

Transferable Skills in Affecting Employability Among Music Graduate Students in China



Li Huan¹, Ooi Boon Keat²

¹Graduate School of Management, Management and Science University, Malaysia

²School of Education and Social Sciences, Management and Science University, Malaysia

ABSTRACT: The increasing number of university graduates in China has posed significant challenges for employability, especially for music graduates who face an oversupply of professionals in a highly competitive job market. This paper examines the role of transferable skills in improving employability competency among music and graduate students in China, focusing on how universities can adapt their curricula to incorporate these skills and better prepare students for diverse career paths.

KEYWORDS: transferable skills, employability, music graduates, career guidance, curriculum design

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As the global economy evolves, higher education institutions are increasingly tasked with preparing graduates who are not only proficient in their chosen disciplines, but also have a broader range of skills that will enhance their adaptability in the workplace. One of the key frameworks influencing this shift is the Bologna Process, which aims to harmonise educational standards across Europe and create a more flexible, comparable and competitive higher education region. At the heart of the Bologna Process is an emphasis on transferable skills, which include critical thinking, communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills that can be applied in a variety of occupational settings (Nägele & Stalder, 2024).

The Bologna Process advocates the development of graduates who are able to navigate the uncertainties of the labour market by promoting a holistic approach to education, one that balances professional knowledge with practical competence. By developing transferable skills, the Bologna Process supports the goal of increasing employability by ensuring that graduates are not only prepared for immediate employment, but also have the flexibility to adapt to the changing job market throughout their careers (Brennan, 2024).

In China, where the number of university graduates continues to grow at a rapid rate, there is a growing recognition of the need to reform higher education to incorporate transferable skills into the curriculum. This is particularly urgent in creative fields such as music, where traditional models of education have focussed primarily on technical training, such as performance and composition, and have often neglected the development of broader competencies (Dai, 2022). As a result, music graduates face significant challenges in terms of employment due to an oversupply of specialised talent and an increasing demand for skills beyond technical expertise (Zhao, 2019).

The educational philosophy of the Bologna Process provides valuable insights for the reform of China's higher education system. By integrating transferable skills into music education, Chinese universities can better prepare graduates for the complexities of the modern workforce. This paper explores how the transferable skills emphasised by the Bologna Process can play a key role in improving the employability of Chinese music students and postgraduates.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Employability Challenges for Chinese Graduates

The rapid expansion of higher education in China has largely increased the number of university graduates, especially in recent years. As more university graduates enter the labour market, especially those in the arts, they face employment difficulties. According to the China Undergraduate Employment Report 2023 (MyCOS Research Institute, 2023), the employment rate of arts graduates continues to be lower than that of graduates in other fields. Music graduates are particularly affected, as the professional skills they learnt, such as performing and composing, although superb, are in limited demand in the job market (Zhao, 2019).

This phenomenon is closely related to China's traditional music education model. Music programmes in most colleges and universities are highly focussed on technical skills, such as training in music performance and theory, at the expense of broader vocational skill requirements. This over-specialisation makes graduates uncompetitive in the job market as they lack soft skills that

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are widely regarded as critical, such as communication, teamwork and leadership skills (Xu, 2021). As Chen Li (Chen, 2021) points out, music graduates' relatively weak adaptability when it comes to employment has led to them encountering more obstacles in the job search process, and many of them have to choose to change their career direction or pursue further studies. Therefore, the current employment difficulties of Chinese music graduates are directly related to the limitations of the curriculum, especially in a globalised and rapidly changing work environment where soft skills are increasingly important.

2. 2 The Need for Educational Reform in China

China's rapid economic growth and expansion of its higher education system have dramatically increased the number of university graduates. This has created a highly competitive labor market, where traditional education models focusing primarily on technical expertise are no longer sufficient to ensure graduate employability. Historically, Chinese higher education has emphasized specialized knowledge and technical skills, especially in fields such as engineering, medicine, and music (Liu & Morgan, 2019). While these competencies remain important, the demands of the modern global workforce have shifted, requiring a broader set of abilities that include transferable skills like communication, teamwork, leadership, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Gao, 2020).

2.2.1 Traditional Education Model and Its Limitations

The traditional Chinese higher education model is deeply rooted in the belief that mastery of specialized, technical knowledge is the key to success. While this model has produced generations of highly skilled professionals, it has become increasingly clear that many graduates lack the flexibility and adaptability needed in a rapidly changing, globalized economy (Zhao, 2019). This is particularly evident in fields such as the arts and music, where job opportunities are limited, and graduates often find themselves unprepared for alternative career paths outside of their narrow specializations (Chen, 2020).

For example, music graduates in China typically receive intensive training in performance, composition, and theory, but they rarely develop the broader skills needed to thrive in interdisciplinary roles, such as arts management or cultural entrepreneurship (Wang, 2021). As a result, many graduates struggle to transition into the workforce, finding their skill set too specialized for the broader employment landscape (Li, 2020). This issue is not unique to the arts; graduates across various fields face similar challenges when their education has not equipped them with the flexibility to adapt to different roles and industries.

2.2.2 Globalization and the Need for Transferable Skills

The increasing integration of China into the global economy has highlighted the gap between the current higher education system and the needs of the modern workforce. With globalization, jobs are no longer confined to specific industries or regions, and many roles require employees to work in international and multicultural environments. This has made transferable skills—such as communication, adaptability, and teamwork—essential for graduates seeking to succeed in global or cross-cultural contexts (Jackson, 2016).

In addition to working across cultures, graduates must now demonstrate the ability to think critically, solve complex problems, and innovate in the face of technological advances and market shifts. However, the rigid and highly structured nature of China's traditional education system often limits opportunities for students to develop these competencies. Classroom instruction tends to be lecture-based, with a strong focus on memorization and standardized testing rather than on fostering creativity and independent thinking (Yang, 2019). This approach leaves students well-prepared for exams but often underprepared for real-world challenges that require them to think on their feet and collaborate with others (Liu & Grieshaber, 2018).

2.2.3. Economic Shifts and the Demand for Innovation

China's economic transition from a manufacturing-based economy to one driven by innovation and high-tech industries has further emphasized the need for educational reform. With industries such as artificial intelligence, e-commerce, and biotechnology taking center stage, the demand for employees who can lead, innovate, and adapt is higher than ever (Li & Xu, 2020). These emerging sectors require a workforce that is not only technically proficient but also capable of managing complex projects, working in interdisciplinary teams, and continually learning to keep pace with technological advancements (Zhou & Hu, 2021).

Current educational models that focus predominantly on rote learning and technical expertise do not adequately prepare graduates for these demands. In fields like music, where creativity and innovation are essential, graduates who have been trained solely in traditional, performance-based curricula often lack the entrepreneurial skills needed to thrive in the modern cultural industries (Chen, 2020). To remain competitive on both the national and global stage, Chinese universities must rethink their approach to education, focusing not only on specialized knowledge but also on fostering the critical and creative thinking skills that are necessary for innovation.

2.2.4. Lessons from the Bologna Process

China can draw valuable lessons from the Bologna Process, which has successfully reformed higher education across Europe by integrating transferable skills and promoting a more flexible, student-centered learning approach. The Bologna Process emphasizes the development of competencies that are applicable across various professional settings, such as critical thinking, communication,

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teamwork, and problem-solving (Brennan, 2014). By encouraging interdisciplinary learning and modular course structures, the Bologna Process has helped European graduates become more adaptable and better equipped for the demands of the modern job market.

For China, adopting similar reforms could help address the gap between academic training and employability. By restructuring curricula to include more interdisciplinary learning opportunities and practical experiences, Chinese universities can ensure that graduates not only have technical expertise but also the broader skills needed to succeed in a rapidly evolving labor market (Yang, 2020). This is especially important for creative fields such as music, where job opportunities may be limited and graduates must be prepared to apply their skills in diverse and often unexpected ways (Xu, 2021).

2.2.5. Calls for a More Holistic Education Model

There is a growing recognition in China of the need to move toward a more holistic model of education that balances technical skills with the development of transferable skills. Several Chinese universities have already begun to pilot reforms that focus on student-centered learning, encouraging greater collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving in the classroom (Li & Zhang, 2021). These reforms are crucial not only for improving the immediate employability of graduates but also for preparing them for lifelong learning and career adaptability.

By fostering transferable skills such as communication, leadership, and innovation, Chinese universities can help their students develop the competencies they need to excel in a variety of professional contexts. This holistic approach to education will ensure that graduates are not only well-prepared for their first job but also equipped to navigate the changing demands of the global economy throughout their careers (Bennett, 2012).

2.3 Bologna Process: A Model for Educational Reform

In response to changes in the global job market, the Bologna Process has become a reference model for higher education reform in many countries around the world. The Bologna Process began in 1999 with the aim of enhancing the competitiveness of graduates for employment through the harmonisation of European higher education standards. One of its core concepts is that higher education should not only provide professional knowledge, but also develop a wider range of competences that enable graduates to adapt to the rapidly changing labour market (Nägele & Stalder, 2024).

Key concepts in the Bologna Process are transferable skills, which are not limited to specific occupations or industries, but can be applied in different work environments. For example, critical thinking, communication skills, teamwork and problem solving skills are recognised globally as important tools for graduates in their future careers (Brennan, 2024). This philosophy has not only transformed the European higher education system, but also provides countries such as China with ideas for reform that can be learnt from.

By encouraging students to acquire these transferable skills at university level, the Bologna Process provides guidance on developing graduates with long-term career resilience. Research by Laguna-Sánchez et al. (2020) suggests that graduates who are able to demonstrate these cross-industry skills are more employable in the modern labour market and are able to succeed at different stages of their career.

2.4 Transferable Skills and Their Role in Enhancing Employability

Transferable skills are more than just a supplement to technical competencies; they are essentially one of the key factors for career success. As defined by Brennan (2024), these skills are competencies that can be applied in a variety of occupations and industries, spanning cognitive, social, and leadership skills. These skills include leadership, teamwork, communication, and creative problem solving, which are particularly important in the globalised work environment of the 21st century.

A growing body of research suggests that graduates with good transferable skills are not only able to adapt more quickly to different work environments, but also demonstrate excellent flexibility across a range of careers, and research by Nägele & Stalder (2024) suggests that these skills are highly valued by employers in a fast-changing global marketplace, particularly in complex interdisciplinary fields where the ability to communicate effectively and solve problems is crucial. and problem-solving skills are crucial.

The development of transferable skills is particularly important in the context of music education in China. Due to the limited job market in the music sector, many music graduates find themselves seeking careers in other related fields, such as arts management, cultural industries or education (Xu, 2021). Transferable skills such as project management, leadership and effective communication will help them to be more successful in these fields (Cui, 2021).

2.5 Application of Bologna Process Principles in Chinese Higher Education

The Bologna Process, with its emphasis on a student-centred approach to learning and the development of transferable skills, has successfully reformed European higher education. The principles of the Bologna Process - such as the development of

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interdisciplinary skills, the creation of flexible learning pathways and a focus on lifelong learning - can help Chinese universities better align their curricula with the needs of the global labour market (Wang, 2020).

One of the core elements of the Bologna Process is the emphasis on transferable skills, including critical thinking, communication, teamwork and problem solving (Knight & Yorke, 2002). These skills are seen as essential for employability in a wide range of industries, making graduates more adaptable in a rapidly changing economic environment. In China, higher education has traditionally prioritised specialist technical knowledge, particularly in specialist areas such as music, engineering and medicine (Liu, 2020). However, this narrow focus often prevents graduates from adapting to complex professional environments that require flexibility and interdisciplinary collaboration (Zhao, 2019).

The incorporation of Bologna Process principles could transform the Chinese education system by facilitating interdisciplinary learning and broadening the scope of student development beyond purely technical skills. For example, music programmes could be adapted to include courses in arts management, project planning and entrepreneurship, providing students with a broader skill set and enhancing their employability. By diversifying the curriculum, students would not only develop technical competencies in their major field of study, but also acquire practical skills applicable to a wide range of industries (Li, 2021). This interdisciplinary approach is in line with the goal of the Bologna Process to produce graduates who are able to switch easily between different professions and adapt to the demands of a globalised economy (European Commission, 2015).

Another important contribution of the Bologna Process to Chinese higher education is the modularisation of the curriculum to make learning pathways more flexible. In the current Chinese education system, educational trajectories tend to be rigid, with students specialising in one field from the very beginning of their studies (Li, 2021). By adopting a more modular system, as advocated by the Bologna Process, students have the option to combine courses from different disciplines to create a more holistic educational experience. This flexibility will encourage the development of transferable skills, allowing students to explore areas such as communication, leadership, and critical thinking while receiving professional training (Wang & Liu, 2019).

In addition, the Bologna Process emphasises the importance of lifelong learning and the development of skills that are continually updated throughout a career. The emphasis on lifelong learning is particularly important in China, where rapid technological advances and economic transformations often render specific technical skills obsolete. By incorporating the Bologna principles into their educational models, Chinese universities can ensure that graduates are not only equipped for immediate employment, but also prepared for long-term careers (Chen, 2021).

To successfully implement these changes, Chinese universities must also prioritise the professional development of educators and ensure that teachers are trained in modern teaching methods that emphasise active learning and student engagement (Knight & Yorke, 2002). This requires a shift from traditional lecture-based teaching to more interactive teaching models that encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning and develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are essential for future careers.

2.6 The Impact of Transferable Skills on Employability

In today's rapidly evolving labour market, the value of transferable skills - skills that can be applied to a wide range of roles and industries - has increased significantly. These skills include critical thinking, communication, problem solving, teamwork, leadership and adaptability. Unlike technical skills that are often job-specific, transferable skills enable graduates to navigate complex and diverse work environments. Research has shown that these skills are increasingly important for employability, particularly in areas where the job market is unstable or competitive (Tymon, 2013).

For many graduates, particularly those in specialised fields such as music, the traditional focus on technical mastery may limit their career options. Whilst technical skills are still important, in an increasingly interdisciplinary world, technical skills alone are no longer sufficient to secure long-term employment. Today, employers are looking for graduates who can demonstrate flexibility, creativity and the ability to collaborate across disciplines. This is particularly the case in the arts and creative industries, where the ability to apply one's skills in a variety of contexts can lead to a longer-lasting and more fulfilling career (Jackson, 2010).

2.6.1. Flexibility and adaptability in the job market

Transferable skills play a crucial role in increasing the flexibility and adaptability of graduates in the job market. In industries where technologies such as information technology or media are changing rapidly, the ability to learn new skills quickly and apply them to different contexts is invaluable. Graduates with strong transferable skills are more likely to thrive in such environments as they can adapt to new challenges and roles as the industry evolves (Bridgstock, 2009).

In China, the growing emphasis on innovation and the digital economy means that employers are looking for graduates who can think critically, communicate effectively and work with diverse teams. These skills allow individuals to move between different job roles, making them more adaptable to changes in the labour market. For example, graduates with a background in music can not only perform or teach, but also apply their leadership and project management skills to arts management, cultural organisations and even entrepreneurship (Liu, 2020).

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2.6.2 Enhancing career mobility and opportunities

Transferable skills enable graduates to pursue opportunities in different fields, thus enhancing their career mobility. In contrast to technical skills that are usually industry-specific, transferable skills enable graduates to apply their expertise across a variety of fields. For example, communication skills are valuable in any career that requires teamwork, interaction with customers, or leadership. Similarly, problem solving and critical thinking are essential in managerial positions or any job that requires innovative approaches to complex challenges (Yorke, 2006).

In the case of higher education in China, the development of transferable skills has become a top priority as graduates face increasing competition for jobs. While traditional employment sectors such as government or education remain important, many graduates are now seeking employment in fast-growing sectors such as technology, finance and creative industries. These sectors require employees who can quickly adapt to new technologies, work in interdisciplinary teams and manage complex projects. Graduates with good transferable skills are more likely to excel in these environments and thus be more competitive across industries (Li & Zhang, 2021).

2.6.3. Long-term career success and lifelong learning

The impact of transferable skills on employability is not limited to obtaining an initial job, but extends to long-term career success. In an era where individuals may change careers multiple times, the ability to continually learn and adapt is critical. Transferable skills facilitate this lifelong learning process by providing graduates with the foundation needed to acquire new competencies throughout their careers (Andrews & Higson, 2008).

Employers value candidates who can demonstrate their commitment to career development and adaptability. For example, a graduate with strong problem-solving skills is not only equipped to deal with current challenges, but also prepared to deal with future disruptions in the industry. This ability to continue to evolve is highly valued in a field that is constantly innovating and changing (Groot & Brink, 2000).

3.0 CONCLUSION

In the context of China's rapidly growing higher education sector, the challenge of employability, particularly for graduates in specialized fields such as music, has become increasingly pronounced. The traditional focus on technical skills—while critical for certain professions—often leaves graduates without the flexibility and adaptability required to thrive in today's competitive and evolving job market. The need for a more balanced approach, incorporating both specialized knowledge and **transferable skills**, is essential to address these employability challenges. As seen throughout this discussion, **transferable skills** such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership are now indispensable in ensuring that graduates are not limited to narrow career paths. These skills allow individuals to transition between industries, adapt to new roles, and meet the demands of a rapidly changing global workforce. In China, where education reforms are ongoing, the importance of developing such skills cannot be overstated. For music graduates, who traditionally focus on performance or composition, the inclusion of transferable skills would significantly expand their career opportunities, enabling them to explore roles in arts management, cultural organizations, and interdisciplinary projects. The **Bologna Process** serves as an important model for educational reform in China, particularly in its emphasis on integrating transferable skills into higher education curricula. Its principles encourage the development of a flexible, interdisciplinary approach to education, which contrasts sharply with the often rigid and highly specialized nature of Chinese university programs. By adopting similar practices—such as modular course structures, interdisciplinary learning, and the promotion of lifelong learning—Chinese universities can help students build the competencies necessary for long-term career success. These reforms would be especially beneficial for music students, whose career paths are becoming increasingly diversified as creative industries intersect with technology, media, and management. Moreover, transferable skills foster greater career resilience and adaptability, preparing graduates not just for their first job but for a lifetime of professional transitions and challenges. This is particularly relevant in a world where industries and job requirements change rapidly due to technological advances and globalization. Chinese graduates who are equipped with both technical and transferable skills are better positioned to navigate these shifts, enhancing their overall career sustainability. In addition to benefiting individual graduates, the cultivation of transferable skills is essential for **China's broader economic development**, particularly in sectors that require innovation and creative problem-solving. For example, fostering leadership and teamwork skills in graduates can directly contribute to their ability to manage complex projects, lead teams, and innovate within their fields. In the context of China's push towards developing its cultural and creative industries, graduates with a strong foundation in transferable skills will be better equipped to contribute to and lead these initiatives. In conclusion, China's higher education system must prioritize the integration of **transferable skills** into its curricula to ensure that graduates are not only technically proficient but also capable of adapting to diverse professional environments. The principles of the **Bologna Process** offer valuable guidance for this transformation, advocating for a more holistic, student-centered approach to education. For music graduates, in particular, the expansion of skillsets through interdisciplinary learning and practical application will be crucial in enhancing their employability. By embracing these reforms, Chinese universities can better prepare their students for the complexities of the modern workforce, ensuring that they have the tools to succeed both now and in the future.

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