it was estimated that 442,375 foreign students were studying in the UK, whilst 33,000 UK nationals were studying abroad (UKCISA, 2018). Research suggests that many SME employers seem unaware of the benefits of international students (Connor and Brown, 2009) whilst some also think too narrowly of them, thus leading towards “cultural stereotyping” (Cheng et al, 2016, p.2). Despite several barriers, “there are clear benefits to businesses of employing international graduates or students at UK universities. They can bring specific skills and knowledge about different countries, languages and cultures that businesses need in order to develop new markets... they broaden the outlook of a company’s workforce and can make the business more receptive to new ideas” (Connor and Brown, 2009, p.5). Universities, however, need to contribute significantly; it has been observed that “there is little emphasis on promoting student mobility experiences, such as work placements, study abroad and internships, despite it being generally believed that student mobility can improve students’ career prospects” (Cheng et al, 2016, p. 3). Universities mostly consider study abroad and exchange programmes with respect to international students’ needs; however, “there is a need to look at mobility beyond these programmes, such as internships and visiting industry” (Cheng et al, 2016, p.6).

Despite it being recognised that WBL initiatives have a significant contribution to student development, it is clear that the majority of contributions still focus on the ‘home’ domestic student cohort (Silva et al. 2016), and focus on reporting the skills and experience taken from participating in such a programme (Credert et al. 2004). There remains very little understanding of how international students are attracted and retained onto WBL initiatives with SMEs. One conclusion is that universities need to provide new and tailored support and

better integrate international students with employers, in order to provide successful collaboration (Shen and Herr, 2004; Arthur and Flynn, 2013; Gribble, 2014). Finally, from theoretical and practical perspectives, there remains very limited research targeting prospective employers. Investigating potential employer perceptions of international students and how they are engaged, and what challenges exist in the recruitment process will shed new light on the employability and mobility of international students.

## **Methodology**

Closer inspection of the North East region shows that international students bring £7bn into the region's economy and further generate 137,000 jobs (ChronicleLive, 2016). This study draws from a theoretical sample (Punch 2013) of 18 small business owners in the North East of England. The participants were initially approached and recruited within the first author's professional network, followed by face-to-face meetings explaining the research project, discussing ethical considerations, and ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality. The research sample comprised bi-gendered participants and represented multiple age groups. They also represented a range of industries, size of organisations and experience in recruiting international students.

## **Data collection and analysis**

The adaptive and interpretive process of data collection (Edirisingha, Aitken, and Ferguson, 2015) combined semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants during multiple time points and spanned five months. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are ideal in revealing emic-level reflections (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994) of participants. Accordingly, using a mix of directive and non-directive questions (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) the study investigated employers' perspectives and experiences of international student mobility within the British higher education system. Interviews were carried out in a neutral and convenient

location chosen by the participants in order to accommodate their time-constrained, busy schedules. In total, 18 interviews were conducted with each employer given a pseudonym. Each interview session was audio recorded with the consent of participants in order to aid in transcription and interpretation building.

The hermeneutic process of data analysis (Arnold and Fischer, 1994) and interpretation building began parallel to data collection and lasted 2 months after the conclusion of data collection. Using thematic data analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006), initial codes were categorised into etic level emergent themes, which informed subsequent data collection sessions. New themes were analysed in the context of prior themes and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was used to identify vertical relationships across the sample (Spiggle, 1994). Particularly, the research teams' prior experience of working with prospective employers, academic research into international student mobility, and being an international student contributed to the generation of valuable insider and outsider perspectives (Edirisingha, Ferguson and Aitken, 2017), thus, aiding the development of a myriad of themes. Therefore, emergent themes continued to develop through comparing, integrating, and delimiting (Glaser, 1965) until the redundancy of themes emerged and theoretical saturation was reached (Goulding, 2005).

### **Research findings and discussion**

The specific aim of this study is to understand better the barriers impacting international student mobility, particularly from an SME perspective. The subsequent presentation of findings is organised into three overarching areas: international students and their fit in British higher education and work-based learning, British higher education institutes and their commitment to international students, and implications for international student mobility in the British higher education system. In doing so, our findings respond to three research questions and reveal perceptual discourses of British small business employers about: 1)

international students and their mobility, 2) higher education institutes and their commitment to recruit, prepare and promote international students, and 3) the ways in which these perceptions implicate international student mobility within the British higher education industry.

### ***International students and their fit in British higher education and work-based learning***

In response to our first research question, our findings reveal a range of prevailing perceptual discourses, both negative and positive, of international students that can be presented in three overarching categories: skills and traits, social-cultural-legal barriers, and misaligning expectations. These categories represent the overarching perceptions of employers of international students and their ability in undertaking short-term, work-based employment.

Skills and traits of international students are perceived as a major benefit when choosing to recruit an international student as part of a WBL internship. Employers regarded international students as lateral thinkers who approached problems from a different cultural perspective and displayed strong traits of creative thinking opposed to domestic students enrolled on similar WBL programmes. Most of our employers went onto describe how international students have the ability to draw from multiple perspectives and can solve a different variety of business problems that native staff were unable to address. Many employers put this down to international students having broader knowledge and first-hand experience of adopting strategies from different cultures. Even though prior research highlights international students' potential to adapt as a concern for employers (Gribble, 2014), our findings suggest that employers may embrace balanced acculturative outcomes rather than complete acculturation from international students. For example, Employer A, felt employers “lose out” when international students completely acculturate and assimilate to British culture and favoured a rather carefully negotiated integration to the British workplace from international

students that enables them to “*embrace and preserve their cultures and draw from a myriad of views and complex personalities and beings they are...*”.

Similarly, international students are often viewed as “*totally committed and driven*” (Employer G) individuals with a purposeful attitude towards succeeding, which often brushes off to others around them, therefore, acting as a motivational resource for other employees:

*“I find internationals are diligent workers, they are here to work... They are here to prove something... I think there is some bigger picture thinking when you are brushing your teeth in the library toilet at night and I think that probably transcends to sort of a management style. I am happy from a management perspective about how somebody who brings that approach and that kind of drive might also impress this upon others.” – (Employer B)*

Our employers perceive that such character traits, combined with their multi-linguistic skills, enable international students to contribute to their organisations in promoting lateral sales and navigate situational and contextual business challenges. Employers admit that international markets are a new business frontier for small businesses replete equally with opportunities and obstacles. As our data reveals, employers believe that international students bring a useful competitive edge for organisations when reaching international markets:

*“We get a staggering number of clients from overseas. I guarantee that if we employ Chinese students we would put them to good use because the Far East Asia is a massive market for us. It is developing and the cultural background knowledge from someone like that is hugely useful... We would never find our feet ourselves there and we would be just playing in the dark. Someone like that can tell us exactly that we need to focus here, here, and here just the market-wise or other... This would be a reason for us to specifically consider somebody like that to achieve business needs at the moment.” – (Employer C, Employer A)*

Despite the positive perception of international students' multi-language skills, there is often a stereotypical negative perception of international students' English communications skills that emerges in our data. Employers are weary about challenges international students face in understanding complex regional British dialects and translating some complex business and technical jargon:

*“Language could be an issue, especially in more technical areas, both verbal and written. For example, for a client who has an English website and a Dutch website, one of the challenges would be to translate that English website into Dutch. There is no quality control; we cannot tell if they have done it right. In technical roles, my language may have a lot of jargon and might be harder to understand for an international person. They have to understand all that jargon and put that into their own language to understand what they should be doing.” – (Employer D)*

Similarly, there is also evidence in the data that is consistent with the extant literature (e.g. Connor and Brown, 2009; Gribble, 2014) implying that international students' lack of ability to understand British cultural nuances and technical jargon is particularly essential in communicating with English consumers. Particularly, as one of our employers, Employer F, argues, having grown up in a distant culture, international students might find it challenging to be competent among other employees to whom such ways of doing and being are of second nature. Combined with acculturative challenges and stress that international students are confronted with, such negative perceptual discourses challenge international students and their mobility (Lawson, 2012). Nevertheless, as we further discuss in response to our third research question, data suggests that employers are keen to negotiate and mediate perceived limitations of international students and consider that they can get more resource out of employing international students on a WBL programme rather than domestic students, considering the range of skills and character traits that international students have to offer.

However, our data also reveals that there are other more challenging perceptual discourses that international students face.

Another theme emerging from data suggests that employers have a range of social, cultural, and legal issue related perceptions of international students which affect their short-term work-based employment as well as graduate employment. In reference to international students' embedding themselves in and adapting to the British culture, employers deliberate potential acculturation issues international students confront. In addition to navigating typical tensions and acculturative stress associated with migration and adapting to a new country, our data also suggests that international students are faced with more specific regional level challenges. For example, several employers described the North East of England as a challenging place to look for work experience as an international student. Despite the presence of international students being the biggest import into the North East and contributing £7bn to the region's economy (UniversitiesUK, 2017), employers point to the attitude of the general population to leaving the European Union, gathering more independence, and prioritising employment for native workforce, which may challenge international students. Employer B agrees claiming *"the decision to leave the EU could do some real harm here. The result in Sunderland, with people claiming such an overwhelming desire to leave sends the wrong signs to prospective students that the North East of England may not be a place where people and employers want non-EU citizens. And it's easier to be accepted and find work in the south of England for example"*. This implies that many international students, although attracted by the academic institutions for various reasons such as cheaper cost of living, may not be keen to look outside the universities' perimeters to secure first-hand work experience (Nunes and Arther, 2011). Moreover, employers argue that there is some subconscious level thinking that channel stereotypical perceptions of international students that may challenge them in integrating into the British work place:

*“We are thinking they don’t know how to speak or behave and they don’t know how to make coffee and such. People don’t critically evaluate what they are saying. Let us say it might be subconscious racism... I fear more conventional businesses with all the best will in the world will recruit international students, but it is true and the international students still feel like they are outsiders” – Employer A*

Finally, another key emergent theme in response to the first research question identifies a perception of a potential discord between international students’ expectations when seeking short-term as well as graduate employment with employers’/organisations’ business and operational needs. There are potentially unrealistic expectations that international students have of their employment that include employer classifications, duties and starting salaries, which may lead to mismatches with their employers. Even though employers do understand the international students’ pursuits of higher education in foreign universities tie their families to financial burdens and social obligations in their countries, such pursuits may not always align with practical level business needs:

*“Even the bigger businesses in the North East are looking for someone with a human connection but not someone looking to tick that box on the CV, which lots of applicants just are. Although it applies to local students, it is extreme with international students. I do not want to generalise, but based on my experience it is expensive for international students to come and study here and often it is paid by family. It is really a big deal for some of them. They have their entire families’ reputation riding on them. They seem to have a very rigid idea of what they are supposed to do to get to that point to make mom and dad happy. You know, like getting employment in fancy offices and doing all these things to make the family happy because they feel as if they have got their money’s worth. But this is a high-risk business and we do not have lots of money in the bank. We are still more likely go out of*

*business. If they decide to come and work for us, then mom and dad are really mad. Maybe I am generalising but the expectations are not realistic.” - (Employer E)*

Because of the mismatch of cultural expectations, employers believe that international students come with rigid blueprints of future, which challenge them in adapting to British employment. As small business employers argue “*things do not happen in quite structured ways*” in small business to meet the preference of international students as in larger corporate organisations. On the contrary, small businesses “*are more haphazard and organic, so not complying with international students’ idea of working for a British company*” (Employer C Employer A). Yet, this implies that employers are concerned about the perishability of international students, especially after investing in recruiting and aiding their development:

*“You really want someone who is going to stay with you, at least for the short-term, because you are investing so much time in training them up. I think if you are looking at someone who came into an interview with really high ambitions it will give me more of an impression that they would be gone quite quickly” – (Employer F)*

Therefore, findings from our data indicate that there is a multitude of perceptual discourses that can be categorised into skills and traits, socio-cultural-legal issues and discord of expectations that British small business employers have of international students. These perceptions, we argue, clearly contribute to the shaping of international students’ experience in the British education system and influence their mobility.

### ***British higher education institutes and their commitment to international students***

Responding to the second research question, findings reveal three emergent themes about how employers perceive commitment of universities in facilitating international student mobility. These themes mainly revolve around the motivations of British universities for recruiting international students, how they recruit them and how they prepare and promote

these students for work-based learning opportunities. First, employers are concerned with the rigour of the processes that involve recruitment of international students. They fear that institutions may be capitalising on the wealth and socio-cultural motivations of international students to increase their enrolment numbers, thus leading to exploitation of these students as well as their families:

*“It is absolutely X business school capitalising on rich international students. It is useful for us but I feel sorry for them because I think they got absolutely exploited by the X University. They should have someone calling or coming in and checking up but no one has come. It is like they recruited them and just abandoned them here.” – (Employer H)*

Accordingly, our second emergent theme suggests that employers feel that there could be much done to improve the recruitment as well as preparation standards of international students:

*“Universities think they reach out to international students because they have big international campuses and nice websites with welcoming messages to international students. But I don’t think they are doing enough. I am sure at some point someone speaks to these students before selection, but what language do they speak when international students actually come to the office? How do they decide if a student has the basic skills to survive here?” – (Employer A)*

They believed that higher standards in identifying, recruiting and selecting international students would bring skilful international students who are capable of adapting to the British workplace. Whilst this enhances student experience in the British higher education system, it would also help to alleviate employer concerns about challenges some international students confront when communicating in English. This view also confirms Gribble’s (2014) previous argument that English Universities need to be more proactive in educating international

students when they first arrive in this country. In fact, Gribble calls for a more defined acculturation process, consisting of peer mentoring, social networking and career development strategies to be put in place that would better inform new international students and better equip them when looking to secure short-term work experience.

As much as recruiting international students is an emerging concern for our employers, they argue there is much to be done when preparing these students for employability once they are enrolled in universities. Identifying their weaknesses early on, whether they are about conversing in English or generally making friends, provides meaningful and customised assistance to international students, thus helping them to secure successful employment eventually. In addition, employers suggest that universities have an ideal opportunity to promote their regions to international students and aid their acculturation to local areas in England. It would provide incentives for international students to remain in that region and seek ways in which to contribute to its economy upon graduation:

*“They can definitely raise the profile highlighting the benefits of staying in the North East and the profile of businesses in the North East as well...When you are looking to progress, there is less application for every position so you are able to progress, particularly in marketing. And, there are gains financially for staying in the North East. There are lots of independent businesses which provide a lot of opportunities for students which you cannot get in larger firms.” – (Employer F)*

Such higher standard of customised recruitment and preparation helps international students to sharpen their skill over time and bridge the cultural gaps that restrict their progress towards integration and employability in England. Indeed, a view supported by Nunes and Arther (2013) who noted that English universities could do more within their infrastructure to support international students better. They claimed additional student support services could

help students build networks and be introduced to prospective employers, thence better connecting international students and the regional employers.

In addition, employers believe that universities need to support international students throughout the recruitment process, not simply to direct them towards employment, but genuinely and honestly to find them an opportunity where they are likely to succeed:

*“I think universities really need to think about how they support international students when they are looking for employment. They need to be honest about it and say to international students that they have not got the language skills for the particular position and suggest they look at a slightly different kind of an internship” - (Employer A)*

Therefore, our final theme responding to our second research question reveals that there is a potential discord between university administrators and potential employers in coordinating international student recruitment for short-term, work-based learning opportunities. Such mismatches may occur as the result of conflicting interests between parties involved. For example, students may seek employment that suits their skills and future aspirations.

However, university administrators may be working with limited employment opportunities in comparison to large numbers of prospective students. As a result, supporting international student mobility may become a lesser priority and matching the available students and their talents with available opportunities may take precedence. On the other hand, employers are seeking candidates who are best suited to the employment criteria and adapt to their cultural environment seamlessly.

Our participating employers believe that there is a range of strategic and administrative processes that universities can adopt in order to facilitate international student mobility from their first year in the university. Such activities may range from making international students aware of the opportunities they have, educating them about the immigration regulations and

empathising with practical issues international students confront when living in an alien country:

*“I think there are all sort of things universities can do to find out if students are interested in taking placement opportunities and match their skill sets with businesses in the North East potentially businesses based in the city centre so they are more accessible for international students. They could do more to align international students with right opportunities, potentially when positions are advertised and students do not have the confidence to go forward for those positions. They can do more to let international students know that these positions are available for international students as much as they are for UK students and build their confidence and when they do they need to show international students how doing pro-bono work such as placements is likely to make them successful in graduate employment” – (Employer F)*

Thus, in response to our second research question, our emergent themes from data suggest three key issues employers recognise of the universities’ commitment towards international student mobility. Particularly, our findings highlight employer concerns about universities’ motivation to recruit international students as well as processes that are in place to prepare international students for employment.

### ***Implications for international student mobility in British higher education system***

Further analysing our data across themes, we theorise that international student employability and mobility are influenced by three key ways by the prevailing employer perceptions of international students and the universities’ commitment to facilitating their employability (Figure 1). Therefore, we respond to our final research question and argue that small business employers’ perspectives of international student influence their mobility by, first, limiting employer incentives to recruit international students, second, restricting employer access to

international students, and third challenging employers in managing international students upon recruitment.

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*Figure 1: Influence of small business employer perspectives on international student employability*

Our first emergent theme suggests that there is a range of existing perceptions which contribute to de-incentivise potential small businesses from hiring international students. As employers argue, negative perceptions of international students such as their perishability, acculturative challenges, English communication skills and stringent immigration regulations complicate the recruitment process of potential employers by adding additional layers of decision criteria:

*“If an international student just wanted a year or two work experience after university before going back home, that wouldn’t be a problem and I would not hire him not because of it, but if there was an identical student I felt more likely to stick around longer, I would probably sway toward him. For us, every person we employ, either an intern or an actual employee, there is a big overhead, not just in finding them but the whole selection process to get to them. So, to invest all that much time, money, and effort into someone to leave a year later would be frustrating.” – (Employer E)*

This indicates that when competing with local British students, international students are challenged to overcome these perceptions employers have of them, in addition to demonstrating their fit for the employment criteria and personal motivations.

Moreover, our data suggests that the negative perceptual discourses employers have of universities’ commitment to international student mobility also add to their scepticism when recruiting international students. Although our data remains consistent with extant literature

that discusses many occasions when employers are impressed with their international students (Cheng et al, 2016), we argue that the negative experiences add to an existing stereotype, thus making it harder for international students to navigate the British workplace. Particularly, the trust issues concerning the actual motivations of universities as the resource that provides international students, employers value more rigour in such processes and think these would bring better value for their investments:

*“It is a problem...I mean I interviewed a young woman and it was an embarrassment. The university should never have even suggested she apply....So at base level when career services are offering interviews they need to be more supportive, sympathetic and realistic about the language skills...” – (Employer A)*

The second theme identifies potential challenges employers have concerning the access to international students. On one hand this involves the lack of motivations of international students in working for smaller, local businesses in comparison to well-established multinational corporations.

*“I am not quite sure that they want to apply for smaller businesses, international students seem to want to apply to larger, multinationals that their family and friends have heard of, not some unknown SME”- (Employer G)*

On the other hand, employers believe that there are other issues that limit the number of applications from international students. For example, issues involving lack of understanding of immigration and visa regulations and lack of confidence in English communication skills limit the number of international students who avail themselves for selection:

*“Students just feel really uneasy about migration rules and visa requirements. They may want to work, but feel that by participating in an internship they will break their visa requirements, through working too much. And do you know when they will find this out? When they arrive*

*back into this country, from vacation, loaded with suitcases and they are turned away at the airport and sent back home” - (Employer B)*

At the broadest sense, employers revealed receiving no formal communication from university career centres or academic staff about becoming partners in WBL programmes. Many small business employers claimed that they had wanted to work with the universities in their region for a long time to discover more about taking student interns and bringing in additional resources. Therefore, unsurprisingly, existing relationships were strictly local and had developed from friendships outside the institutions rather than through any formal student employability initiative.

Therefore, according to employers, they receive far fewer applications from international students than domestic students when trying to appoint an intern. However, most employers put this down to student uncertainty and lack of knowledge concerning their work entitlements whilst studying on a student visa in England. This, therefore, suggests that international students' lack of confidence and understanding surrounding their visas, discourages many international students from applying for internships (Shen and Herr, 2004). Despite students being initially keen to secure first-hand work experience alongside their studies, we recognise a potential barrier that prevents a relationship being built between employers and international students interested in participating in internships.

Finally, our last theme responding to the third research question argues that small business employers' perceptual discourses of international students also challenge international students in settling in small business organisations whilst also imposing issues for employers in the management of international students once they are recruited. As discussed in response to the first research question, employers are concerned about the acculturative challenges international students face and their ability to integrate into the British work environment. Managing such cultural difference and facilitating international students' pursuit to negotiate

liminality particularly within organisations' cultural environment bring new challenges to British small businesses:

*"I think culturally there is hugely distinct sort of approach to business. I have to be very careful how I phrase things. Here in the Western world, whilst people work hard there is flexibility in a bigger picture behind business life, allowing people to think if something goes wrong they can learn from it and move on. But thinking about the Japanese approach to business, you get people throwing themselves off buildings if they don't get the pay raise, they didn't get promotions or etc. They have this very honour driven approach and in that case, keep in mind that I have to invest a lot more time in doing some cultural education for reassurance."* – (Employer B)

There are also other issues concerning the synergy between international students' goal-oriented prior expectations and British small business workplace culture. Particularly, as these organisations lack hierarchical structures and clearly stated decision-making procedures, employers fear international students may find it challenging to adapt:

*"We are very independent, therefore, we design the workplace as such... We employ people we genuinely like, that is a massive part of it... It is a nice environment, everyone works hard but it is not a silent formal office, that is not how we will be. It is quite flexible here and you have to be open to change. Things can go in unexpected angles in any given moment and that could be quite daunting for people. We try to explain decision making but sometimes we just cannot. So, for someone coming in with a Tier 2 visa progression structure in mind, it is quite hard for us to give them that... it would be very hard to put a development plan in place for somebody expecting they would be the same as everyone else at the end of it"* – (Employer C & Employer A)

Next, we discuss key implications of our findings, conclusions and consider avenues for future research.

### **Discussion of findings and research implications**

This research sought to understand international student mobility, particularly from an SME employer perspective. We contribute to the literature by discussing perceptual discourses and barriers influencing international student employability. Specifically, this paper extends current literature in three areas.

First, our findings uncover the prevailing small business employer perceptions of international students and of their employability. We suggest that there are both positive and negative perceptions of international students that implicate their mobility within the British higher education system. For example, employers believe that international students have a strong work ethic and bring new skills and knowledge for businesses (Connor and Brown, 2009), whilst they are also wary of English communication skills and cultural differences (Gribble, 2014). Paradoxically, we observed that at times employers valued the different cultural perspectives of international students, whilst at other times they seemed to be concerned about lack of acculturation. In some respects, this confusion correlates with the suggestion that employers be more “open-minded” (Arthur and Flynn, 2014). Employer perceptions revolve around socio-cultural tensions, acculturative challenges and international students’ “*unrealistic expectations*” of WBL programmes. Thus, findings show how these prevailing employer discourses contribute to existing stereotypes of international students evident in prior research (Cheng et al, 2016).

Second, our findings also reveal key dispositions small business employers have of higher education institutions and their strategic commitment toward recruiting, preparing and promoting international students for employment. We contribute to prior literature that

suggests the importance of understanding changing needs of international students and engaging with them through strategic planning (Arthur, 2017) within their education environment. Findings highlight low levels of employer confidence of how British universities approach, recruit, and prepare international students, thus, restricting their ability to integrate to the British work place. Findings also argue that there is a discord between employer expectations, international student employability pursuits, and education administrators' resources that needs to be bridged through integrated strategic planning. Although extant literature identifies tensions between internationalisation pursuits of British universities and international students' education experience (Crawford and Wang, 2016), it does not discuss what factors challenge international students' employability pursuits or consider employer responses. Our research responds to this gap in literature. Bringing practical implications to education administrators and policymakers, we argue that universities should critically assess how they facilitate international student employability pursuits. We posit that British universities should understand unique circumstances of international students, engage with them through genuine effort, identify areas for development, and support their acculturation pursuits at a more personal level, thus, informing more organically synthesised administration strategies. It is important to ensure employers that international students are not just an outcome of profit-making strategies but a product of rigorous recruitment, academic engagement, administrative support and diligent work. Universities need to be proactive in communicating their efforts to potential employers regionally as well as nationally, building employer trust about the system and elevating their confidence in international students.

Finally, our findings show how small business employer perceptions of international students and their universities influence international student mobility in England, shaped by cultural, legal and pragmatic concerns. Whereas prior studies consider personal and rather internal

factors that inhibit international students' ability to adapt to the British work place (Cheng et al, 2016; Coates and Dickinson 2012), we extend this discussion by revealing how positive and negative employer perceptual discourses shape the ways in which international students come across WBL opportunities. On one hand, such discourses shape international students' motivation to seek out WBL opportunities, their propensity to succeed in the selection processes, and their ability to adapt to British work place culture upon recruitment. On the other hand, employer perceptions of international students as well as their universities affect employers' motivation to seek out international students, how international students come to contact with employment opportunities, and how they can adapt to British work environment and culture during short-term work-based learning opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

Despite fierce global competition, international markets and highly internationalising workplaces bring new growth opportunities for British universities (Warwick, 2016; Schech et al., 2017). In response, recruiting international students has become integral to British universities' growth strategies and the importance of international students employability is also reflected in the more recently changed British immigration targeting international students (UKBA, 2019). However, interestingly, as revealed in our research, the employers view universities as big business models that are less interested in the student experience, but only in making profit. The argument is that there is much universities could do to develop the international student interns and invest time in bringing them up to speed with British business culture, especially at SME level. The belief that academic and professional support staff lacked the core, "*real world experience*" and preferred only to operate within university circles contributes to shaping the employer perception that British universities offer little provision for supporting and preparing students for work. This is surprising given the amount of support universities claim to offer to their international students whilst studying in England

and suggests that closer relationships need to be forged and better lines of communication built between HE and employers. This resonates strongly with Shen and Herr's (2004) conclusions on international students' experiences of placement and Gribble's (2014) observations in Australia. Therefore, our findings add a new perspective to prior research, albeit from an employers' point of view, and extends current literature that suggests an increasing dissatisfaction of international students about their opportunities in securing first-hand work experience whilst studying in England (Lawson 2012; Gribble 2014). In some respects, there are similarities in terms of the student experience and from employers; the literature suggests a need for stronger links for students, forged by student support services, whilst our findings that articulate the employer voice echo this sentiment. We argue that there is an untapped opportunity for universities to reach out to high quality international students as well as to aid their path to employability. British universities should communicate with employers clearly and consistently throughout work-based learning programmes to solidify relations with the industry and help their students gain invaluable transferable skills.

However, there is a caveat in that current UK government policy and legislation create structural barriers when attempting to facilitate employability for international students and does little to recognise the commercial advantages to the national economy.

Future research in the area could evolve in two key areas. First, further research needs to be carried out to understand how universities could better engage with small businesses in the region such as how they work with employers aid international student development.

Workplaces are increasing internationalised and universities have inherent requirement to adapt their pedagogies to produce employable graduates who are capable of working in these environments. Such student development can be achieved with some level of pedagogical collaboration with employers and more research in the area could shed light onto how this could be materialised. Second, future research needs to investigate how universities can

facilitate international students' acclimatisation to fluid and diverse SME workplace cultures.

Providing unique insight into SMEs and how these employers feel about international students and higher education students, our findings establish a stepping stone to further investigate the important but complex interrelationships that exist between international students, higher education institutes, and small business employers.

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