

Graduate Employability in a Changing World: A Critical Review of Evidence and Influencing Factors

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i12/27336>

Published Date: 30 December 2025

Abstract

The issue of graduate employability has emerged as a more challenging one recently with the trend of global economic changes, technological growth, and the growth of higher education structures increasing the strain on the new graduates. Although the past research pinpoint skills, career identity, social networks, and adaptability as key determinants of employability, the literature is still disjointed and does not have a comprehensive view of how all these factors interact in national settings. This is a synthesis of worldwide studies and studies in the region and especially in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where education to employment transition is complicated by demographic strain, culture and labour market segmentation. The paper analyses conceptual underpinnings of the employability concept, the major stakeholder views on it, systemic labour market issues and the many variables that have a complex impact on graduate work-readiness, through a structured narrative review approach. The results indicate the pivotal role of problem-based learning (PBL) to build the human and social capital, career identity, and personal adaptability. The review ends with an overview of the research priorities that need to be addressed in the future, namely the contextual effectiveness of the PBL, the culturally specific models of career identity, and the empirical research of the functioning of the social and human capital in the specifics of the UAE labour market.

Keywords: Graduate Employability, Problem-Based Learning, Career Identity, Human Capital, Personal Adaptability

Introduction

For some young people, the change from school to work is more than just a change of pace; it's a big step in life that shapes who they are, their health, and their future. But this has been a hard shift. Globalisation, changes in technology, and unpredictable job markets have made it harder for people with a lot of education to find compensated work. Graduates are entering a job market that is less secure, has fewer levels of hierarchy, and requires skills that are always changing. Against this backdrop, graduate employability has emerged as a significant worry for higher education institutions (HEIs), companies, politicians, and even the students themselves. In the past, the idea of employability was often the same as the idea of just getting a job. But modern writing is much more comprehensive. Employability now encompasses not only the capacity to secure employment but also to maintain and progress within a profession, leveraging skills such as adaptability, self-awareness, problem-solving, and lifelong learning (Jackson, 2013; Atitsogbe et al., 2019). It is also how the graduates see their chances and how ready they are to work, which is called "perceived employability" (Wittekind, Raeder & Grote, 2010).

It is important to note that employability is not the responsibility of a single individual. Employability is increasingly recognised as a consequence of the interaction among individual factors (such as career identity, human and social capital, and personal adaptability), educational activities (including problem-based learning, work-integrated learning, and co-curricular activities), and structural factors (including labour market demand, economic cycles, and cultural norms). This review aims to synthesise the literature and, more crucially, to identify the recurring elements that influence employability. At first, it makes the definition of employability and how it differs from job and career readiness clearer. It then goes into the research on post-graduates and how they get jobs, the social and structural factors that help or hurt their chances of getting a job, and how important people may help them. It starts with the main problems that graduates and systems face, and then it looks at the things that affect employability, focussing on: * human and social capital * career identity * personal adaptability * perceived employability * problem-based learning (PBL) as a way to teach. ideas regarding the job market.

The review has always kept an eye on places like the UAE and the rest of the MENA area, where the transition from school to work is especially hard because of demographic, cultural, and economic factors. The goal of this is not just to summarise past research, but to give a human-centered, big-picture view of what helps and what doesn't help graduates turn years of hard work in school into meaningful and sustainable jobs.

Work that is Related to Employability

From Having a Job to Being Able to Get A Job

In the past, employability was closely related to ideas like job security and having a career for life. Many graduates said that the "ideal" outcome would be a steady, long-term work with one firm (Ybema, van Vuuren, and van Dam, 2020). In an environment like that, getting a degree was a pretty easy way to get a job. Nevertheless, in recent decades, this paradigm has been destabilised by the rise of global competition, automation, outsourcing, and novel forms of employment (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2018; Lee and Clarke, 2019). Due to the growing fluidity and unpredictability of labour markets, researchers have shifted their focus to the more dynamic notion of employability, moving away from previously emphasised static

employment outcomes (Nghia, Anh & Kien, 2024). In higher education research, employability is often regarded as an economic output of universities and, in certain instances, serves as a metric for institutional performance (Atitsogbe et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2022).

Several scholars caution against reducing it to a mere assessment of employment rates. Employment refers to whether someone has a job or not. Employability, on the other hand, refers to the ability and willingness to find and hold a job using a mix of skills, knowledge, traits, and outside factors (Suarez-Barraza & Ramis-Pujol, 2012). This difference is quite important: a graduate can be completely employable but not currently employed (for example, because of an economic downturn), or they can be working in a job that doesn't make good use of their skills and doesn't allow for significant advancement. Career preparedness is another word that talks about whether someone has all the abilities they need to undertake a certain job at a certain time (Wallis, 2021). Herbert et al. (2020) say that both employability and work readiness are vital. Employability is the wider picture (identification, flexibility, and general skills), while job readiness is the set of tools you need to get a specific job. Both of them have an impact on how well graduates do in the job market and how well HEIs are judged for their work.

2.2 Graduates' transition into the workforce

The process of the transition between higher education and the work is not smooth and certain. According to ILO (2020), this shift cannot be called easy and the process is not reversible because initial labour market experiences may have long-term effects. The growth, or massification, of higher education was heralded as an opportunity and inclusion (Alves and Tomlinson, 2021), yet in most countries it has added to the oversupply of graduates seeking fewer than high-quality jobs (Artess et al., 2017). The unemployment rate among youths around the world has been high with some parts of the world like North Africa, and the MENA region as a whole recording and registering 29 and 25 percent of youth unemployment respectively (UNICEF, 2019). Meanwhile, labour markets themselves are also being transformed. Emerging industries and roles are becoming digitalised, automated and their business models are changing, making some outdated (PWC, 2018; Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2018). Employers are seeking graduates that can adapt swiftly, be creative in problem-solving, and work inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural. However, many studies find out that there is always a skills mismatch between what is provided by graduates and what employers demand (Osmani et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018; Uddin, 2021). According to Winterton (2019), there is a large number of overqualified but under-employed graduates: they have a degree and even higher qualifications, yet, they cannot find jobs that would make use of their skills. Graduate employability (GE) is a concept that came into being in response to these problems in part, as the realization that HE systems should not just produce knowledge of a disciplinary nature. The relevance of curriculum, work-integrated learning, and industry partnership are often research subjects of GE to enhance outcomes (Bonnard, 2020; Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019). In such locations as the UAE, other aspects such as demographic pressures, linguistic issues, and cultural requirements contribute to the complexity of this shift even further (Ashour, 2020).

How Graduates go From School to Work

The transfer from higher education to the workforce is neither seamless nor certain. The ILO (2020) says that this change isn't easy and can't be undone because early experiences in the

job market might have long-term repercussions. The expansion, or massification, of higher education was seen as a chance for opportunity and inclusiveness (Alves and Tomlinson, 2021), but in most countries it has made the problem of too many graduates looking for low-quality jobs worse (Artess et al., 2017). The young unemployment rate has remained high over the world, with North Africa and the MENA region as a whole having 29% and 25% of youth unemployed, respectively (UNICEF, 2019). At the same time, the job markets are also changing. New industries and jobs are being digital and automated, and their business models are evolving, which is making some old ones obsolete (PWC, 2018; Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2018). Employers want graduates who can quickly adapt, think outside the box when addressing problems, and work with people from different fields and cultures. But a lot of research shows that there is always a skills mismatch between what graduates have and what employers want (Osmani et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018; Uddin, 2021). Winterton (2019) says that there are a lot of graduates who are overqualified but not working: they have a degree and even higher qualifications, but they can't find jobs that use their skills. Graduate employability (GE) emerged as a notion in response to these issues, stemming from the recognition that higher education systems should not solely provide disciplinary knowledge. The significance of curriculum, work-integrated learning, and industry collaboration are frequently themes of research in GE to improve outcomes (Bonnard, 2020; Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019). In places like the UAE, demographic pressures, language problems, and cultural needs make this change even more complicated (Ashour, 2020).

The Structure and Mechanisms of Society

Employability is not merely an individual characteristic; it is also embedded throughout society structures. Cashian (2017) asserts that political, economic, and educational frameworks are interconnected, generating opportunities for graduates through a system that determines and enforces degree classifications, institutional reputation, internship placements, and professional accreditation. Education contributes to economic growth by enhancing human capital; yet, the benefits are unevenly distributed and influenced by labour market conditions (Adejumo et al., 2021). Holmes (2013) says that socioeconomic class, gender, and policy should all be taken into account, along with personal traits. Hartmann and Komljenovic (2021) critique employability strategies that prioritise addressing issues among students and universities while neglecting labour market regulation, employment practices, and macroeconomic constraints. The authors underscore that the emphasis ought to be on examining the socio-cultural context within which graduates seek to build jobs, rather than assuming that employability is solely a function of individual effort or institutional excellence (Lundgren-Resentera and Kahn, 2020).

Stakeholder Agency

The interplay between structures and agency, which enables individuals and organisations to act, reflect, and change, results in employability (Hewson, 2010). Onyx and Bullen (2000) assert that employability is a negotiated and socially created notion, influenced by the expectations, resources, and limits of students, educators, employers, and policymakers. Human capital theory (Becker, 1964) emphasises individual investments in skills and education, whereas Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration and Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2013) highlight that these investments occur within patterned contexts. This is emphasised in the literature of stakeholder perspectives, specifically Higher education institutions, employers, and students. The HEIs have to report

on how employable their students are, companies are unhappy with the skills gap they see, and students have to deal with mixed messages about how important the job market is (Pereira et al., 2020; Pham, 2021; Schull et al., 2021; Tran, 2018). Cake et al. (2021) define employability as the capacity to satisfy the expectations of all stakeholders in a workplace sustainably while achieving an ideal equilibrium between the demands and expectations of all parties concerned. All of these works of literature help us see employability as a multi-dimensional, relational, and context-dependent idea. This makes it possible to look more closely at the obstacles and circumstances that affect it.

Problems with Getting Hired After Graduate School

Even if many countries work hard to meet the need for jobs in the market, graduate employability stays the same. The research has identified several clusters of problems, including structural, institutional, and personal/perceptual issues. The increasing number of graduates does not meet the problems with the structure of global and meso-labour markets. High levels of young unemployment and underemployment (when graduates are engaged in positions that do not require or fully utilise their qualifications) continue (Artess et al., 2017; ILO, 2020). In regions such as MENA, these tendencies are particularly pronounced: little diversification, a significant dependence on the state sector, and demographic pressures collectively result in youth contending for a very small share of desirable employment (UNICEF, 2019; Ashour, 2020). If not handled well, a fast-changing job market would make these difficulties worse (Walker, 2020; WEF 2017).

Higher education often struggles to make lofty policy statements a part of everyday life in its institutions. Curriculum development may lag in aligning with industry demands, evaluation might incentivise the replication of learning, and work-integrated learning experiences exhibit significant variability (Nguyen et al., 2018; Uddin, 2021). Communication between higher education institutions and businesses is frequently fragmented, resulting in misaligned expectations on both sides (McArthur et al., 2017; Franco et al., 2019). Employability is becoming more and more important in the strategic goals of colleges and universities, however Hartmann and Komljenovic (2021) say that institutional responses may prefer reputational indicators above real transformation.

At the employer level, it is most critical to close the gap between the abilities they value, such as professionalism, teamwork, problem-solving, and communication, and what they think graduates have (Botes & Sharma, 2017; Pham et al., 2018). Employers are looking for more than just technical skills these days. They want graduates who can handle difficult work situations, take charge, and help the company reach its goals from the start (Igwe et al., 2022; Schull et al., 2021). Students have their own problems to deal with. Many people who go to college or university think that getting a degree will "ensure" them a decent job (Brown & Souto-Otero, 2018). This expectation might make people angry and disappointed as job markets become more competitive. Research indicates that although students acknowledge the importance of abilities and experiences outside the classroom, they do not consistently participate fully in co-curricular activities that foster these attributes (Tran, 2017; Nghia et al., 2020). The pressure to get good grades, not having enough money, and not knowing much about the job market can all make them less interested in developing their employability in a broader sense. In places like the UAE, other cultural and demographic considerations make things even more complicated. There are a lot of problems that come together to make a

complicated web of problems, such as youth unemployment, gender inequality, language barriers, and a preference for public sector labour (Ashour, 2020). These problems highlight the inadequacy of simplistic remedies such as "teaching more skills." We need to know more about the things that affect employability, how they work together, and how they may be improved in real-life situations in school and the job market.

Things That Affect Your Ability to Get a Job

The employability environment is intricate, although the literature identifies some important elements that consistently influence graduates' capacity to obtain and maintain significant employment. This part puts together the research you gave and other related work to explain how the elements are connected.

Human Capital

Human capital is still a key part of employability theory (Becker, 1964). In its most basic form, it means the knowledge, abilities, and credentials that people get via school and work. However, more sophisticated theories suggest numerous dimensions. Useem and Karabel (1986) and subsequently Baruch, Bell, and Grey (2005) delineate types of scholastic capital (knowledge), social capital (networks), and cultural capital (prestige and status). More recent research introduces inner-value capital (self-esteem, confidence, self-efficacy) and market-value capital (financial and career returns).

These dimensions demonstrate that human capital encompasses not only "what you know," but also "who you know," "how you perceive your abilities," and "how the market evaluates your qualifications." Graduate education can augment academic capital via discipline knowledge, while simultaneously cultivating intrinsic value capital through the enhancement of confidence, reflective capacity, and a sense of action (Baruch, 1996; Atitsogbe et al., 2019). Well-designed programs also give people chances to build their social and cultural capital through things like networks, internships, and the reputation of the institution. The literature assessment is clear: human capital is vital but not enough. Even graduates with good education may have a hard time if they don't have connections, self-confidence, or a clear idea of how to sell themselves (Osmani et al., 2019). This is where the next things come into play.

Capital Social

According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), social capital is the resources that are built into social networks, such as mentors, peers, alumni, and professional contacts, that can help in job searches and career growth. Jackson and Tomlinson (2020) emphasise that businesses frequently hire through networks and informal channels, underscoring the need of access to these networks as a vital aspect of employability. According to Santisi et al. (2018), graduates who network, do internships, or get to know people in their field tend to think they are more likely to get a job and do better in the job market. However, social capital is not fairly spread around. Students from less wealthy families, those who travel, work long hours, or have trouble with language may not have as many chances to build it. Research particular to certain regions, such as the UAE, indicates that dependence on familial networks ("wasta") can both facilitate and hinder youth, occasionally constraining their opportunities or perpetuating sectoral and gendered job trends (Ashour, 2020).

Career Identity

Another thing that keeps coming up is career identity. It shows how people see themselves in connection to work, what kind of professional they want to be, what they value, and how they envision their future (Fugate et al., 2004; McArdle et al., 2007). A solid sense of who they are as a professional helps grads figure out what they want to do, set goals, and keep going when things don't go their way.

Research indicates that students possessing a better defined career identity are generally more driven, proactive, discerning in their job search, and confident in their self-presentation to employers (London, 1983; Nazar & van der Heijden, 2012). They are also better at putting together a clear story about who they are and what they can provide by putting together different educational experiences, like PBL, internships, and extracurricular activities.

Career identity does not evolve in isolation. Family, culture, role models, and learning experiences all have a role in shaping it. Research on identity development underscores the significance of both formal and informal learning, encompassing storytelling, reflection, and engagement in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Nonetheless, there are still gaps in our understanding of how daily learning activities and work involvement influence the development of career identity (Lee et al., 2016). The most important thing to know about employability is that helping students understand and talk about their professional selves is just as vital as teaching them skills.

Being Able to Adjust to Change

Career adaptability is the idea that people use their psychosocial resources to deal with changes, problems, and new chances. Savickas and Porfeli (2012) delineate four dimensions: concern (future orientation), control (assumption of responsibility), curiosity (exploration of options), and confidence (faith in one's capacity to succeed). Research indicates that career adaptability is significantly correlated with favourable personal, academic, and professional results (Rossier, 2015; Rudolph et al., 2017). Adaptable graduates are more inclined to keep learning, adjust their plans when things change, and see problems as chances to grow instead of threats. They also say they are more likely to get a job because they think they can handle whatever the job market throws at them (Wittekind, Raeder & Grote, 2010; Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004). In volatile labour markets marked by technology advancements and non-linear career trajectories, adaptability transforms from a luxury into a requirement. Adaptability can be improved or made worse by the way you teach. Research has demonstrated that environments that promote introspection, independence, experimentation, and coping with uncertainty, like PBL or well-planned work placements, help people become more adaptable (Peng et al., 2018; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020).

Perceived Employability

Perceived employability refers to an individual's assessment of their prospects for securing and maintaining employment in either the internal or external labour market (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Wittekind, Raeder & Grote, 2010). The literature review considers perceived employability as both a consequence of educational and personal variables and a mediator that affects behaviour. Individuals who perceive themselves as employable are more inclined to pursue opportunities, submit job applications, invest in skill enhancement, and react positively to challenges (Álvarez-González et al., 2017; Ergün & Şeşen, 2021). Individuals with

low perceived employability may hesitate, withdraw, or curtail their ambitions despite possessing robust objective qualifications. Human capital, social capital, flexibility, and identity all affect how employable someone thinks they are. So do organisational support, feedback, and experiences of success. This makes it a strong way to examine how educational programs like PBL affect real-life job outcomes.

Ways of Teaching

Problem-based learning (PBL) is one of the numerous teaching methods talked about in the literature that is especially useful for getting a job. In PBL, students work in groups on difficult, often poorly defined problems that are similar to difficulties they would face in the real world (Dunlap, 2005; McGrath et al., 2006; Peng et al., 2018). Students shouldn't just sit back and take in information. They should figure out what they need to know, look for it, weigh their options, and explain their choices.

This method has a number of effects that are important for getting a job. Employers greatly prioritise problem-solving, teamwork, communication, and self-directed learning (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020; Osmani et al., 2019). It also boosts self-efficacy: as students work through and finally solve tough problems, they start to regard themselves as competent professionals (Bandura, 1997; Zhao et al., 2005). Research indicates that Project-Based Learning (PBL) can improve both actual skills and perceived employability, particularly when integrated into genuine industry-related projects (Ngoma & Dithan Ntale, 2016; Santisi et al., 2018).

PBL also works with other things: it can help students "try on" positions to form their career identity, work together with others to build social capital, and learn to be flexible by making uncertainty and learning via trial and error normal. In this way, PBL may be seen of as a tool that brings together and activates several aspects that affect employability.

Conclusion

The literature collectively indicates that employability is optimally conceptualised as a relational, multi-faceted construct. Human and social capital, professional identity, personal flexibility, perceived employability, educational methodologies such as project-based learning (PBL), and perceptions of the labour market all influence the transition of graduates from education to employment. A review-based conclusion indicates that no singular aspect is enough; rather, employability arises when learning, identity, confidence, networks, and circumstance are harmonised. This synthesis establishes a basis for more context-specific investigation—such as analysing the implications of these factors in the UAE—and for formulating interventions that recognise the human and structural realities of graduates' lives, rather than merely considering employability as an additional performance metric.

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