

COUNTRY STUDY



ASK Asia

Erasmus Mundus Alumni Employability Study in
the Field of Agriculture and Related Life Sciences

Agriculture
Skills
Knowledge
Asia



With the support of the
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of the European Union

Team of authors:

- Petra Chaloupková: project coordinator (Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic)
- Didier Pillot: project partner representative (Agreenium, France)
- Frederik Dewulf: project partner representative (Gent University, Belgium)
- Margarita Calderón-Peter: project partner representative (University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Austria)
- Martina Opočenská: project partner representative (AGRINATURA Association, Czech Republic)

Cambodia

- Petra Brtníková: PhD candidate, project officer (Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic)
- Socheat Keo: consultant (Royal University of Agriculture, Cambodia)
- Mom Seng : project partner representative (Royal University of Agriculture, Cambodia)

China

- Assem Abu Hatab: consultant (SLU, Sweden)
- Radek Vašíček: Master student (Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic)
- Jan Hummelová: project assistant (Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic)
- Xianlei Ma: project partner representative (Nanjing Agricultural University, China)

Indonesia

- Zuzana Polívková: PhD candidate (Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic)
- Masyhuri : consultant (Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia)
- Ingrid Melnikovová: project assistant (Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic)
- Aiyen Tjoa: project partner representative (Tadulako University, Indonesia)

Mongolia

- Bayarmaa Bold: consultant, project partner representative (Mongolian University of Life Sciences, Mongolia)
- Radek Vašíček: Master student (Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic)

Thailand

- Zuzana Polívková: PhD candidate (Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic)
- Prompilai Buasuwan: consultant (Kassetsart University, Thailand)
- Chutima Tantikitti: project partner representative (Prince of Songkla University, Thailand)
- Olga Leuner: project assistant (Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic)
- Chaidarun Tippawan: project partner representative (Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association, Thailand)

Vietnam

- Petra Brtníková: PhD candidate, project officer (Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic)
- Ho Huong Lien: consultant (Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic)
- Hanh Hoang Huu: project partner representative (Hue University, Vietnam)

Project partner representatives are/were coordinators and/or partners of the Erasmus Mundus projects mentioned in the Methodology chapter.

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Table of contents

Abbreviations and Acronyms	3
Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
Brief overview of Chinese higher education and labour market	7
Agricultural sector development	8
Labour Market Assessment	9
Higher Education	10
Methodology	12
Erasmus Mundus Alumni experience	14
Sampled alumni characteristics	14
Knowledge and professional skills of graduates	15
Employment	16
Alumni’s perception of their position on the labour market	21
Employers’ perception on employability of EM alumni	24
Job market characterisation and agricultural sector evolution	24
Visible impact of international donors and support from government	25
Supply of graduates and new positions demanded	25
Recruitment process	26

The most important points on the candidates' background	28
The most important skills and competences.....	29
Missing skills of employment candidates	31
Advantages of EM graduates in comparison with other graduates	31
Outcomes from national workshop	32
Employers' perspective.....	32
Alumni testimonies.....	33
Implications and Outlook.....	34
Recommendations for EM programmes.....	36
References.....	39

Abbreviations and Acronyms

CEC	China Education Center
EM	Erasmus Mundus
EU	European Union
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
ILO	International Labour Organization
NBSC	National Bureau of Statistics of China
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WEF	World Economic Forum

Executive Summary

Agriculture is an important pillar of the Chinese economy as it accounts for 10% of China's GDP with an annual growth rate of 8%, and contributes to more than half of total national employment. However, the agricultural growth that China has achieved cannot yield sufficient jobs to meet the demand of the growing number of job seekers. The job market in agriculture and related life sciences is becoming fiercely competitive.

In this context, this study aims to assess how the Erasmus Mundus (EM) graduates in agriculture and related life sciences perform on the professional job market in China. It helps to identify the advantages of the EM graduates in meeting the requirements of the employers.

To conduct the study, data were collected from the EM alumni and employers. Firstly, 47 valid online questionnaires were obtained from the EM alumni; secondly, personal interviews were conducted with 18 employers in the field of agriculture and related life sciences in China; and thirdly, focus group discussions were facilitated during workshops that hosted eight alumni and representatives of six employers including Asian and European institutions.

The main findings from the online questionnaire show that EM alumni have distinguished themselves in the labour market by their ability to be independent, their adaptability to the new environment, their communication and language skills. They believe that, compared to the locally educated graduates, they have achieved greater career advancement with shorter periods needed for finding jobs.

From the employers' point of view, although two thirds of them prefer to hire employees with international experience, what they value most is practical experience. The employers confirm that the EM programme has had positive impacts on the graduates, i.e., EM graduates are likely to spend a shorter time job searching, achieve greater career advancement and get highly paid jobs. Yet they also find that graduates are not well equipped to meet the needs of the job market.

Findings from the focus group discussion indicate that the EM graduates are perceived to have developed a more global perspective, better critical thinking skills, and their capacity to learn and adopt new solutions. Meanwhile, the EM alumni in the workshop recognised the contribution of the overseas study experience in the job market and in international networking.

Despite the benefits of the EM programme, there is more that EM could do to improve. Firstly, Chinese EM students could be provided with increasing work practice programmes within EU countries and more career training to bridge the gap between academic programmes and work requirements. Secondly, offices could

be built to promote EM programmes among key agricultural universities in China and attract more Chinese students. Thirdly, information concerning the Chinese agricultural labour market should be collected to help Chinese EM students be better prepared to suit job requirements.

Introduction

China is one of the countries that benefits from the Erasmus Mundus Programme that provides scholarships for and mobility of Chinese students to study at selected European universities. Such cooperation aims to build the human resources for the future development of China. Up to date over three thousand Chinese students, scholars and fellows have been selected to take part in EM mobility and to experience educational excellence at European universities, 1,605 of them under the Action 1 programme and 1,675 under the Action 2 programme (European Commission, 2014). The second phase of Erasmus Mundus ran between early 2009 and 2013, raising the question of its potential success in the following years. This country report is a part of a comprehensive study that was conducted under the ASK Asia project. The **project ASK Asia** (“Agriculture, Skills, Knowledge in Asia: Competences and Employability of Erasmus Mundus Graduates in Agriculture on the Asian Professional Market”) is an Erasmus Mundus Action 3 project funded by the European Commission (EACEA) in the period from 2013 till 2015. The main objective is to assess how the Erasmus Mundus graduates in Agriculture and related Life Sciences perform on the professional job market in Asia and to identify specific competences and skills that provide these graduates with a comparative advantage in meeting the expectations of their employers following the education/training period.

Brief overview of Chinese higher education and labour market

In the last 15 years China's GDP has been growing constantly and currently is more than triple that in the year 2000. This stable growth has lifted more than 500 million people out of poverty (World Bank 2014). Thanks to the fact that China's exchange rate is determined by fiat, rather than by market forces, the measure of GDP using the official exchange rate is not an accurate measure of China's output; GDP at the official exchange rate substantially understates the actual level of China's output vis-a-vis the rest of the world. In China's situation, GDP at purchasing power parity provides the best measure for comparing output across countries (Index Mundi, 2015). China's economy depends on the size of its workforce and its productivity; this combination determines how much China can supply without overstretching itself. The country's urban workforce, which produces most of its output, is growing ever more slowly. The age group from which this workforce springs is now shrinking. The population of working age shrank by 2.44 million in 2013, having already fallen by several million the year before. This demographic turning-point has contributed to a marked slowdown in China's potential rate of growth (Economist, 2014). Regarding the unemployment rate, in the last 10 years it has remained unchanged around 4% of the working population. The unemployment rate in China averaged 4.14% from 2002 until 2014, reaching an all-time high of 4.3% in the fourth quarter of 2003 and a record low of 3.9% in the third quarter of 2002. In China, the unemployment rate measures the number of people actively looking for a job as a percentage of the labor force (Trading Economics, 2014). China successfully achieved some specific Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Three related factors were: rapid economic expansion coupled with gradual reforms; development and inclusiveness-oriented government; and particular domestic and social demographic requirements; all signs of high performance (UNDP, 2015).

The economy of China has gradually shifted from a centrally planned economy to a market-based economy from 1978 onwards. China simultaneously encouraged farmers to modernize and urbanize. A priority is export-led growth, so as to reduce the risk of bankruptcy in many state-owned enterprises. China adopted many pilot programmes to determine the correct policies, which allowed the government to experiment before implementing policy on a larger scale (UNDP, 2015). The Chinese government is seeking to transform China from being the best-known low-cost manufacturing country worldwide into a country respected for its innovative capacity (WEF, 2008).

Table 1 Overview of Chinese economy and demography

	2000	2003	2006	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
GDP per capita (constant 2005 US\$)	1,122	1,430	1,940	2,611	2,870	3,122	3,345	3,583	-
Agriculture value added (% of GDP)	15	13	11	10	10	10	10	10	-
Gross agricultural production value (constant 2004- 2006 million US\$)	391,154	421,443	479,398	533,584	557,750	577,296	594,147	-	-
Population (1000)	1,262,6 45	1,288,4 00	1,311,0 20	1,331,2 60	1,337,7 05	1,344,1 30	1,350,6 95	1,357,3 80	-
Agricultural labour (1000)	509,262	509,818	509,180	508,708	507,734	506,341	504,523	502,213	499, 340

Source: FAOSTAT, 2015; World Bank, 2015

Agricultural sector development

Although the Chinese economy is well known for its strong growth in the manufacturing and service sectors, agriculture is still an important economic sector, accounting for a significant portion of both employment and overall economic output. The sector accounts for about 10% of China's gross domestic product (GDP) (Worldbank, 2014) with a growth rate of approximately 8% annually, and agriculture contributes more than 50% of total national employment (FAOSTAT, 2014a). This number remains unchanged in the last 4 years (Worldbank, 2014). In the year 2011 "China produced 70% more than the entire agricultural output of the European Union, 150% more than India and 205% more than the US" (Gianni

et al., 2011). The most important food crop in China is rice. “It is observed that more than 75% of the total cultivated land is used for producing food crops.” Second in importance is wheat; also important are potatoes, fish, flex, jute, meat and others. (ECONOMYWATCH, 2010). China is investing in the quality of its techniques and technologies in an attempt to improve to the level of productivity of other countries (Gianni et al., 2011)

Moreover, the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBRSC) reports that total agricultural production in 2012 was valued at US \$1182.2 billion, representing an increase of 41.4% in comparison to 2010 (FAOSTAT, 2014b).

Labour Market Assessment

However, the Chinese economy is not growing as fast as it did in previous years and this in turn poses challenges for new graduates entering the job market. A breakdown of unemployment in China by education attainment shows that unemployment rates are highest among people who have a tertiary education (16.4%), nearly double the rates among people with secondary education, and 4 times higher than among individuals having only primary education (Gan et al., 2013).

High priority has been given to employment and social protection. The improvement of vocational training and employment services has helped college graduates, rural migrant workers, ex-soldiers and urban residents who have difficulty finding jobs. A Labour Contract Law and an Employment Promotion Law have been implemented, minimum wages raised, and harmonious labour relations promoted. Those are breakthroughs in the progress of social security.

A system for both urban and rural residents has been created. Basic pension insurance for urban workers was put under unified planning at the provincial level. A method was devised to transfer pension insurance coverage for workers moving from one province to another; and the basic pension for enterprise retirees increased by an average 10% per year over the last seven years. In addition, the trial of a new type of pension insurance for rural residents has been extended to 24% of all counties. A basic medical insurance system for non-working urban residents and a new rural cooperative medical care system have been completed. Moreover, the national social security fund now stands at 781 billion yuan, an increase of over 580 billion yuan in five years. Chinese people are now wealthier, better educated and healthier than ever before (ILO, 2015).

In China 35% of the population was working in agriculture and rural development in 2011. Years before, it varied between 37% and 38% (Worldbank, 2014). The numbers were higher also in the years 2004-2008, when 47-50% of the population worked in the sector. Many Chinese students who pursue postgraduate

education end up in universities and research institutions which belong mostly to the public sector. Second, although it is assumed that top Chinese graduates generally prefer to work for private and multinational companies, this is no longer the case because of the oversupply of graduates in recent years, a factor with which the private sector cannot keep pace. As a result, employment in the government and public sector, with its guaranteed security and benefits, is becoming increasingly attractive to graduates (Zhai, 2010) and (Kuruville et al., 2011).

The fact that agricultural growth in China no longer produces enough jobs can be in part attributed to the challenges that agricultural systems around the world are facing and to increasing competitiveness on the international markets for agricultural and food commodities, which are converting agricultural labour markets into a quality-based market, posing challenges to the higher agricultural institutions to produce a workforce that has the capacity to engage in global agricultural value chains and deal with the quality requirements and intellectual property rights of international high value markets to meet the changing demands of the agricultural labour market.

Higher Education

The education system in China is the biggest in the world. There were 9,39 million students taking China's National Higher Education Entrance Examination in June 2014. The number of students enrolled for agricultural higher education in 2013 was 40,527, which is 1.527% of all student enrollment in higher education in China. The percentage of female students exceeds 50% of all higher education students except for Doctors degree's, where females are only 36.9% of all students (NBSC, 2015). Investment in education is 4% of GDP in China. Since 1986 there is mandatory 9-year education for all Chinese children (CEC, 2015). This mandatory education is free. After middle school, parents pay for the public high schools, but in rural parts of the country the majority of students stop their education at the age of 15 after their nine-year mandatory education. There are also private high schools for wealthy Chinese and international schools as well (Mack, 2014). Last year, there were 7 million college graduates coming to the job market, only 35% of whom, and only 26% of postgraduates, had found a job by April of that year.

There are 879 higher educational institutions (HEIs) in China (2013). The universities are divided among 30 provinces. Institutions can be divided into those for training and for academic studies. Academic institutions, meaning the universities (public or private) or research institutions end with a diploma, whereas training institutions provide training in specific skills (languages, business, IT, finance etc.) and finish with certification (AT0086, 2014).

There are many agricultural universities providing agricultural education in China. The most reputable ones are: The China Agriculture University, The South China Agriculture University, The Huazhong Agriculture

University, The Nanjing Agricultural University, The Northeast Agricultural University, The Sichuan Agricultural University, and The Beijing University of Agriculture.

Methodology

To reach our specific objectives, multiple means of data collection were used throughout the survey. The general procedure followed the overall methodological framework explained in the ASK Asia Erasmus Mundus Alumni Employability Study. Three main data collection approaches were applied, firstly an online questionnaire was distributed among EM alumni, secondly interviews were conducted in person with key employers and informants in the field of agriculture and related life sciences in China and, last but not least, focus group discussions were facilitated during the national workshop with representatives of alumni and employers. Some specifications were adjusted to suit local conditions.

The total number of alumni who completed the survey and were accepted into the research sample for the country study was 47. Contact with the particular institutions that employ EM graduates were obtained via an online survey. Based on the information provided by the sample of Chinese alumni, a list consisting of the contact details of 30 employers was developed. Of these, three employers were not based in China (Singapore, US, and Switzerland), so they were dropped from the sample because the objective of the study is to assess the performance of the EM graduates in the Chinese professional job market. Moreover, the contact information of 4 employers was completely missing and thus these employers were excluded. The remaining 23 employers were first telephoned to briefly explain the objectives of the study and to request their participation in our interviews. Of these, 5 employers did not participate in the interviews including 3 employers with whom contact could not be established, an employer who cancelled the meeting at the last minute due to unavailability because of other business commitments, and an employer who refused to participate due to lack of interest.

Our final sample consisted of 18 Chinese employers, of whom 28% were female and 72% were male. The majority of the interviewed employers in our sample hold senior level positions in their organizations. This reflects their experience in the Chinese agricultural sector and gives their views more weight in understanding the dynamics of the agricultural professional job market in China. Our sample of employers was distributed among 11 Chinese provinces as follows: 4 employers were based in Sichuan province, 2 employers were interviewed in Shanghai, Beijing, Zhejiang and Guangdong, the rest of the employers were interviewed in Guizhou, Yunnan, Gansu, Shaanxi, Shanxi and Heilongjiang. A breakdown of the employers by the type of their organization (sector) indicates that 78% were public sector and state-owned organizations whereas 22% belonged to the private sector. This distribution pattern with a dominance of public sector employers is to be expected, as explained in the labour market assessment sub chapter.

A national workshop was organized in Nanjing Agricultural University, China, on October 11, 2014. The workshop hosted 17 participants. Eight of these were from the sample of responding alumni, six were representatives of Asian institutions and three were representatives of European higher education.

Finally, lessons learnt from each country and final conclusions were discussed during the regional conference that was facilitated in Prince of Songkia University, Thailand on February 2-4, 2015. The regional workshop hosted 25 representatives of European and Asian universities and consultants involved in the research process.

Erasmus Mundus Alumni experience

In this chapter results from the alumni survey are presented, including general demographic information about the respondents, their study backgrounds, professional experience and skill development throughout the programme, as well as the current employment situation of EM alumni in the field of agriculture and related life sciences.

Sampled alumni characteristics

The age range of the sampled alumni was between 20 and 36 years. The two largest age groups are 20-25 and 26-30 years. This seems to be explained by the fact that Chinese alumni leave mainly for bachelor and master degree studies. The EM alumni come from different areas; being predominantly from urban areas (85%), where easier access to good quality education is available. With 51% of the alumni being female, a sound gender distribution is noticed amongst EM participants. The majority of respondents had participated in the EM project as Master degree students (42%), followed by Post-doctoral (28%), Bachelor students (17%), and Doctoral degree students (13%). Master students mainly participated in mobility of one or 2 years, while bachelor students' mobility lasted for a half or full year. Most participants were financed through one of the following 3 projects: Lotus II, Mover and Eurasia 1 and 2.

The most-visited country was Belgium (17% of the respondents), followed by Germany with 12%. The choice of specific country was indicated as based mainly on personal interest in a particular university. The most stated reasons for opting for a specific host university were that it offered study programmes (30%), a proposal by the university sending them to study at a particular European university (19%), or for reasons of specific working groups/teachers or tutors at the university concerned (12%). The least mentioned reason (6%) was that students found the university online and became interested in it.

The most frequent reason (15%) for conducting the mobility was given as desire to improve language skills. Overall, integration within the new society seemed to have been quite smooth, as 55% indicated to have experienced a good degree of integration with only some minor problems.

The majority of alumni studied mostly in the field of engineering (17%) and rural development (11%); followed by biotechnology and animal sciences 38% of all the respondents chose one of the above-mentioned fields. Within the other half, agriculture economics and business were those mostly represented.

Alumni chose the host country mostly according to the particular university that was situated there or according to the proposals of their own university or knowledge about the target country.

Knowledge and professional skills of graduates

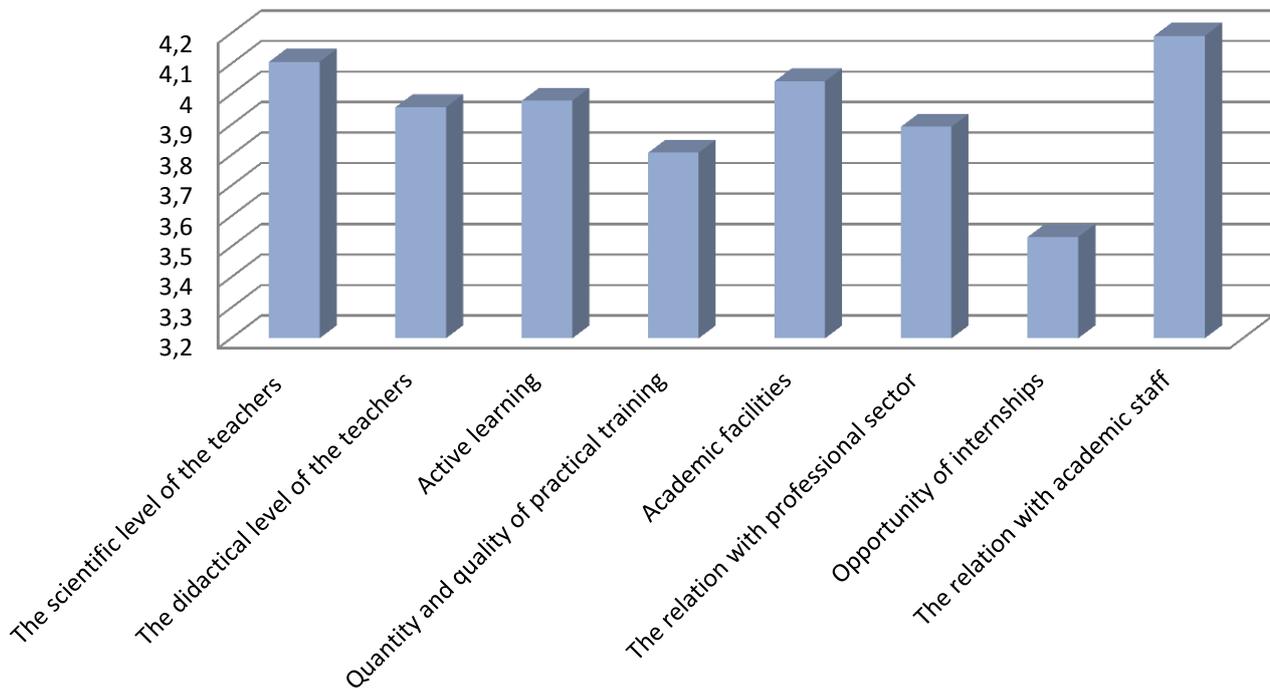
The Chinese EM participants were not a homogenous group, as they come from different parts of China, have experienced different living conditions, and majored in different subjects. 28% had had a previous experience abroad before participating in the EM project; more than half of them for a period of about 3-6 months, followed by those who participated for less than 3 months. Previously, the most visited countries/regions had been USA and EU, followed by Singapore, Canada and New Zealand.

70% of respondents gained practical experience during their studies in EU. A number of them took internships or found a student job or a volunteer position during the period out of China. Internships were taken by 51% of all respondents, mainly voluntary. 76% of all currently working alumni strongly agreed or agreed that their participation in the EM programme helped them find a job and develop their career. After finishing the programme, alumni were supposed to return to their countries. The majority, consisting of 76% of respondents, came home after the end of their study. The rest stayed in Europe longer because they wanted to get a job in Europe or applied for a higher level of education.

The EM alumni developed specific skills and competences during their stay in the EU. Alumni mentioned the ability to be independent and the capacity to adapt to new situations as the most important skills they developed. Additionally, the surveyed students indicated that they improved their oral and written communication, language skills, self-confidence, interaction with other people and cultures, ability in problem solving and their capacity to learn. Alumni scored computer skills lowest. However all skills were given a high grade. With regards to language skills, specifically English improved a lot (by 88% for the alumni). With the exceptions of Spanish (16%) and French (15%), improvements in other languages were negligible.

Overall appreciation of European teaching and learning was very positive. Students evaluated it on scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being the best. Specially valued were relations with the academic staff with a rank of 4.2 and the scientific level of the teachers. This ranking is graphically expressed in the following figure.

Figure 1 Chinese alumni appreciation of European teaching and learning



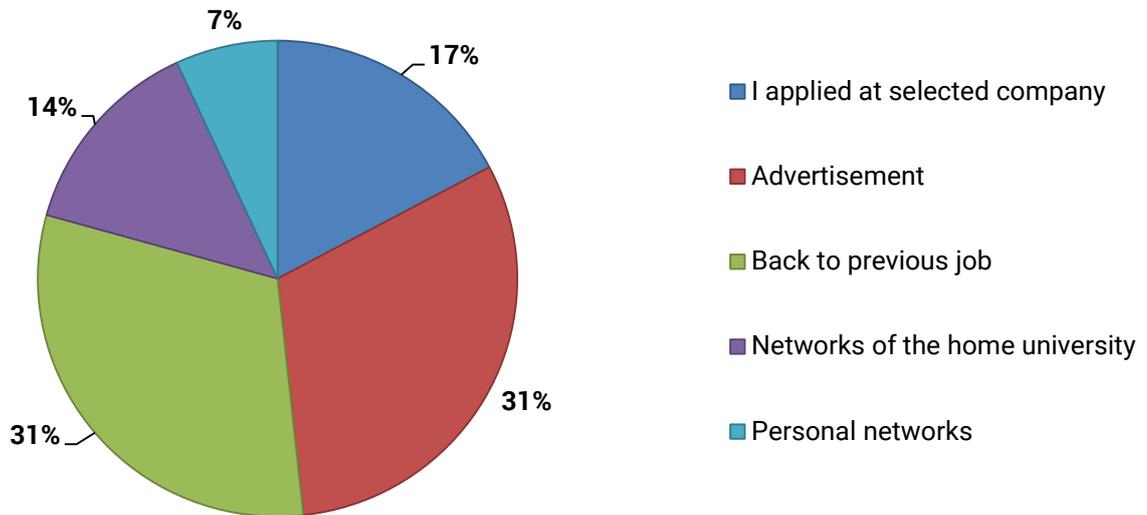
Source: Online survey on alumni experience with EM programme

Indicators that were ranked the lowest were the opportunity of taking an internship offered by the host university and the quantity and quality of practical training. The lack of internships offered might be the reason why the majority (72%) of the alumni gained practical experience outside of the university. More attention could be paid to offering some training or internships to students to gain more skills and experience for the future job market.

Employment

Over half of the respondents (63%) had some kind of professional experience before participating in the programme. Only one fifth of the alumni (15%) had a job before participating in the EM programme. At the time of this research, 62% of the respondents were working. Alumni who were working before the EM programme were working mostly in the same job as before (31% of those with a job before starting EM). The rest were now working in a new company.

Of the EM graduates that were currently unemployed, 28% were actively searching for a job, while another 67% were on holiday, the remaining 5% were women on maternity leave. The majority of those that were currently looking for a job had been doing so for less than three months. To search for jobs, Chinese alumni make use of different types of media (newspaper, internet, etc.). The following figure summarizes how the alumni find out about jobs.

Figure 2 How did the alumni find a job

Source: Online survey on alumni experience with EM programme

The majority (83%) of the alumni who were currently working were employed in the public sector, mainly in ministries, universities and national agencies. This fact should be understood in the light of the government support, given to this mobility, to receive highly skilled public servants with more foreign experience to help the country in its development. The private sector also has a strong position in alumni employment, because employees with international experience and foreign language skills are welcomed by many companies engaged in international business.

After the EM programme more than half the alumni returned to the same employer and same position as before. The field of their current position was also the same as the field of their study abroad. This confirms that institutions/companies don't want to lose skilled employees and continue to support them. Moreover, it is interesting that the private sector also supports the education/training of alumni abroad. For a summary of the alumni experience, a cluster analysis was implemented and the alumni were divided into three clusters.

Cluster I

Cluster I. represents the group of alumni who were working before their participation in the EM, representing 15% of respondents. These alumni were currently working in the same company/institution as before. Alumni from this group were working in the public sector, mainly in universities and the rest in other institutions. Alumni in this cluster were in the age groups 31-35 and 36 years and over. This category consists of Post-Doctoral researchers that mainly carried out research in the EU for one year.

The following figure represents selected testimonies of alumni with EM experience as to satisfaction with their position in the labour market:

+ Pros	- Cons
Studies applied in practice Job corresponds to the field of study Building capacities for higher education development Ability to convert the knowledge and experience in home country	Lack of internship offers

What do they consider to be the most important factor influencing their employability?

Experiencing a foreign culture Language skills Capacity to work in a team, networking Self-confidence Creativity Capacity to adapt to new situations Degree from Europe Level of skills
--

Cluster II

The second cluster also represents alumni who were working before participating in the EM programme. These were only 6% of respondents. This group also had some professional experience before starting the EM programme. Alumni from the second cluster were currently working in a different organization than before, but in the same sector. Also in this cluster, all respondents worked in the public sector. Similar to Cluster I, the mobility of these alumni was for 1 year post-doctoral research. Alumni were in the age group 36 years or over. They choose the exchange university based on a specific working group/teacher/tutor, recommended by a schoolmate/tutor/teacher.

+ Pros

- Cons

Ability to learn new things in a multicultural environment

none identified

Research skills

Enjoy working on projects

International and national relations/networks

What do they consider to be the most important factor influencing their employability?

Capacity to work in a team

Interaction with other people and cultures

Academic background and degree from Europe

Capacity for applying knowledge in practice

Technical know-how

Creativity

English language skills

Cluster III

The third cluster represents the alumni without working experience before participating in the EM programme. This group is the largest. It consists of 79% of alumni. All age groups are represented here, the majority belonging to age groups 20-25 years and 26-30 years. Alumni from this cluster studied mainly master degrees, with a mobility duration of one to two years. In this group, slightly more than half of the alumni were working, while 11% were still looking for a job. However, the majority of those still looking for work had been doing so for less than three months.

+ Pros

- Cons

Ability to develop communication skills, time management and expertise

none identified

Culture exchange

Contribution to higher education development

Research and work related skills

What do they consider to be the most important factor influencing their employability?

Independence

Capacity to adapt to new situations

Capacity to learn

Communication skills

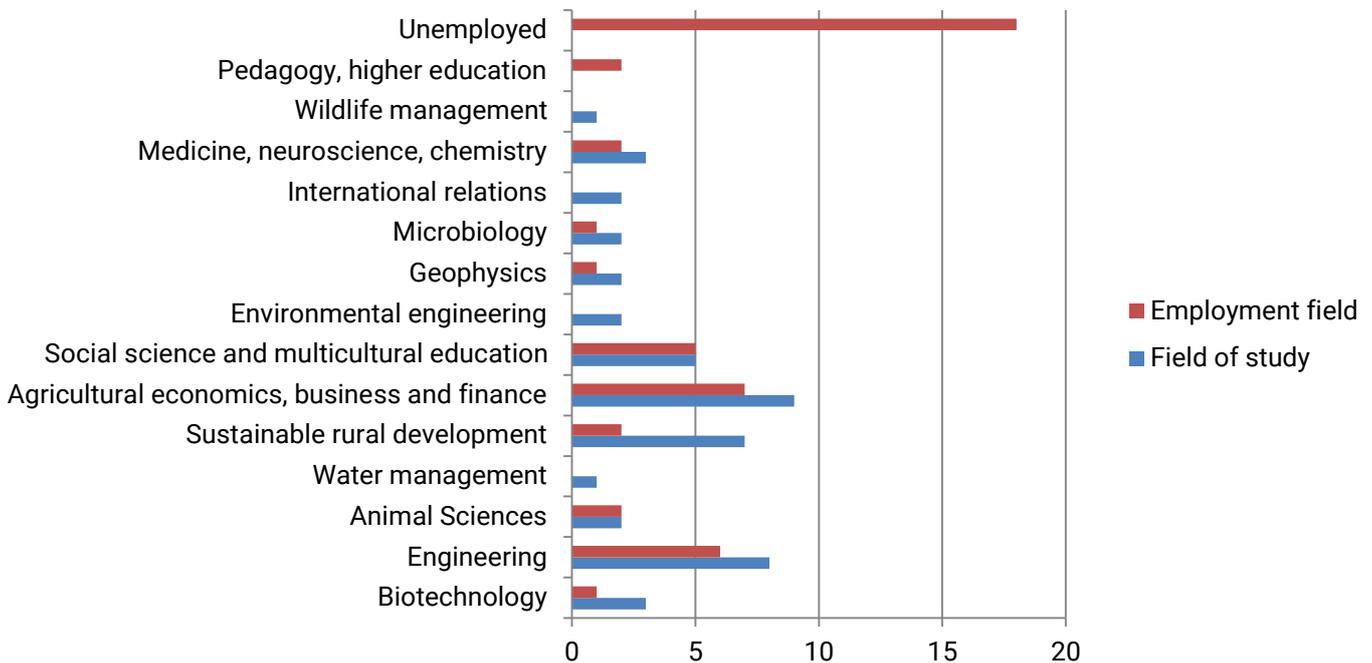
Self-confidence

Degree from Europe

Language skills

Regarding to the field of studies and current employment, the majority of alumni found a job in a field related to their studies. With only three alumni who were working in a field that is not related to their studies as is represented in the following figure. These data are strongly influenced by the relatively high prevalence of unemployment among graduates.

Figure 1 Study fields and current employment of alumni



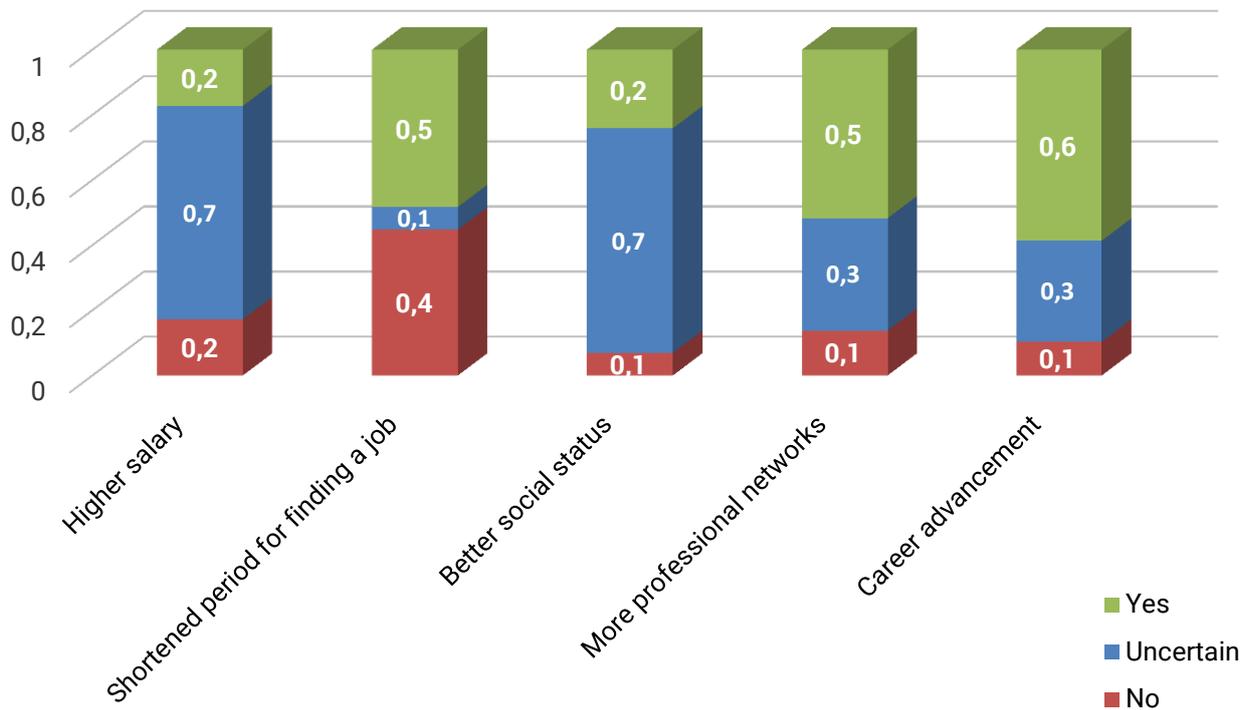
Source: Online survey on alumni experience with EM programme

The biggest group of alumni (48%) works as academically qualified employees without any management function. In second place (17%) are employees working as research assistants. Academically qualified employees with management functions were 14% of all respondents. 10% of the working alumni work as executive employees. Further, 7% of respondents had a job as a qualified employee. Only one respondent was an ordinary employee.

Alumni work in various institutions and companies where the employers require different working skills and competences. According the alumni responses in the survey, the most important skills required are capacity to generate new ideas, capacity to work in a team, ability in problem solving, responsibility and analytical and synthetical capacity. The least required skills were computer skills, nowadays perceived as standard.

Alumni’s perception of their position on the labour market

How competitive alumni will be in the labour market is influenced by the level of confidence they have in themselves. Do they feel an advantage in comparison with graduates from a Chinese university who didn’t have an opportunity to study in foreign country? The graph below shows the respondents’ perceived advantages.

Figure 4 Perception of labour market advantages of EM alumni

Source: Online survey on alumni experience with EM programme

Respondents consider that their participation in the EM programme advantaged them on the labour market. Studying abroad has more advantages for a future career. Many of the participants who were surveyed considered the EM programme a great opportunity. Through their participation in the programme, they improved their ability to work and consequently were able to improve their livelihoods. In addition, they stated that they developed competences important for the Chinese labour market.

Career advancement was strongly agreed as an advantage for alumni (59%). A shorter period of job hunting is considered an advantage after the EM programme for almost half of the respondents. However, alumni are uncertain whether EM participation conducted to a higher salary or better social status. This might become visible over time. Extended professional networks were considered an advantage for most respondents.

Respondents were very positive with regards to their position in the labour market. Moreover, many alumni were satisfied with their own position, and most of them learned new things. The skills that alumni gained are applied at work and they consider themselves as improved. Many people who were unsatisfied would have preferred more opportunities in research, instead of project implementation, and less administrative work.

There are several factors which can be important and influence alumni's employability. These factors are affected by whether the employer is from the public or the private sector. Some of the most important and common factors influencing the EM graduates were: skills developed during their stay in Europe, having had the opportunity to study abroad, communication, English skills and the opportunity to understand a different culture. These skills were considered as having improved the alumni's position in the Chinese job market. The majority of the alumni surveyed believe that the degree they obtained in the EU gave them a better starting position and more opportunities for career achievement. The experience and knowledge gained in the EU were used often by alumni in their daily working life.

Employers' perception on employability of EM alumni

This chapter summarizes the results of interviews conducted with a sample of 18 Chinese employers of EM graduates. The majority of the interviewed employers hold senior level positions in their organizations.

Job market characterisation and agricultural sector evolution

Although the Chinese economy is well-known for its strong growth in manufacturing and service sectors, the interviewed employers indicated that agriculture is also an important pillar for the Chinese economy. It accounts for a significant portion of employment and overall economic output. Given its significant role in the economy, agriculture has always received high priority and attention from the Chinese government. According to the interviewees, the Chinese government strongly believes that sustainable agriculture and rural development are two important components for ensuring overall sustainable development in the country. The employers agreed that the growth of agricultural production in China since the second half of the last century has been one of the main accomplishments of Chinese development and food security policies.

According to one employer from a research institution, the number of graduates moving into the job market in 2013 was about 7 million. This represents the highest number ever recorded in China. However, the Chinese economy is not growing as fast as it did in previous decades, which in turn poses challenges for new graduates entering the job market. Although the Chinese government celebrated “ten years of consecutive growth” in 2014, the interviewees mentioned that the growth achieved has not generated sufficient job opportunities to meet the demands of the increasing numbers of graduates from higher agricultural education institutions. In this context, two thirds of the interviewed employers described the Chinese labour market for graduates in agriculture as increasingly competitive and tight.

According to our interviews, the fact that the agricultural sector in China is no longer yielding enough jobs can partially be attributed to the challenges that agricultural systems across the world are facing, and to the increasing competitiveness on the international markets for agricultural and food commodities. In turn, the employers explained that increasingly fierce competition is shifting the agricultural labour markets towards higher qualified labour. This poses a challenge to higher agricultural education institutions to produce a workforce that can meet the changing demands of the agricultural labour market, that has the capacity to engage in global agricultural value chains, and that can deal with issues such as the quality requirements and intellectual property rights of international high value markets.

Visible impact of international donors and support from government

When asked to compare the role of the national government and international donors in the development of the agricultural sector, the majority of the interviewees (78% of the sample) pointed out that the support of international donors for the reform and development of the Chinese agricultural sector is relatively low. In their view, government support and the special attention that successive Chinese governments gave to the reform and transformation of the sector is the main factor behind the consistent growth achieved in the Chinese agricultural sector over the past decades. Moreover, according to the interviewees, government spending on agricultural programmes has been expanding over time. The government has increasingly been implementing programmes to support farmers and domestic agricultural production; including direct subsidies, tax reductions, price support and expenditure on infrastructure, among others.

A number of reasons were also given by the employers interviewed to explain the modest contribution of international donors to the development of Chinese agriculture. Firstly, due to historical reasons related to China's socialist management model, cooperation with international donors and foreign development organizations has often been regarded with suspicion. The government is concerned that these organizations may have political motives adverse to the existing system. Secondly, the development of non-governmental organizations is a relatively recent phenomenon in China. Thirdly, although China is often still considered a developing country, the remarkable growth and economic expansion it has achieved over the last three decades makes the model of development intervention by international donors in China different from the models used by these organizations in other countries.

Supply of graduates and new positions demanded

Almost all employers in our sample agreed that there is an oversupply of agricultural graduates on the Chinese job market. In the employers' opinion, the shortage of jobs against the high supply of agriculture students on the job market is a resultant of government policies adopted since 1999. These policies aimed to expand the Chinese higher education system, partially to stimulate the economy and upgrade the labour force and tilt the economy away from low-wage manufacturing. Consequently, enrolment rates in higher agricultural education programmes increased dramatically and the number of graduates expanded creating a large pool of surplus labour in the agricultural sector.

The interviewed employers pointed out that in recent years there is a general tendency of Chinese students to become more reluctant to attend higher agricultural education institutions. Three major reasons were given for this: 1) the employment opportunities for graduates in agriculture are claimed to be low and the competition for these jobs has become stronger, 2) the disparity in payment between jobs in the agricultural

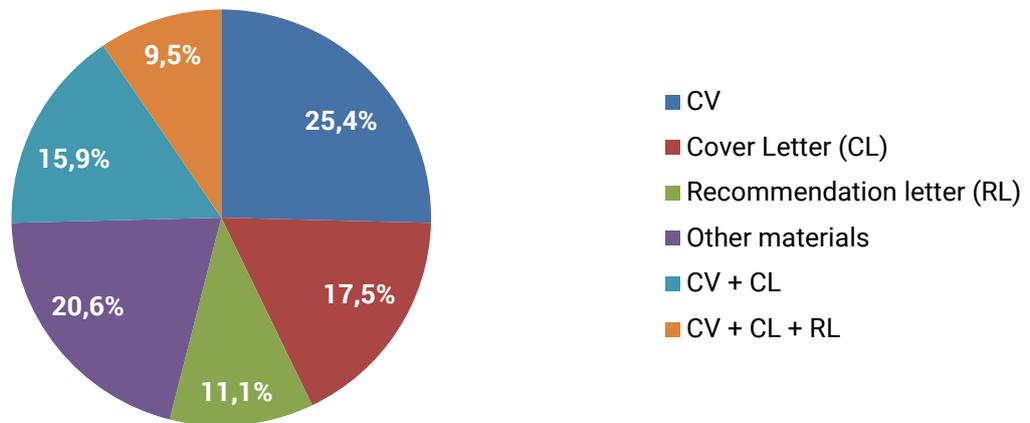
sector and industry and service jobs discourages students from majoring in agriculture related disciplines, and 3) higher agricultural institutions in China fail to gear curricula to the employers' requirements. Accordingly, the interviewed employers believe that this phenomenon will, in the medium to long run, have (positive or negative?) impacts on the supply and demand dynamics of the Chinese job market for agricultural graduates.

Recruitment process

According to 12 employers (67%), the average period for advertising a vacant position at their organizations is around one month. However, some positions, mainly in universities and research institutions, may be advertised for up to three months before they are filled. Only two interviewees had job advertisements open for up to six months. The short duration of vacancy advertisement should come as no surprise in such a vast country with an oversupply of university graduates. However, the employers in our sample added an additional reason, 'graduate job fairs'. According to the employers, these graduate job fairs represent one of the major means of recruiting university graduates in China. In a graduate job fair participating employers and recruiters meet with prospective job seekers. During the fairs, Chinese graduates can quickly connect with numerous employers, who collect their resumes and also interview them.

Figure 5 indicates the different job application materials demanded. Resume and Curriculum Vitae (CV) are regarded by the employers in our sample as the most required documents (25%). Employers usually also ask for other materials, including graduation certificates and credentials, documents proving experience gained, and civil registry documents. Employers in academic and research institutions pointed out that covering and recommendation letters (17.5% and 11%, respectively) are among the documents they often require from their job applicants. In some cases, employers ask their prospective employees to submit a combination of these documents.

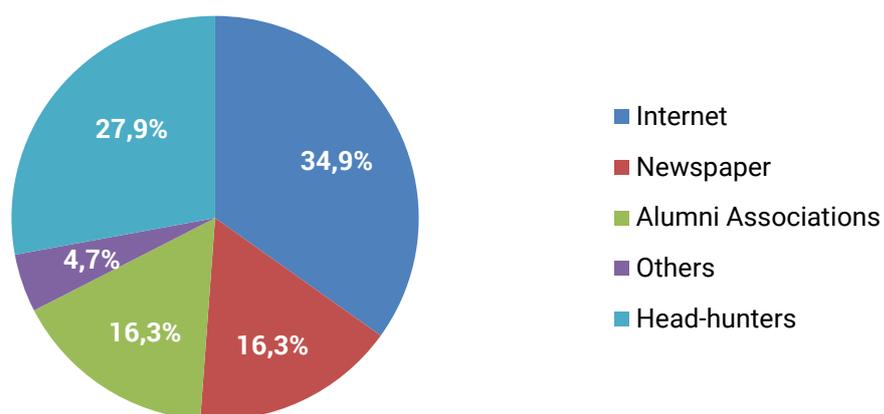
Figure 5 Required documents of the applicant



Source Online survey on alumni experience with EM programme

The survey results show that 72% of the employers constituted a jury to interview applicants. Results also indicate that constituting a jury for interviewing job candidates is more typical in the private sector than in the public sector. The employers were also asked to provide estimates of the number of responses they usually get for a single vacancy on a scale ranging from less than 5 to more than 100. Without exceptions, all employers pointed out that the number of applications they receive for a single vacancy far exceeds 100.

Figure 6 Means of posting information about job vacancies



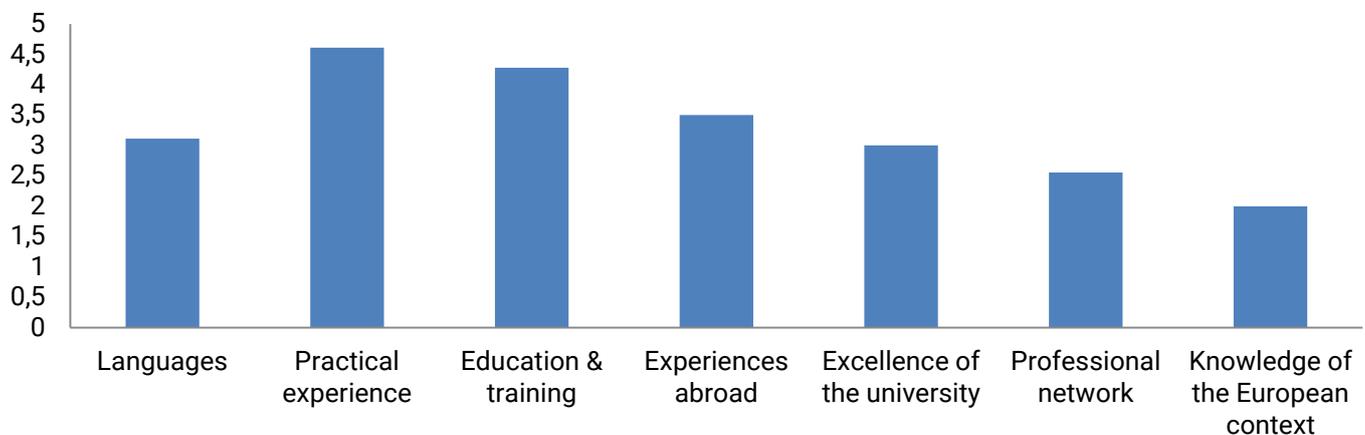
Source: Online survey on alumni experience with EM programme

Chinese employers apply multiple means for posting information about available job vacancies at their organizations. According to Figure 6, electronic means of communication, such as the internet and digital social media topped the list with about 35%. This was followed by head-hunting agencies, including the career fairs, newspapers and alumni associations with about 28%, 16.3% and 16.3% of the answers, respectively. About 78% of the employers use grids with established criteria to screen applications for jobs at their organizations.

The most important points on the candidates' background

In general, around two thirds of the employers interviewed indicated that they actively look for employees with experience abroad (Figure 7). Those employers were asked to list which foreign country graduates they prefer to employ. Graduates of American universities were the most looked for by Chinese employers (92% of employers), followed by graduates from EU universities (67%), Canada (59%), other Asian countries (25%) and finally from other European (non EU) universities (17%). Moreover, all private and 11 of the 14 public sector employers indicated they would recommend their colleagues to recruit candidates with experience in Europe.

Figure 7 The most important points on the candidate's background



The Y axis is the average score given to a certain criterion (1 less important, and 5 most important).

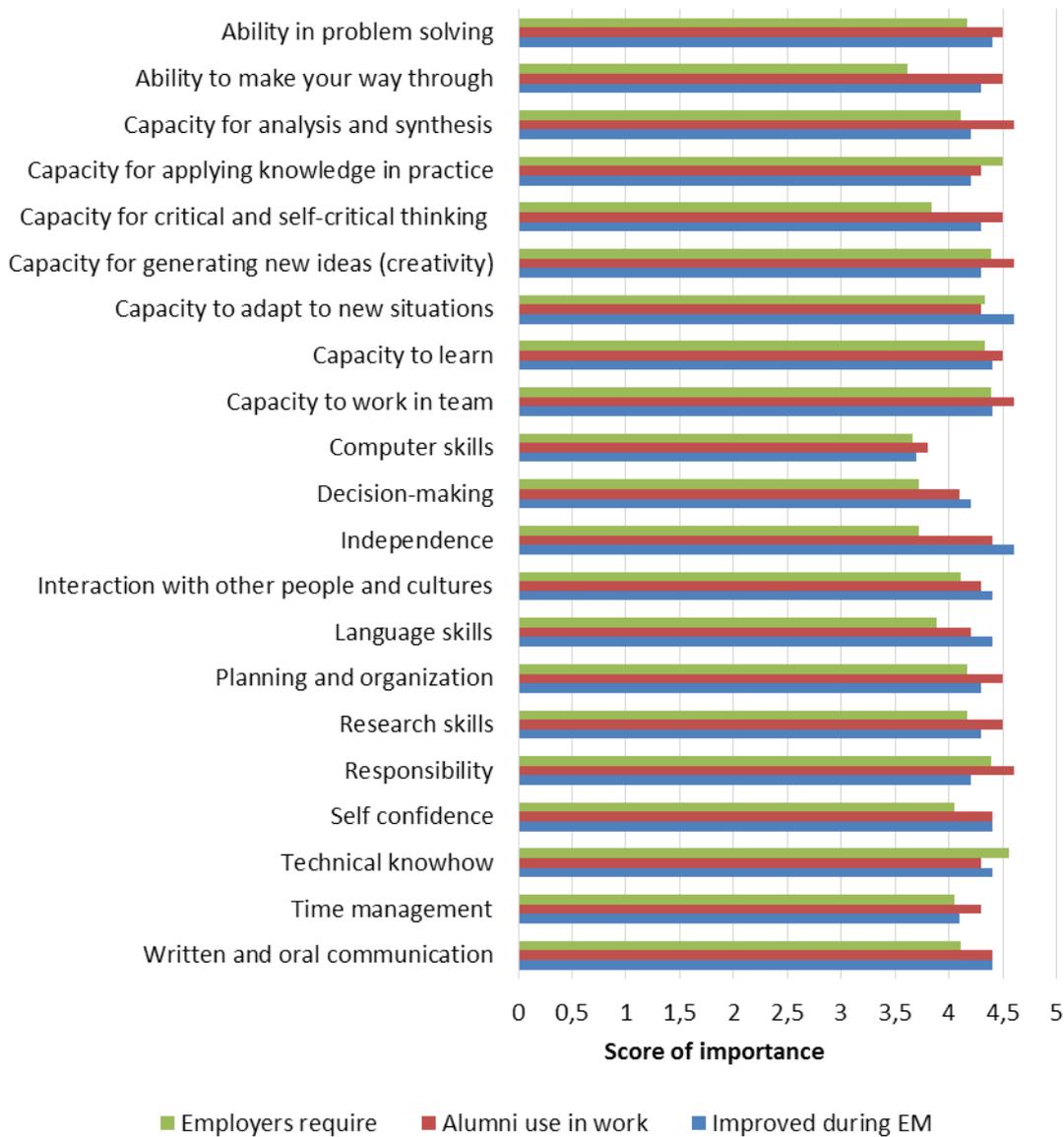
When hiring graduates, Chinese employers place more emphasis on practical experience than on education and academic credentials (Figure 7). According to a number of respondents, there is an increasing gap between academic programmes and job related requirements. Education programmes focus on theories which are not necessarily relevant or related to real-world problems. One of the interviewed employers elaborated that “our company sends fresh employees off for training and/or provide in-house training for them which costs money; therefore we value those candidates who have proven practical experience”.

Nevertheless, the employers investigated also believe that graduates of domestic higher education institutions possess advantages and specific skills that are important for the Chinese labour market. For instance, it was pointed out - by the interviewed employers (many of whom are universities) - that Chinese higher education institutions are increasingly gaining a reputation for providing quality education and becoming comparable with their overseas counterparts in some educational fields. Moreover, locally educated graduates were perceived as more knowledgeable about the domestic business environment and labour market dynamics and professional culture. Interviewees also highlighted the fact that hiring overseas educated graduates is relatively more expensive than their home-trained counterparts. Figure 5 also shows that the respondents were less concerned with a university's reputation, the candidates' professional network and their understanding of the European context. In summary, the Chinese employers interviewed prize job candidates' practical experience and specialized training as the most vital and more important than candidates' educational backgrounds. In addition, overseas experience and the knowledge of a foreign language were perceived as important assets for job seekers in the Chinese professional market for agricultural graduates.

The most important skills and competences

Based on the above identified duties and tasks, the interviewed employers were asked to rank the most important skills and competences needed to fulfil these duties and tasks. Figure 8 shows that the average scores given to each skill range from 3.6 to 4.5. This indicates that all of these skills are perceived as important and needed. In line with the results portrayed in Figure 8, technical know-how and the capacity to apply that knowledge in practice come first for employers. One employer pointed out that "technical know-how and the ability to put knowledge into practice are crucial for graduates in the Chinese labour market. Developing these skills makes a candidate stand out from the rest".

Figure 8 Importance of skills and competences



Source Online survey on alumni experience with the EM programme; Personal interviews with employers

As many jobs today involve working in one or more work groups, the employers valued the capacity of a candidate to work responsibly and cooperatively with others in the workplace. This is considered important to achieve shared goals, while showing flexibility when there are conflicting opinions. Chinese employers also appreciate employees’ creativity and their ability to come up with new ways of doing things that add value to the work environment and offer new perspectives about the job and the organization. Moreover, critical thinking skills, involving planning and organization, problem solving, evaluating a variety of solutions and selecting the best option, and the capacity to learn and adopt new solutions are valued assets for job seekers on the Chinese professional market. Furthermore, demonstrating interpersonal abilities,

communication skills, leadership and making well thought-out decisions are seen by the employers in our sample as critical skills to any workplace.

Missing skills of employment candidates

Results of our interviews with Chinese employers do not suggest that there are skills which are missing in the employment candidates. Yet many employers pointed out that graduates of higher agricultural education intuitions are not well equipped to fill the needs of the job market. One of the employers from the private sector noted that despite the large number of university graduates in China, his company sometimes faces a shortage of fresh graduates who have the skills to fill certain positions, even when candidates have the right qualifications on paper. The deficiencies that were most cited by employers were a lack of communication and interpersonal skills (including foreign language skills), a lack of entrepreneurial skills, problem-solving skills, and ability to think independently and show teamwork skills.

Advantages of EM graduates in comparison with other graduates

78% of the interviewed employers agreed that EM graduates are more likely to spend shorter times searching for jobs compared to their fellows who graduated from national programmes. Moreover, 13 employers (72%) agreed that EM programmes offer better career advancement opportunities. Ten employers (56%) assessed positively the impact of EM programmes on graduates' opportunities for employment in highly paid jobs.

Outcomes from national workshop

This section provides a summary of some testimonies of employers and alumni during the interviews and the regional workshop.

Employers' perspective

The Chinese agri-food sector is affected by global trends such as population pressure, the international market for commodities and climate change among others. In addition, the professional job market is evolving towards more efficient use of human resources rather than offering more jobs. Together, the challenges facing the agricultural sector and increasing competition in the professional job market call for a better educated agricultural workforce.

This in turn has stimulated the demand for overseas education in China which is increasingly perceived to provide students with high quality training and can therefore offer graduates more and better future career opportunities. Consequently, the number of Chinese students studying abroad has been growing significantly over the past decade and is expected to continue to grow in the coming decades. The rising numbers of Chinese overseas students is also spurred by a growing Chinese middle class.

According to Chinese employers, “education is one of the major criteria that our firm applies to select new employees”. Moreover, “overseas education and internships are important criteria for the evaluation of our job applicants”. Overseas education provides students with high quality training and equips them with important skills for the job market, such as language and communication skills, team working skills, and the ability to adapt to new environments and to work in a multicultural atmosphere. However, for private firms practical experience and skills are more important than academic credentials. According to the employers there exist many gaps between the skills that graduates of agricultural higher education institutions possess and the skills required for employment in non-academic sectors.

Nonetheless EM graduates are generally perceived as having important skills required for the job market, such as a more global prospective, and better critical thinking skills and the capacity to learn and adopt new solutions. Furthermore, EM students distinguish themselves by their interpersonal abilities and communication skills. The impact of EM programs on candidates' professional career was confirmed by the employers. “With these important skills and competences required by the current job market, EM graduates have more career options and advancement opportunities, and they also have better opportunities for employment in highly paid jobs”.

Finally it was stated that to attract more Chinese students to meet the Chinese agricultural labour market demands, “Erasmus Mundus programs should give special focus to practical skills and competences that enhance graduates’ technical know-how, ability to apply knowledge in practice and adopt new and creative solutions”.

Alumni testimonies

According to the alumni testimonies an overseas education makes them more competitive on the job market, and broadens their international network. As one of the alumni stated, “studying abroad had a positive effect on my position on the job market, especially looking at the language skills. I was employed at a research institute because of my experience abroad”.

According to alumni the private sector gives more weight to overseas education in comparison to the public sector. However, in general an education in the USA is perceived as being of a higher standard and a much better asset on the Chinese job market than a European education. The only exception are degrees from the UK. In addition, “There is a lack of information about education opportunities in the EU. In contrast, it is much easier to access such information with regard to UK and the USA”. “Many USA and UK universities actively promote their education programs in China and many of them have a Chinese website, however the EU does not promote education enough in China”.

Alumni thus propose “education exhibitions and study tours and more networking with Chinese universities and research institutions can be sound channels to promote EM programmes to Chinese students”.

Implications and Outlook

Agriculture is an important pillar of the economy of China; it accounts for a significant portion of both employment and overall economic output. The sector is developing dynamically thanks to sharply increasing demand for food products by domestic and global consumers. Successive Chinese governments have therefore given a special attention to the reform and transformation of the agricultural sector, which has contributed positively to the evolution of the agricultural sector.

The results of the interviews with eighteen Chinese employers who hired graduates of Erasmus Mundus programmes in agriculture showed that the Chinese labour market for graduates in agricultural related sciences is increasingly competitive and tight. On the one hand, the number of graduates moving into the job market has been on the rise over the last few decades, registering about 7 million in 2013, the highest number ever recorded in the country. On the other, the Chinese economy is no longer growing as fast as it did in previous decades and this in turn has posed challenges for new graduates entering the job market.

Although the Chinese government has adopted, since 1999, a policy aimed at expanding the higher education system including agriculture-related sciences, about two-thirds of the employers interviewed agreed that the agricultural growth that China has achieved in recent years has not yielded sufficient jobs to meet the demands of the growing numbers of job seekers. This may indicate that the development of the sector has driven the job market towards more efficient use of human resources (quality) rather than offering more jobs (quantity), emphasizing the skills and competences that graduates should possess in order to be able to engage in global agricultural value chains.

In terms of different aspects of the recruitment process, our sample pointed out that they use multiple means for posting information about available job vacancies at their organizations. Internet and digital social media, head-hunting agencies including career fairs, newspapers and alumni associations, respectively, are the major ones. The average period for advertising a vacant position was described by two-thirds of the employers interviewed as as short as one month. Such a relatively short advertising period was in part attributed to the fact that a major means of recruiting university graduates in China is “graduate job fairs” where prospective job seekers can be connected to numerous employers quickly, who collect their resumes and also interview them at these fairs.

With respect to job application materials, the employers revealed that a resume and CV are the most frequently required documents. Recruiters usually also ask for other materials that include graduation certificates and credentials, documents proving any experience gained, and civil registry documents. Covering and recommendation letters feature particularly among the documents which academic and

research institutions' employers often require their job applicants to provide. In relation to the interview process, the majority of the employers pointed out that they form a jury to interview applicants. Use of a jury for interviewing job candidates was found to be more typical of the private sector than of public sector employers. Most of the employers in our sample use grids with established criteria to screen applications for jobs as this method allows them to document the relative strengths and limitations of applicants more smoothly.

The experience of studying abroad was highly valued by about one-fifth of the interviewed employers. Compared to locally-educated candidates, the interviewed employers agreed that candidates with overseas experience have better opportunities to develop important attributes of a globally competent employee which recruiters value, whilst graduates of domestic higher education institutions still possess advantages and specific skills that are important for the Chinese labour market. Moreover, locally-educated candidates were perceived as more knowledgeable about the domestic business environment and labour market dynamics and culture. In addition, respondents highlighted that hiring overseas educated graduates is relatively more expensive than hiring their counterparts trained at home. On the whole, graduates of American universities were the most looked for by Chinese employers, followed by graduates of the EU universities, Canada, other Asian countries and finally from other European universities.

In particular, all private recruiters and about 79% of public sector employers in our sample indicated that they would recommend their colleagues recruit candidates with experience in Europe. Compared to their fellows who graduated from other programmes, EM graduates were viewed as more likely to spend a shorter time searching for jobs. Moreover, the employers assessed positively the impact of EM programmes on graduates' career advancement opportunities and on employment in highly paid jobs.

Meanwhile, about 43% of the interviewees placed low importance on the criterion of experience abroad, it being argued that the importance of an overseas experience depends mainly on the job vacancy for which the candidate is applying. This calls for more investigation into the extent to which overseas study attributes are articulated by graduates and understood by potential Chinese employers.

Despite the recognition of the importance of education, Chinese employers place more emphasis on practical experience, technical know-how and the capacity to apply knowledge in practice than on education and academic credentials. The employers also valued the capacity of a candidate to work responsibly and cooperatively with others at the workplace to achieve shared goals while showing flexibility when there are conflicting opinions. Moreover, they held in high regard an employee's creativity and ability to come up with new ways of doing things that add value to the work environment and offer new perspectives about the job and the organization. Furthermore, critical thinking skills were perceived by the employers as valued assets for job seekers in the Chinese professional market. Finally, demonstrating interpersonal abilities,

communication skills, leadership and making well thought out decisions are seen by the employers in our sample as critical skills in any workplace.

Above all, the interviewed employers spotlighted that there is an increasing gap between academic programmes and work requirements; education programmes focus on theories which are not necessarily relevant or related to real-world problems. This finding highlights the importance of bridging the gap between education and labour market demands in order to ensure that the graduates are equipped with the skills and competences needed for the agricultural labour market.

Recommendations for EM programmes

1. Based on the above discussed results, we recommend that to attract more Chinese students that can meet the Chinese agricultural labour market demands, EM programmes should put special focus on practical skills and competences that enhance graduates' technical know-how, the ability to apply knowledge in practice and adopt new and creative solutions. This requires a much wider conversation among EM programme coordinators, Chinese institutions of higher agricultural education and Chinese private sector employers, to look at labour market demands and how academic curricula can equip students with these skills.
2. Linked to practical skill development, more effort by EM stakeholders should be put into increasing work practice programmes for Chinese overseas students during their study periods in the EU.
3. Our results showed that Chinese employers consider work experience highly valuable when hiring new graduates. Therefore more opportunities for work practice in the EU would be positive for both employers and students, because this would lead to students becoming more attractive to the Chinese job market, and to EM programmes better meeting the high demand for students with work experience in China.
4. The findings from our alumni and employer surveys point out that many Chinese recruiters do not seem to recognize the connection between overseas experience and the professional skills a student gains from such an experience. This calls for the need to articulate overseas study experiences to ensure that these graduates are commensurately valued in the Chinese labour market.

5. EM stakeholders in association with Chinese higher education institutions should investigate the experience gained by studying abroad in relation to Chinese employers' recognition thereof and the perceived skill-sets attained. In this respect, undergraduate education could be utilized as a route by which Chinese educators can inform future recruiting managers about the advantages and benefits of overseas experience.
6. EM stakeholders could invest in increasing the capacities of offices for study abroad in Chinese institutions of higher agricultural education in order to better deliver services and assistance to students willing to study in the EU. This could also include training the personnel in these offices how to communicate to students the benefits of studying abroad on their resumes and the potential that this experience could have on enhancing their career prospects.
7. In addition, the training of the personnel of these offices should also include training on how to develop the ability of job seekers to speak about their overseas experience in terms of the transferable skills that the candidate developed during their stay abroad and how these can be applied in the workplace.
8. Furthermore, our findings suggested that a lack of information about the study opportunities in the EU is a major reason that prevents many Chinese students from applying to EM programmes in agriculture.
9. More networking efforts are therefore needed to promote EM programmes in China. Indeed, information is a determining factor for students' study destinations. To promote EM programmes among Chinese students, EM stakeholders might consider opening "EM offices" in key Chinese agricultural universities to collect market information about prospective students and Chinese agricultural labour market demands, and to provide direct outreach of EM programmes.
10. Last but equally important, legal and administrative issues including visas and work permits are also important factors that disadvantage the EU as a study destination in comparison to other providers of overseas education. EM stakeholders could also negotiate with migration authorities in EU member states to relax these administrative barriers to make EM programmes more attractive to Chinese students.

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