

Literature-evidence base: Employability

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This literature review aims to explore definitions of employability and identify the underlying assumptions rife in the literature. We further introduce holistic frameworks of employability, and address challenges with operationalisation and measuring outcomes in the UQ context.

Unpacking employability: The different definitions and measures

Rising tuition fees, heightened student expectations, slower economic growth and increasing employer demands has more than ever directed the spotlight in higher education to that of employability. The ongoing employability debate in the literature is not merely academic; the choice of operationalisation for employability decides its implementation, which is in turn interlinked with a particular set of outcome measures. These choices have an impact on the funding of institutions, consequently affecting teaching and learning practices and the allocation of support services in higher education (Harvey, 2001). For instance, when institutions in the UK bid for extra funded places on programmes of study, part of the evidence used by panels in the decision-making process is employability indicators of graduate rates. This drives the focus on ensuring as many students as possible, in the subject areas institutions are seeking to expand, acquire the ability to obtain a job. Yet across the border in Wales, the employability focus is on attribute growth, and on measuring the activities in place within institutions (HEFCW, 1999). Harvey (2001) further elaborates on the different definitions and outcomes as seen in Table W-1.

Employability as job acquisition

The first definition of employability in higher education is the traditional approach of employment as synonymous with employability and equated with the gaining and retaining of fulfilling work (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). This reduces outcome measures of employability effectiveness to measurement of graduate employment rates, and an underlying assumption that a student's employability is the result of an institution's efforts, rather than the student's own capacities to gain employment (Harvey, 2001). The opportunities higher education institutions provide for employability development is causally linked to the graduate's ability to improve 'employability' and hence get employed. This approach results in employability as being construed as an institutional achievement, responsible for equipping the student with the skills necessary for acquiring a job (Harvey, 2001).

In reality, there are a multitude of external factors that affect employment rates. Higher education institutions do provide a range of services that help develop the capabilities and mindsets required in the workforce and to navigate the recruitment process, including opportunities embedded in curriculum, or co-curricular activities and career development learning. However, the student may not take advantage of all or some of these opportunities, and there is little consideration of their experiences outside of the institution, such as extracurricular activities, career intentions and social networks (Harvey, 2001). As Purcell et al. (1999) also point out, irrespective of the opportunities afforded the student in university, graduates from different disciplinary backgrounds also tend to differ in the time they take to get a 'graduate job', and are highly dependent on economic growth in specific sectors. Additionally, the final gatekeeper of employment outcomes are the employers themselves. A range of recruitment factors affect the employment process (Harvey, 2001), which include employers' own specific preferences towards certain demographics such as age, sex, the institution attended, and subject studied (Harvey et al., 1997; Purcell et al., 1999). Thus, a student's ability to acquire a job is only partially contingent on the services provided by the institution. Given the nebulous range of factors that mediate the link between employment rates and employability-development opportunities, graduate employment rates are a superficial and ineffective measure of how institutions can directly affect employability.

Table W-1: Example of alternative operationalisations of employability

Alternative	1	2	3
Stage 1: Theoretical definition	Employability is the ability to gain and retain fulfilling work (Hillage & Pollard, 1998)	Employability is the propensity of the graduate to exhibit attributes that employers anticipate will be necessary for the future effective functioning of their organisation (Harvey, 1999)	Employability is the ability of the graduate to get a satisfying job
Stage 2: Dimensions	Nature of employment, time after graduation, income discipline	Range of attributes: teamworking, communication, risk taking, etc.	Financially rewarding, interesting, delegated responsibility
Stage 3: Indicators (examples)	Is the graduate employed? Is the employment linked to degree subject? Does it involve graduate skills? Does it have scope to be 'grown'?	Teamworking: experience of working in teams; experience of leading teams; ability to play different roles in different teams simultaneously, etc.	e.g. delegated responsibility; control over flexible working; specify direction; make strategic decisions ...
Stage 4: Selection	Is the graduate employed within six months of graduating?	Set of key attributes, which may have a discipline-specific element	Set of indicators of job satisfaction
Stage 5: Instruments	Survey of recent graduates' employment activity	Evaluation of graduates' abilities	Satisfaction survey of graduates in work
Stage 6: Decision	Simple indicator of employment	Complex set of indicators of graduates' abilities	Array of single indicators of graduate satisfaction

Employability as a set of attributes

The second definition describes employability as being primed for demonstrating, or to quickly develop, desirable attributes at the point of recruitment (Harvey, 1999). Although a common definition, over the years there has been little consensus about the notions of key 'attributes', 'skills' or whether they are interchangeable (Artess, Hooley, & Mellors-Bourne, 2017). Modern definitions conceptualise it as a set of core skills (teamwork, communication etc.) that transcend disciplinary fields, or attributes certain employers, company or sectors prefer (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011). Given the wide range of employability skills, competencies and attributes, it is reasonable to ask which of these a student – or HEI – should feasibly concentrate on acquiring and developing (Blackmore, Bulaitis, Jackman, & Tan, 2016), and given the constantly changing nature of the graduate labour market, how it would be possible to keep up with the ever-evolving skill requirements of employers. There are several other issues inherent in this skills-based approach. It assumes that even if students were aware of the desired attributes for their sector, that they can demonstrate the attributes appropriately during the job hunt and during the job itself. It also implies that

employers have a well-defined list of the attributes that are necessary for performing well in the organisation – instead of idiosyncratic preferences – and are able to objectively measure these attributes in graduates (Harvey, 2001). It is also extremely difficult to assign credit to HEI for attribute development when it cannot be differentiated between what was facilitated by the institution and what was developed out of the institution. Lastly, a fixation on prescribed skills can encourage a tick box mentality (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011), with students only focusing on ‘gaining’ particular skills rather than taking a holistic approach to developing themselves, and identifying and articulating additional learning or capability development.

Employability as a set of achievements

Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011) suggest that instead of focusing on a range of attributes and skills, we should instead define employability through the ‘graduate experience’ against values, intellectual rigour, performance and social engagement. This emphasises a holistic approach wherein the student exhibits employability if he or she can demonstrate a set of achievements relevant to that job, as a multi-faceted expression of the individual’s own experiences (Yorke, 2004). This echoes the fundamental idea that a student’s success is context-dependent; it depends on whether the student is able to demonstrate the competencies, knowledge and attributes required for successful entry into a given occupation, and the specific requirements desired by the employer. For instance, a Business Studies graduate with limited quantitative skills would make a poor candidate for a market research role in which statistical analysis is priority. He or she might however hold strongly desirable skills for a human relations position.

Thus, Knight and Yorke (2004) proposed a definition for employability which is still widely used today: “A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.” (p5). The definition distinguishes employability as a personal state of individuals, which benefits not only students but also contributes to the economy and society. Yorke’s definition also indicates that while employability-development opportunities may facilitate the acquisition of prerequisites required for employment, it is not guaranteed. Instead, employability derives from the ways in which the student learns from their experiences and is able to relate it to their work. While it acknowledges that employable individuals are more likely to gain employment, it also recognises that the acquisition of jobs is not necessarily a function of the individual’s own employability, or an indication of the quality of employability-development opportunities in higher education (Artes, Hooley, & Mellors-Bourne, 2017).

By accepting this definition, it is clear that measures of job acquisition do not suffice. Harvey (2001) suggests that an alternative measure is to audit the extent of employability-development opportunities within an institution by identifying opportunities within and outside of the curriculum. This does not aim to assess the effectiveness of the services provided, and does not solely attribute the student’s development of employability to what the institution provides. Instead of focusing on simplistic outcome measures, the employability audit provides an indication of process and a focus on where and how that process can be improved to facilitate the capacity of the graduate to function in a job. Accordingly, the UQ approach to employability is to measure students’ perceived confidence in identifying and articulating their employability development, through participation in the various curricular and extracurricular activities provided.

Models of employability-development

One of the most highly-cited models for embedding employability opportunities in the curriculum is the USEM model (Yorke, 2006). It emphasises the need to include assessment that develops the student’s efficacy and metacognition, and relate this to the development of subject understanding and professional skills that are transferable to the broader practice context. Their model proposes four interrelated components of employability as shown in the figure below:

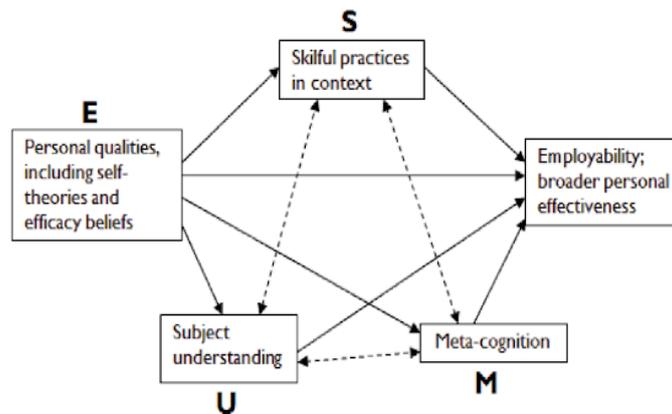


Figure W-1: USEM model of employability

CareerEDGE model

While acknowledging the significant contributions of the USEM model, Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007) note that it may not be as accessible to non-experts in the field, particularly students and parents, in clarifying exactly what employability means – or looks like. Their CareerEDGE model of Graduate Employability (see Figure W-2), seeks to address this as a useful tool for those involved in implementing employability activities and support (in and outside of curriculum). It can also be used to develop a way of evaluating employability, and has been successfully used by many HEIs to support their employability strategy and process.

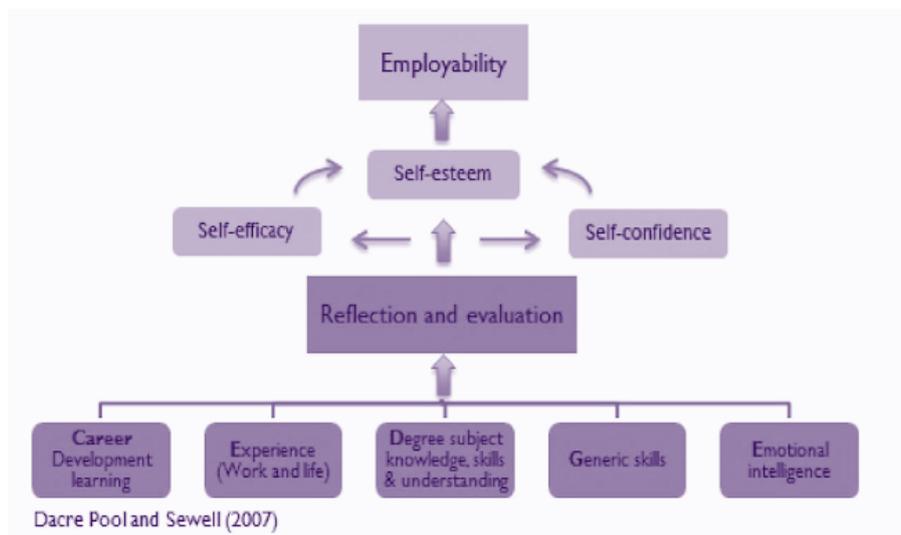


Figure W-2: CareerEDGE model of employability

The CareerEDGE model provides a means of understanding the different components of employability (such as experience and emotional intelligence), and emphasises that reflection and evaluation are necessary to transform all these components into employability (Dacre, Pool & Sewell 2007). The importance of reflection to turn any kind of experience into learning is widely acknowledged in the literature (Boud, Cohen & Walker

1993; Dewey, 1963; Kolb, 1984). This is especially important in the higher education landscape, where focus on employment outcomes has translated to services in providing students with the technical skills to navigate the recruitment process. Support with developing reflection skills, however, are lacking, which implicitly assumes that students are aware of their capabilities, understand where and how they were developed, and can not only articulate them in a resume and interview, but put them in practice in the workplace. A student exposed to the 'appropriate' employability opportunities is unable to apply it effectively without reflecting and identifying what was learnt from their experiences, and translate this learning to meet employer expectations.

Development of the UQ Employability Framework

The concept of learning from experience forms the basis of the educational theory of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), which posits that reflection on and learning of abstract concepts gained from concrete experiences, is generalized to future experiences. This is complemented by transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) theory; the process of deep and constructive learning in which learners consciously make meaning of their lives through becoming critically aware of implicit assumptions/expectations and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation (Mezirow, 2000). With The University of Queensland having a strong reputation in teaching and research, it was critical that a UQ approach to employability would align with these institutional strengths and add to the University's value proposition. Consequently the UQ Employability Framework drew on the educational theories of experiential and transformative learning to focus on the learning process of student employability development.

The UQ framework below transforms approaches to employability development by shifting the focus from acquisition of technical skills in navigating the recruitment process, to fostering ongoing personal growth and lifelong learning. This approach supports the holistic development of an individual so that they can perform effectively in a job and continue to do so throughout their career. It is a learning process through which the onus is on students to self-reflect on their engagement with a range of experiences, and come to an understanding of personal employability and the positive contributions that they can make to society.

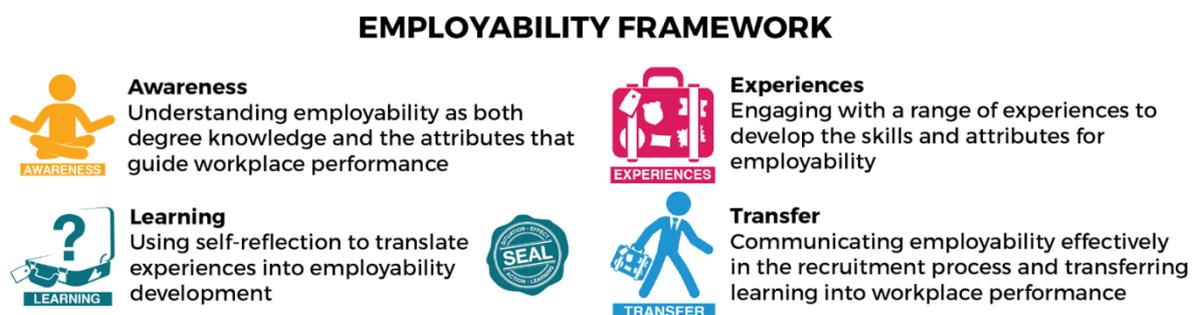


Figure W-3: UQ Employability Framework

For students to develop their employability through the experiential learning process, it is critical to ensure that reflection on experience is taking place. To this end the Employability team began an iterative process spread over three semesters, running workshops and focus groups with UQ Abroad student cohorts, to see how they conceptualised and reflected on their experiences in relating to employability. This resulted in a co-created self-reflective technique (the SEAL process of self-reflection) which steps students through the process of recognising the meaning and inherent value in their experiences as related to employability.



Figure W-4: SEAL Self-reflective process

The UQ framework, and the SEAL reflective process, enables students to learn from all experiences and understand how any experience can enhance employability. An assumption that students are employable on the grounds of provision of (curricular and extracurricular) experiences alone is not enough – this is *providing* experiences, not *assuring learning* from them (Yorke, 2004). Framing the UQ Employability approach project and resulting framework around these emergent theories in the employability space positions UQ at the cutting edge of applied research and ensures that the UQ approach to employability integrates with the existing institutional culture. The framework impacts the whole UQ community and beyond, through the MOOC, staff capacity building and embedded workshops. Current and potential interest in the framework from other Australian educational institutions has secured UQ's reputational value as a leader in employability.

Impact of global experiences on employability

Exposure to global, or international experiences, is seeing increasing uptake across institutions worldwide. In 2014 alone, more than 30,000 students from Australian universities travelled abroad to undertake study, work or community service as part of their degree (AUIDF, 2015). Participation in such programs has increased fourfold over the last 10 years and is held in high esteem. Engaging in international experiences is a key contributor to enhanced employability, with short-term programs demonstrated to have significant lasting impact on participants (McGourty, 2014) and employers worldwide likely to give extra credit in the recruitment process for international experiences. The QS Global Employer Survey Report (2011) sampled the views of more than 10,000 employers in 116 countries and found that over 80% of employers actively sought graduates who had studied abroad, with up to 44 percent of Australian learning abroad alumni reporting that their experiences were important to employers during recruitment (Potts, 2016).

Learning abroad experiences are also linked to facilitating the clarity of future career directions, with 69 percent of Australian respondents rating their international study experience as significant in increasing their career motivation and passion (Potts, 2015). Students worldwide also reported improvement in a range of skills, including interpersonal and communication skills, critical thinking, and intercultural competence (Anderson, 2015; Bracht, et al., 2006; Potts, 2014). These advantages not only benefit students, but also contribute to the enrichment of the Australian campus environment through developing openness to diversity, encouraging increased internationalisation and a cultural and economic benefit to the local community and institution.

Despite the rhetoric on the positive impact global experiences bring on multiple levels, there is a dearth of information on students' learning outcomes and how they specifically relate experiences to employability, outside of generic attributes (Nerlich, 2013). A survey of 219 Australians with an international study experience noted that they were unable to provide examples or describe the broader implications of their time overseas, even when probed with specific questions. They struggled to articulate the deeper outcomes and focused on describing concrete, comparative experiences, such as differences with food and the weather (Forsey, Broomhall, & Davis, 2012). This highlights the importance of the UQ SEAL framework in helping extract the value of their experiences and relating it to employability. Students must be equipped with the ability to reflect on their experiences and the development of achievements, to deploy it in the workplace to the benefit of the individual, community and economy.

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