

Emotional Intelligence of Local and Overseas Graduates in Real Estate Industry in China

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Abstract: There is still limited research that investigates emotional intelligence in the context of the real estate sector in China, despite the rapid growth of the industry. Furthermore, there has been an exponential increase in the number of Chinese students studying overseas. Underpinned by these tendencies, this research investigates the levels of emotional intelligence of overseas and local graduates in the real estate sector in China. Data were collected using a survey of 140 employees and semi-structured interviews of four human resource managers in six Grade One state-owned real estate companies in China. The findings suggest that emotional intelligence influences the levels of interpersonal skills, represented by communication skills and teamwork behaviour. However, there is no difference in the levels of emotional intelligence between overseas and local graduates, suggesting that there are other factors that influence emotional intelligence development. Overseas graduates also seem to have greater difficulties than local graduates from elite universities to find jobs in the real estate sector. This suggests that international study experience is no longer adequate; instead, various contextualised interpersonal skills are needed to meet work demands in China. Developing emotional intelligence has been found to promote success across cultures and is a way to meet the demands of today's work environments in the real estate industry in China.

Keywords: China, Emotional intelligence, Communication skills, Teamwork behaviour, Interpersonal skills, Real estate, Overseas graduates

INTRODUCTION

The real estate industry in China is growing rapidly due to high market demands and healthy economic growth. Along with this growth, there is a need for real estate companies in China to interact with clients and stakeholders who have diverse languages and cultural backgrounds. Not only requiring a fresh influx of employees to meet workflow demands, these companies also seek to hire employees with overseas education to operate in a business environment that is becoming more and more globalised. Furthermore, in a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected, interpersonal skills also have become a major factor that determines employee success in China (Lu and Guy, 2018). Most employers expect their employees to possess many facets of interpersonal skills, such as emotional intelligence (EI) (Sunindijo and Hadikusumo, 2014), teamwork (Pant and Baroudi, 2008), integrity (Robles, 2012), problem solving (Othman, 2014), political skill (Lu and Guy, 2018) and work ethics (Robles, 2012).

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There is mounting evidence that EI is regarded as an important interpersonal skill that differentiates individual performance in the workplace and influences organisational effectiveness (Goleman, 1998). Emotional intelligence is related to a variety of interpersonal outcomes, including the ability to understand the emotions of others, cooperative behaviour, positive interpersonal relationships, effective communication and teamwork (Schutte and Loi, 2014). Sunindijo (2012) stated that EI is the foundation of interpersonal skill while Gong, Chen and Wang (2019) found that EI has a positive predictive influence on job performance and is negatively correlated with burnout.

Despite the advancement of EI research and the growth of the real estate sector in China, there is still limited research that focuses on EI in this context. In addition, there is no research that investigates the EI of overseas graduates. Filling this gap is crucial because the number of Chinese students studying overseas has increased exponentially and they are expected to have a significant influence on the development of China. Between 1978 and 2016, the number of Chinese students studying abroad increased from 860 to 544,500 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2017). This research, therefore, aims to assess the level of EI of employees and its importance in the real estate sector in China. A comparison between Chinese overseas and local graduates in terms of their levels of EI is also made.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is categorised into three sections. The first section discusses the importance of interpersonal skills and introduces the concept of EI in the context of the real estate industry. The second section describes the phenomenon of overseas university graduates, particularly those from China. The third section combines the previous two sections to identify the research gap and develop hypotheses.

Interpersonal Skills and EI

Management literature has classified managerial skills into conceptual, interpersonal and technical skills. Technical skills are important for those at the lower management levels and become less important for those at the top. Conceptual skills, on the contrary, are more important for those higher up the management ladder than those in junior management positions. However, interpersonal skills are considered important in all management levels, particularly in today's dynamic and interconnected work environment. For instance, data collected from 768 managers and executives found that effective job performance relies on interpersonal skills, such as collaboration and communication (Bedwell, 2014). Other research found that an increase in a manager's political skill, which is considered as an interpersonal competence, is associated with an exponential increase in enterprise performance (Gansen-Ammann et al., 2019).

In the real estate industry, interpersonal skills have also been identified as an important skill in many countries. Othman (2014) found that trust and honesty, oral and written communication and problem solving are the three most important skills in South Africa. Human resource managers in Poon's (2012) study explained that interpersonal skills, such as professionalism, teamwork, report writing, communication, presentation skills and client care, are crucial in the real estate and construction

industry in the UK. Sunindijo, Zou and Dainty (2017) found that interpersonal skills such as apparent sincerity and social awareness, are important for delivering positive safety outcomes in construction projects in Australia. Furthermore, Poon (2017) suggested that communication skills are crucial for graduates working in the real estate industry in Australia. There is even an expectation for graduates to possess the ability to speak a second language.

Research has shown that EI affects a variety of interpersonal outcomes, including cooperative behaviour (Makkar and Basu, 2019), high quality social relationships (Leonidou et al., 2019), effective teamwork abilities (Su and Zhang, 2015) and better communication skills (Schutte and Loi, 2014). Sunindijo (2012) stated that EI is a significant component and foundation of interpersonal skills in the construction industry. Individuals with high EI can manage relationships and resolve conflicts effectively, an important quality in today's work environment where people are expected to be more and more interconnected (Sunindijo and Hadikusumo, 2014).

EI is defined as the capacity for motivating ourselves, recognising our feelings and those of others and for managing emotions in our relationships as well as in ourselves (Goleman, 1998). It is a predictor of superior performance in various work roles (Miao, Humphrey and Qian, 2018) and research has found that emotionally intelligent people perform better than their counterparts (O'Boyle et al., 2011; Schutte and Loi, 2014).

EI has four dimensions: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness and (4) relationship management (Goleman, 2001). Self-awareness is the ability to identify one's own feelings and understand the causes of those feelings, which is the basis for assessing one's own abilities (Lee, 2018). Self-awareness is considered as a core skill in developing professional self and the ability to understand one's own experiences and feelings affects individuals' ability to understand and work with others (Blakemore and Agllias, 2019). Self-management allows individuals to regulate their emotions, while managing progress (Goleman, 1998). Individuals with high self-management capabilities are able to redirect emotions constructively, allowing them to manage pressures and stress and to think before acting, which is crucial to promoting positive relationships (Raghubir, 2018). Moreover, self-management enables individuals to hold in mind positive feelings, while inhibiting negative feelings (Sunindijo and Hadikusumo, 2014). Social awareness is associated with the awareness of others' demands, feelings and concerns, sympathising with others' emotions and understanding others' unspoken feelings (Goleman, 1998; Sharma and Singh, 2018). This ability is particularly essential to improve outcomes when interacting with others (Sunindijo and Hadikusumo, 2014). Lastly, relationship management is the culmination of the previous dimensions and is reflected by the ability to build and manage relationships with others through communicating effectively (Goleman, 1998) and inducing desirable responses in others (Sharma and Singh, 2018). Well-developed relationship management skills are essential for quality cooperation, collaboration and teamwork (Bradberry and Greaves, 2004; Raghubir, 2018).

Chinese Overseas Graduates

The number of international students has increased exponentially in the past two decades. For example, from 2012 to 2016, the number of international commencements in Australia increased by 45%. In the same period, the share of

commencing international students to all commencing students increased from 21.8% to 26.7%. International education contributed more than USD30 billion to the Australian economy in 2017, making the sector the third largest export sector in the country (Birrell and Betts, 2018).

Among international students, Chinese students are one of the largest and fastest growing groups. They are the largest group of international students in eight major countries for education, including the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, Korea and New Zealand (Li and Qi, 2019). The rapid growth of international students in Australia, for example, can be attributed to Chinese students. For example, in a higher institution in Sydney, Chinese commencers made up 72% of all international commencing students (Birrell and Betts, 2018). Given China's economic growth, it is likely that this trend will be sustained.

Due to the large number of international students from China, research has been conducted to identify factors that motivate Chinese students to study overseas. Summarising from previous research, Li and Qi (2019) identified a range of factors, including gaining prestige, quality and variety of education, intrinsic personal attraction to a different culture, social and peer pressure, social and cultural experience and English-speaking environment.

Another important motivator is the perceived importance of international learning experience for future job searches and career development. Governments around the world encourage internationalising student learning experience to foster global knowledge and skills so that their human resources are able to respond to the demands of social, economic and labour market globalisation (Mok et al., 2017). Chinese students themselves often mention that an overseas degree from a top university is beneficial for their career choice and development (Li and Qi, 2019).

Despite the popularity of overseas education among Chinese students and its perceived benefit, the variables that influence Chinese overseas graduates when seeking jobs in China depend on a range of factors, including the reputation of the higher education institution (Bodycott, 2009), individuals' personality and the labour market contexts (Cai, 2014). The employment situation for Chinese overseas graduates is complex (Melik, 2012). Sometimes there is a negative attitude towards employing these graduates and it seems that their entry-level salaries are decreasing (Cai, 2014). Hao, Wen and Welch (2016) argued that overseas graduates are disadvantaged when accessing local networks as compared to local graduates. They are required to have an awareness of the domestic situation and to build trust with local stakeholders, which can be challenging due to their living overseas for a number of years (Buckley, Clegg and Tan, 2006). In addition, many Chinese overseas graduates usually have limited work experience and are perceived to be less mature because they have been fully dependent on their parents while studying overseas (Hao, Wen and Welch, 2016).

On the contrary, overseas graduates also have advantages because they are highly valued by international organisations (HuiBo Research Institute, 2007) and some private and state-owned enterprises in China (Su and Zhang, 2015). Employers are looking for graduates from the top 500 universities in the world because they are perceived to produce high-quality graduates suitable in contemporary management environments to create economic advantage (Su and Zhang, 2015; Hao, Wen and Welch, 2016). Crossman and Clarke (2010) also suggested that international experience enhances employability because of

the acquisition of second language and soft skills, such as cultural understanding and character development. Hao, Wen and Welch (2016) stated that overseas graduates learn to adapt quickly in a new environment and are able to solve new tasks more effectively than local graduates.

One survey revealed that the majority of employers prefer international study experience during talent recruitment because of a belief that graduates with international learning experience will outperform their local counterparts (Mok et al., 2017). Li et al. (2019) suggested that Chinese organisations can promote innovation by recruiting Chinese overseas graduates and experienced returnees who have international awareness and exposure. Mok et al. (2017) argued that interpersonal skills is one of the most important skills, according to employers, in the era of globalisation and they perceive that overseas graduates are better than local graduates in this quality.

Formulation of Hypotheses

Integrating the elements of EI in the real estate sector and the popularity of overseas education among Chinese students, this research first assesses the level of EI among practitioners in the real estate sector in China due to the limited research in this area. As discussed previously, EI is considered as an important skill at work to facilitate positive interpersonal relationships with various stakeholders. Using communication skills and teamwork behaviour as proxies of interpersonal skills, this research seeks to establish the relationships between EI and interpersonal skills in the context of the Chinese real estate sector. It is hypothesised that there are positive relationships between EI and communication skills and teamwork behaviour. Furthermore, this research aims to establish differences between Chinese overseas graduates and local graduates in terms of their levels of EI and interpersonal skills. Based on the perceived benefits of international learning, it is hypothesised that Chinese overseas graduates have higher EI and interpersonal skills than their local counterparts.

RESEARCH METHODS

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were adopted in this research. In the quantitative method, a questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire has 59 items, which was categorised into four sections. The first section contains 13 demographic questions. The second section is the Emotional Intelligence Appraisal (EIA) instrument developed by Bradberry and Greaves (2004), which consists of 28 items. The EIA was designed to assess the four dimensions of EI, i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management and has been rigorously tested and validated across various industries and job positions. The remaining two sections measure the levels of communication skills and teamwork behaviour, which serve as proxies of interpersonal skills in this research. Twelve items were used to assess communication skills. The items were extracted from Robbins and Hunsaker (2008), who reviewed a large number of studies and synthesised the key components of communication skills. Teamwork behaviour was assessed by seven items, developed based on the dimensions in the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) model proposed by Stevens and Campion (1994). This model has been validated and widely used across various contexts. These two additional

sections were used to demonstrate the influence of EI on other key interpersonal skills. A 6-point Likert scale, i.e., "Never", "Rarely", "Sometimes", "Usually", "Almost always" and "Always" was used in sections two, three and four.

Pilot testing was conducted with two real estate employees in China. They were asked to ensure that the Chinese version of the instrument was clear and easy to understand and the length was appropriate. The pilot test revealed the instrument to be clear and appropriate. As suggested by the pilot study participants, the wordings in some items were revised to improve clarity. Furthermore, before commencing data collection, ethics approval was obtained from the institution's ethics committee.

Capitalising on the contacts that the researchers have in the real estate sector in China, the questionnaire was distributed to six state-owned real estate companies headquartered in Beijing, China, that agreed to participate. To ensure the reliability of the data, all the companies were chosen with similar characteristics, in that they are classified as Grade One (highest grade) real estate developers that have a range of major business activities, including quantity surveying, property development and facility management. It is also common for these companies to employ overseas graduates, which is an important criterion for this research. In total, 140 responses were collected from the six participating companies, representing a response rate of 65.34%. SPSS Statistics version 25 (IBM, New York, USA) was used to conduct the quantitative analyses.

Besides using a questionnaire to collect quantitative data, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data and enrich the interpretation of the results. The principles of triangulation underpinned the decision to collect the qualitative data. Triangulation is often used to describe research where at least two methods are used. In triangulation, results from different methods can complement each other and be used to supplement the individual results (Heale and Forbes, 2013). In the context of this research, triangulation was used to supplement and enrich the quantitative results using the qualitative results. Six human resource managers from the participating companies were invited to participate and four managers agreed to be interviewed. Since the research aims to determine the importance of EI in the real estate sector and compare the EI of local and overseas graduates, interviewing human resource managers can capture the valuable perspectives of the employers. The interviews focused on the importance of EI in this sector according to the employers and the reasoning behind and the expectations of, employing local and overseas graduates. Specifically, the following questions were asked during the interviews:

1. What kind of candidates are you looking for? Do you prefer local graduates or overseas graduates?
2. Are there different expectations for local and overseas graduates?
3. What are the interpersonal skills sought from new recruits in your company?
4. Do you consider the emotional intelligence of applicants during the recruitment process?
5. Is proficiency in English important in recruitment?
6. Do you have any suggestions for overseas graduates who are seeking employment in the Chinese real estate sector?

The interview data were analysed using the principles of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within data. A theme, which is a pattern found in the data, can range from simply describing and organising possible observations to interpreting aspects of the phenomenon. A theme can be explicit, directly observable in the data, or can be implicit, representing an aspect that underlies the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998). The stages proposed by Braun and Victoria (2006) were used to conduct the thematic analysis:

1. Data familiarisation, which involves transcribing, rereading interview data and jotting down notes and ideas inductively.
2. Generating initial codes and matching them with the data extracts.
3. Sorting the codes into potential themes. In this research, theme development was governed by the two research objectives, which is to understand the importance of EI in the real estate sector and to understand the rationale of employing local and overseas graduates.
4. Reviewing themes and subthemes to ensure their coherence and distinction.
5. Defining the themes and subthemes by determining their essence and the aspects of the data that they capture.
6. Reporting by not only describing the data but putting forward arguments related to the research objectives.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the respondents and 17% of the respondents had overseas education.

Table 1. Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variables		Frequency	%
Gender	Female	52	37
	Male	87	62
	Unknown	1	1
Age	18 to 24 years old	13	9
	25 to 29 years old	51	36
	30 to 34 years old	50	36
	35 to 39 years old	16	11
	40 to 44 years old	5	4
	45 to 49 years old	2	1
	50 to 60 years old	1	1
	Unknown	2	1

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Table 1. Continued

Demographic Variables		Frequency	%
Highest level of education	Diploma	15	11
	Bachelor	64	46
	Master	53	38
	Doctorate (PhD)	3	2
	High school	–	–
	Unknown	5	4
Overseas study experience	No	104	74
	Yes	24	17
	Unknown	12	9
Graduation year	Less than 10 years	106	76
	Greater than 10 years	22	16
	Unknown	12	9
How easy to find a job	Extremely difficult	5	4
	Moderately difficult	8	6
	Slightly difficult	60	43
	Slightly easy	54	39
	Moderately easy	7	5
	Extremely easy	6	4
Satisfaction	Extremely dissatisfied	–	–
	Moderately dissatisfied	–	–
	Slightly dissatisfied	18	13
	Slightly satisfied	88	63
	Moderately satisfied	22	16
	Extremely satisfied	12	9
Learning experience	Strongly disagree	1	1
	Disagree	2	1
	Somewhat disagree	19	14
	Somewhat agree	75	54
	Agree	28	20
	Strongly agree	15	11

(Continued on next page)

Table 1. Continued

Demographic Variables		Frequency	%
English skill	Non-user	12	9
	Limited	36	26
	Modest	40	29
	Competent	11	8
	Good	26	19
	Very good	10	7
	Expert	5	4

Note: Unknown = The respondent did not respond to the question.

Emotional Intelligence in the Real Estate Sector in China

Table 2 shows the levels of EI, communication skills and teamwork behaviour of the respondents. The level of EI was calculated based on the guidelines of the EIA instrument. The overall EI scores of the respondents range from 52 to 95 with an average score of 76.86. The average EI score of tens of thousands of respondents across industries and professions as revealed in the guidebook is 75. One sample *t*-test was used to compare the average score of this research with the score in the guidebook and found no significance difference. This is an indicator that the result reflects the general population and is valid.

Table 2. Levels of EI, Communication Skills and Teamwork Behaviours

Code	Description	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Rank	Std. Deviation
E1	Self-awareness	140	61	98	79.95	1	7.298
E2	Self-management	140	37	98	75.99	3	11.551
E3	Social awareness	140	54	100	78.41	2	8.567
E4	Relationship management	140	36	96	72.81	4	12.485
E5	Overall EI score	140	52	95	76.86	–	8.092
C1	Congruent with my message	140	3	6	4.61	1	0.862
C2	Send message clearly	140	2	6	4.47	4	0.809
C3	Eye contact	140	2	6	4.55	3	0.892
C4	Factual content	140	2	6	4.41	5	0.856
C5	Presentation	140	1	6	3.69	11	1.080
C6	Withhold judgement	140	1	6	4.28	9	1.053
C7	Do not interrupt	140	2	6	4.39	6	0.919

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Table 2. Continued

Code	Description	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Rank	Std. Deviation
C8	Ask question	140	2	6	4.30	8	0.879
C9	Tailor the feedback	140	2	6	4.20	10	0.883
C10	Give objective comments	140	1	6	4.36	7	0.915
C11	Communication with people from different cultures	140	2	6	4.41	5	1.045
C12	Communication method	140	2	6	4.59	2	0.921
T1	Manage conflicts	140	2	6	4.32	6	0.908
T2	Clarify individual task	140	1	6	4.54	2	0.917
T3	Clarify collective task	140	2	6	4.64	1	0.946
T4	Provide creative ideas to solve problems	140	2	6	4.34	5	0.935
T5	Seek the root of problem	140	2	6	4.42	4	1.025
T6	Encourage people toward same goal	140	2	6	4.46	3	0.925
T7	Give feedback to others	140	1	6	4.32	6	1.006

Note: Mean; 1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Usually; 5 = Almost Always; 6 = Always.

Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability of the communication skills and teamwork behaviour sections of the questionnaire because they were adapted from existing questionnaires. The Cronbach's alpha values are 0.876 and 0.907, respectively, much higher than the 0.7 cut-off value, which indicates that the instruments are reliable. The most frequently used communication skills were congruent messaging ($M = 4.61$), being flexible in using various communication methods (e.g., face-to-face, email or phone) ($M = 4.59$) and maintaining eye contact ($M = 4.55$). In contrast, giving a presentation ($M = 3.69$) was the skill used least frequently by the respondents. In terms of teamwork behaviours, the most frequent behaviour demonstrated by the respondents were clarifying collective tasks ($M = 4.64$) and individual tasks ($M = 4.54$). On the other hand, giving feedback ($M = 4.32$) and managing conflicts ($M = 4.32$) were the least frequent behaviours demonstrated by the respondents. It must be noted that the difference between the most frequent and least frequently used teamwork behaviour is marginal, indicating that the respondents demonstrated all behaviours relatively equally in their work.

Table 3 presents the results of the Pearson's correlation analysis between EI and communication skills and teamwork behaviour. There are significant correlations (at 0.01 level) between the overall EI score and communication skills and teamwork

behaviour. Similarly, there are significant correlations between dimensions of EI and communication skills and teamwork behaviour. This means that the higher the EI score, the more frequent the respondents exhibited a range of communication skills and teamwork behaviour. This confirms the first hypothesis, which demonstrates the influence of EI on other interpersonal skills in the real estate sector in China and confirms the role of EI as the foundation of interpersonal skills as asserted in previous studies (for example, Sunindijo, 2012). The noteworthy correlations also serve to confirm the criterion validity of the instruments to measure communication skills and teamwork behaviour.

Table 3. Correlations between Communication Skills and Dimensions of EI

Communication Skills and Teamwork Behaviour	Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Social Awareness	Relationship Management	Overall EI Score
C1 Congruent with my message	0.336**	0.552**	0.436**	0.617**	0.634**
C2 Send message clearly	0.299**	0.454**	0.447**	0.633**	0.599**
C3 Eye contact	0.273**	0.456**	0.428**	0.548**	0.555**
C4 Factual content	0.442**	0.452**	0.539**	0.540**	0.620**
C5 Presentation	0.175	0.158	0.277**	0.553**	0.385**
C6 Withhold judgement	0.346**	0.395**	0.359**	0.431**	0.488**
C7 Do not interrupt	0.396**	0.519**	0.454**	0.528**	0.607**
C8 Ask question	0.422**	0.335**	0.392**	0.475**	0.511**
C9 Tailor the feedback	0.483**	0.405**	0.423**	0.599**	0.604**
C10 Give objective comments	0.494**	0.462**	0.432**	0.521**	0.597**
C11 Different cultures	0.387**	0.420**	0.434**	0.432**	0.521**
C12 Communication method (e.g., phone)	0.246**	0.522**	0.415**	0.472**	0.534**
T1 Manage conflicts	0.406**	0.559**	0.520**	0.568**	0.657**
T2 Clarify individual task	0.426**	0.551**	0.550**	0.481**	0.630**
T3 Clarify collective task	0.382**	0.574**	0.575**	0.527**	0.654**
T4 Provide creative ideas to solve problems	0.420**	0.504**	0.494**	0.672**	0.673**

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Table 3. Continued

Communication Skills and Teamwork Behaviour	Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Social Awareness	Relationship Management	Overall EI Score
T5 Seek the root of problem	0.463**	0.521**	0.489**	0.542**	0.637**
T6 Encourage people toward the same goal	0.407**	0.542**	0.552**	0.657**	0.695**
T7 Give feedback to others	0.262**	0.391**	0.307**	0.556**	0.501**

Note: **0.01 level of significance (2-tailed).

When asked about EI and interpersonal skills, the human resource managers strongly acknowledged their importance in the real estate industry as noted in the following quotations: "EI is very important because all jobs in the real estate industry involve dealing with people", "EI is extremely important, particularly when communicating with others to solve problems towards a common goal. The higher the position, the higher the EI requirement" and "EI and interpersonal skills are definitely important. They are needed to understand the social value system in China and to operate effectively within that system".

Managing various stakeholders, such as government officials, designers, contractors and clients, is critical when working in the real estate industry. In this case, EI is needed to understand social contexts and adapt behaviour according to those contexts to achieve desirable outcomes (Sharma and Singh, 2018). Furthermore, the real estate industry is known for its conflict-laden environment (Maiti and Choi, 2018) and EI is important for negotiation and achieving compromise which maximises the interests of each party (Leonidou et al., 2019).

In addition, a human resource manager appreciates EI in the recruitment process because people with high EI can control their emotions and adapt to the new work environment by embracing the values and culture in the organisation. They can quickly adapt their behaviour when dealing with their superiors and also can manage their subordinates effectively. After successfully integrating themselves into the organisation's culture, they can then contribute more by asserting their own values and ideas that will bring positive change to further advance the organisation. This aligns with previous research which found that emotional intelligence enables individuals to adapt to environmental changes and to resolve conflict effectively when dealing with others (Darvishmotevali, Altinay and De Vita, 2018).

To summarise, EI is indeed an important skill for those working in the real estate industry because the industry demands its practitioners to interact with and manage the expectations of, various stakeholders who have differing agendas. Those with high EI are able to manage their emotions and understand the social contexts in which they operate. Capitalising on this understanding, they are able to adapt their behaviour to match the cultural and social values of those contexts. This adaptive ability allows them to effectively communicate and build relationships with others and negotiate to achieve common goals.

Comparison between Chinese Overseas and Local Graduates

Table 4 presents the result of the two-sample *t*-test, which shows the differences between overseas and local graduates regarding various factors in this research. There are four significant differences with *p*-values less than 0.05. First, the results indicate that it is easier for local graduates to find jobs in the real estate sector in China (3.59 vs 3.17; *p*-value = 0.050). This is in contrast to the literature that suggests that employers prefer overseas graduates due to their international awareness and exposure (Mok et al., 2017). Likewise, the perceived benefit of international education in career choice and development is not supported by this finding. The finding is further supported by the interviews with the human resource managers, who explained that "Overseas graduates are preferred in the design department because they have a broader view. However, we prefer to hire local graduates for the finance department or human resource department, since they have better understanding of Chinese business culture" and "We prefer to hire graduates from local elite universities, such as Beijing University and Tsinghua University, because they have good networks with their alumni. Their networks will benefit our company".

These statements suggest that local graduates are preferred by real estate companies in China, particularly because of their understanding of Chinese business culture and their alumni networks. One human resource manager also explicitly added that Chinese elite universities are better than many of the top 100 universities in the world. Yang and Welch (2012) also found that graduates from elite Chinese universities are more popular than overseas graduates due to their teaching quality and alignment with China's economic and social development needs.

Table 4. Differences between Chinese Overseas and Local Graduates

Code	Description	Local		Overseas		Sig. 2-tailed
		Mean	N	Mean	N	
G7	How easy to find a job	3.59	104	3.17	24	0.050*
G8	Job satisfaction	4.21	104	4.29	24	0.641
G9	Learning experience is valuable for work	4.24	104	4.38	24	0.523
G10	English skill	3.04	104	4.92	24	0.000**
E1	Self-awareness	79.72	104	80.79	24	0.449
E2	Self-management	76.54	104	75.54	24	0.691
E3	Social awareness	78.16	104	78.17	24	0.999
E4	Relationship management	72.48	104	74.38	24	0.494
E5	Overall EI score	76.80	104	77.29	24	0.784
C1	Congruent with my message	4.65	104	4.63	24	0.857
C2	Send message clearly	4.48	104	4.42	24	0.729
C3	Eye contact	4.57	104	4.58	24	0.935

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Table 4. Continued

Code	Description	Local		Overseas		Sig. 2-tailed
		Mean	N	Mean	N	
C4	Factual content	4.41	104	4.42	24	0.987
C5	Presentation	3.57	104	4.08	24	0.035*
C6	Withhold judgement	4.32	104	4.21	24	0.594
C7	Don't interrupt	4.39	104	4.29	24	0.656
C8	Ask question	4.30	104	4.33	24	0.864
C9	Tailor the feedback	4.17	104	4.33	24	0.420
C10	Give objective comments	4.41	104	4.13	24	0.155
C11	Communicate with people from different cultures	4.39	104	4.50	24	0.657
C12	Communication method	4.59	104	4.42	24	0.413
T1	Manage conflicts	4.38	104	4.21	24	0.385
T2	Clarify individual task	4.63	104	4.25	24	0.062
T3	Clarify collective task	4.76	104	4.29	24	0.027*
T4	Provide creative ideas to solve problems	4.34	104	4.42	24	0.699
T5	Seek the root of problem	4.53	104	4.21	24	0.159
T6	Encourage people toward same goal	4.56	104	4.21	24	0.085
T7	Give feedback to others	4.37	104	4.25	24	0.600

Note: * Significantly different at 0.05 level (2-tailed); ** Significantly different at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Second, it is understandable that overseas graduates have better English skills than local graduates (3.04 vs 4.92; p -value = 0.000). However, English proficiency may not be an essential skill in Chinese real estate companies. The interviewees mentioned that they do not expect their employees to use English, although some proficiency in English may be needed when involved in international projects. For example, one interviewee stated that "All the suppliers are from China, so there is no English requirement in the recruitment process".

Third, there is an indication that overseas graduates are more comfortable in giving presentations or public speaking than local graduates (3.57 vs 4.08; p -value = 0.035). This finding suggests that overseas graduates have higher self-confidence due to their international learning experience (Hao, Wen and Welch, 2016). Nowadays there is a need for employees to give oral presentations and perform well in public speaking. In this case, overseas graduates have more opportunities to improve their self-confidence and presentation skills during their study, which can become their competitive advantage.

Fourth, local graduates tend to clarify collective tasks more frequently than overseas graduates (4.76 vs 4.29; p -value = 0.027). This finding may be explained by the interview results, which suggest that overseas graduates are influenced

by Western-style education, making them more independent and experiencing difficulty in adapting to Chinese business culture. Li and Feng (2018) found that international learning experience may reduce Chinese students' evaluation of China's overall situation and future prospects. Furthermore, two interviewees said "For us, who have been working in this company for many years, we all know if the leader asks you to do something, you just follow his instructions, but many young overseas graduates always have their own ideas" and "Most local graduates have a set mind. We admire young people who think out of the box, but many state-owned companies don't".

Fifth, as presented in Table 4, it is important to note that there is no difference in the levels of EI and interpersonal skills between overseas and local graduates, thus the second hypothesis is rejected. This may mean that there are factors other than higher education that affect EI development in the real estate sector. This is a worthy endeavour for future research.

In addition, the interviewees were asked about the skills that need to be improved among current graduates. They responded that both overseas and local graduates lack time management skills, stress management ability and motivation. These graduates were expected to learn quickly, be hard working, adapt to the company culture and be professional. Overseas graduates usually receive better pay and were expected to have a wiser and broader view that could be translated into better performance. Hao and Welch (2012) argued that overseas graduates needed to obtain an in-depth understanding of the Chinese business environment and without this understanding, they would face re-integration issues. For local graduates, local alumni networks and past work experience in other local companies are considered to be valuable assets.

Interviewees also gave several cautionary hints for overseas graduates seeking to enter into the real estate industry in China:

1. Adapting to China's business culture is very important.
2. You should have a career plan before going aboard and relevant internship experience is a big problem if you want to return to China.
3. You not only have to look up at the stars but also have to be down to earth.

As explained by Ai and Wang (2017), cultural shock is a challenge faced by Chinese overseas returnees. It is important for them to quickly adapt and operate within the existing business culture in China. Successful integration to local culture can then open the way to slowly change local practices for building competitive advantage and contributing to the betterment of society.

In summary, these results show that there is no difference in the levels of EI between Chinese local and overseas graduates, indicating that there are other factors besides higher education that affect EI development in this context. Being independent, able to think creatively and to be confident in public speaking are qualities that differentiate overseas graduates from their local counterparts. However, they need to apply these qualities within the constraints of Chinese business culture. Understanding social contexts and managing relationships within these contexts is the key for success. It shows again that interpersonal skills, particularly EI, are important for overseas graduates and will help them adapt to and develop their careers in, the real estate industry in China. It is important to note that EI has been proven to facilitate successful work performance across cultures.

CONCLUSION

This research found that the level of EI of real estate employees in China is average, which is approximately the same as the level in the population generally, for which data were collected across professions and industries globally. Supporting the finding drawn from previous research, this research found that EI is an important quality in the Chinese real estate industry because it influences other key interpersonal skills, such as communication skills and teamwork behaviour. EI is particularly important because dealing with various stakeholders and managing their expectations are major tasks for those working in this industry.

It is interesting to note that overseas education does not seem to have any impacts on the level of EI because the survey suggests the EI of overseas graduates is no different from the EI of local graduates. As such, there may be other factors that influence the development of EI in the real estate sector in China, a topic that can be investigated in future research.

The research also found that overseas graduates seem to be better in giving presentations or in public speaking and in thinking innovatively than local graduates. They are also better in communicating in English, which is understandable due to their educational training. However, local graduates are better in clarifying collective tasks, which is probably due to their deeper understanding of local Chinese culture and their collectivistic norms. There is also a perception that it is more difficult for overseas graduates to find jobs because Chinese real estate companies prefer to employ local graduates from elite Chinese universities who have strong local networks and a deep understanding of local culture. It is important, therefore, for overseas graduates to understand the social context in China and adapt quickly to local cultures, while applying the positive qualities of their international learning within those contexts. High EI is a way to accomplish this because EI has been found to promote success across all cultures.

There are several research limitations that must be mentioned. First, quantitative data were collected from six Grade One real estate companies in China. As such, the results may not represent the entire population of the real estate sector and may not be generalisable to other contexts. However, the companies were chosen carefully to ensure that their characteristics were sufficiently similar to ensure the reliability of the results within that context. Future research could collect data from more companies in China to validate the findings. Second, qualitative data were collected from four human resource managers with the purpose of gaining insights from the perspective of the employers on the matters being investigated. More data could be collected to validate the findings. Interviews can also be conducted with top managers as opposed to human resource managers to understand the rationale in recruiting local and overseas graduates into real estate companies in China. Third, common method biases due to the use of survey and semi-structured interviews may occur although an appropriate research process has been followed to minimise its occurrence. Fourth, communication skills and teamwork behaviour were used as proxies of interpersonal skills, so they do not represent interpersonal skills comprehensively. There may also be other elements that can be used to better assess communication skills and teamwork behaviour. However, this research used instruments and items that have been previously validated to address this limitation. This research also found that the instruments are reliable and valid.

Besides expanding the research into other contexts, there are several specific recommendations for future research. First, the characteristics of the respondents may influence the results and should be investigated further. For example, the length of stay overseas and the field of study may influence the levels of EI and interpersonal skills. Second, this research found that there is no difference in the level of EI between local and overseas graduates. Finding factors that affect the EI of graduates in the real estate sector in China is a worthy endeavour due to the growth of the industry and the influence of EI on job performance. Third, collecting qualitative data from overseas and local graduates is valuable and would provide deeper understanding of the skills required and employer expectations in the real estate sector in China. Fourth, this research can be extended to other industries, such as finance, manufacturing, education and information technology, that are considered the largest employers of overseas graduates in China.

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