



Review

Understanding Perceived Employability: A Systematic Review and Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

This study establishes the need for a robust theoretical framework to effectively evaluate the concept of employability (EC) and its related dimensions. Although diverse definitions of EC exist, a systematic review was essential to clarify its evolution, key contributors, and perceived employability determinants (PED). Using a comprehensive search across eight electronic databases (1960–2024), 45 relevant studies were analyzed through word cloud generation and thematic analysis in NVivo to identify recurring patterns and themes. Findings reveal that perceived employability arises from the interaction between individual capabilities—such as skills, motivation, and adaptability—and external enablers, including education systems, organizations, and policy frameworks. The study recommends fostering a collaborative ecosystem where individuals, universities, employers, and governments jointly build supportive pathways that strengthen employability and empower individuals to navigate the labor market with confidence.

Keywords: Employability Concept, Perceived Employability, Influential Factors, Systematic Review Thematic Analysis



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1. Introduction

Employability Concept (EC) has become a central focus in contemporary research, attracting the attention of scholars worldwide (Gazier, 1998). Over time, it has evolved into a multidimensional concept, shaped by individual capabilities, organizational practices, and broader socioeconomic factors (Kristianto, 2019; Forrier & Sels, 2003). In the 1950s and 1960s, research emphasized individuals' attitudes toward work and self-perception (Gazier, 1998; Kemp, 1970; Kroll, 1976). By the 1970s, knowledge and abilities (IKA) emerged as key components, while in the 1980s organisations took a more active role in fostering employability skills (Fugate, 2006). During the 1990s, individuals increasingly engaged in skill development through job rotation and workplace experiences, and employability continued to expand to include capacity building, Adaptation, and interactive employability (Gazier, 1998).

Despite its widespread use, employability remains a "fuzzy notion" that is inconsistently defined across studies (Gazier, 1998). Some definitions focus on obtaining employment (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007), while others highlight sustaining

and progressing in a career (Harvey, 2001). Yorke (2006) offered a comprehensive perspective, describing employability as a set of skills, achievements, and personal attributes that enable individuals to secure employment and succeed, benefiting themselves, organizations, and society. Scholars such as Bernston and Marklund (2007) and Duggal (2024) further emphasise that employability requires both the ability to obtain a job and the capacity to transition effectively between roles, drawing on personal attitudes, soft skills, technical skills, and employment-related competencies.

Despite its importance, employability is fragmented in the literature, with unclear definitions and scattered research on perceived employability (PE) and its determinants. This limits the ability of educators, employers, and policymakers to develop coherent strategies that truly enhance individuals' readiness and confidence in the labor market.

This study addresses these gaps by systematically reviewing the literature on employability, focusing on perceived employability and its influential factors. By synthesizing prior research, it clarifies conceptual ambiguities, identifies key patterns, and highlights both individual and structural determinants. The findings provide actionable insights for universities, organizations, and governments, guiding them to create supportive pathways that strengthen employability and empower individuals to navigate today's dynamic labor market with confidence.

2. Literature Review

Individual competencies, career behaviors, and psychological resources influence perceived employability. Wittekind, Raeder, and Grote (2010) found that education, job-related skills, and willingness to change jobs significantly predicted employability, whereas attitudinal readiness and opportunity awareness had a limited impact. Jackson and Wilton (2016) highlighted the role of career self-management, prior work experience, and self-efficacy, and Ergün and Şeşen (2021) and Ananthram (2024) confirmed that personal attributes such as GPA, soft skills, and adaptability outweighed contextual factors, emphasizing individual agency in employability development.

Contextual and cultural studies indicate that personal determinants often surpass environmental influences. Sabri, Charfeddine, and Bouchoucha (2021) reported that academic performance and institutional support were stronger predictors of Moroccan students' employability than generic skills, while Simiyu and Misuko (2021) found that internships and work experience were the most salient factors in Kenya, with gender differences also evident. Studies indicate that perceived employability interacts with academic environment and job market factors (Noori & Azmi, 2021). Pattanayak and Arora (2021) demonstrated that protean career attitudes and organizational support enhanced well-being through employability perceptions, highlighting the interplay between personal mindset and institutional culture. Noori and Azmi (2024) developed and validated a scale tailored to Afghan higher education students. The study suggests two sets of external and internal factors influencing perceived employability. In addition, perceived employability is influenced by productivity and contextual labor conditions (Noori & Azmi, 2021; Idehlu, Ahmed, & Noori, 2024).

Theoretical frameworks further conceptualize employability as multidimensional. Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) synthesized models such as USEM,

Career EDGE, and Fugate's framework, emphasizing knowledge, skills, attitudes, adaptability, and social capital. Liu et al. (2022) found that future orientation and problem-based learning enhance employability, with this effect moderated by proactive personality and labor market knowledge. Vanhercke, De Cuyper, and De Witte (2014) suggested a potentially reciprocal relationship between employability and well-being, advocating longitudinal research, while Frontiers et al. (2018) highlighted the mediating role of organizational learning climate in professional development.

Recent trends underscore the evolving labor market context. COVID-era studies (2022) revealed that high perceived employability supports well-being and engagement without increasing turnover. UK skills-based hiring trends (2018–2024) prioritize AI, green, and soft skills over formal qualifications, with wage implications, and Nosratabadi et al. (2022) identified AI-driven assessment tools enhancing employability management. Despite extensive research on individual and contextual determinants, few studies integrate external and internal factors simultaneously, leaving a gap in understanding the comprehensive interplay shaping employability across diverse contexts.

Recent studies show that students' perceived employability is shaped by both personal confidence and the learning environment they experience. For example, Gunawan et al. (2024) found that young people feel more employable when they believe in their own abilities and expect positive career outcomes. Similarly, Li et al. (2024) emphasize that universities that actively collaborate with industry and promote a strong academic quality culture give students clearer pathways into professional work, which boosts their confidence in finding employment. Practical training also plays an important role. Simiyu and Misuko (2024) revealed that students who participate in internships or hands-on learning tend to view themselves as more employable.

At the individual level, Ngoan (2024) shows that when people intentionally shape or “craft” their job roles, they feel more capable of managing their careers and achieving success. Meanwhile, Qostal et al. (2024) highlight the importance of soft skills such as teamwork, communication, and self-management, especially in technical fields like engineering. Together, these studies suggest that perceived employability is not only about the job market itself—confidence, real work experience, supportive institutions, and the development of practical, interpersonal skills strongly influence it.

3. Method

3.1 Search Strategy

A comprehensive and sensitive search strategy (SSS) was developed to identify relevant manuscripts published between 1960 and 2024. The following bibliographic databases were explored: University Library, SCOPUS, Business Source Elite, Educational Research Complete, Psyc INFO, Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection, Psyc Articles, Web of Science, Expanded Academic, and a repository of student theses to locate grey literature. Additional sources were identified by examining the reference lists of key papers related to PE. The SSS incorporated keywords such as “model,” “framework,” “concept,” “theory,” “holistic,” “antecedents,” and “perspective,” which were combined with the term “PE” to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic.

3.2 Selection Strategy

Broad inclusion criteria were established to ensure the capture of all relevant studies. In the initial screening phase, titles and abstracts were reviewed. If these were indicated as potentially relevant to conceptual themes (e.g., model, theory, or framework), the full text was retrieved for detailed evaluation. In cases where the abstract lacked sufficient information, the complete manuscript was also reviewed to determine eligibility.

Manuscripts were included in the review if they met the following criteria:

1. Provided a comprehensive conceptualization of PE.
2. Focused on the definition, antecedents, or influencing factors of PE.
3. Published in English.

3.3 Review Strategy

Each article meeting the inclusion criteria underwent systematic data extraction using a standardized form. This process involved identifying all components related to the conceptualization of PE, which included reviewing diagrams, lists, and tables provided by the original authors. A content analysis approach was used to organize these components into sub-categories for this review.

Component definitions were analyzed to detect conceptual overlaps, enabling the grouping of similar elements across different models. For example, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) and Bernston and Marklund (2007) both describe employability as “abilities,” while Harvey (2001) refers to it as the “propensity of the individual” to obtain work. These definitions were interpreted as reflecting a shared understanding of employability as an individual's readiness to secure and maintain employment. In addition, thematic and cloud analysis were conducted to identify the relevant themes to the main concept.

3.4 Procedure

After selecting manuscripts that satisfied the initial inclusion criteria, each was meticulously reviewed using the data extraction sheet. To ensure reliability, a substantial portion of the extracted data was independently verified by a co-author. After the systematic review process, the qualitative data were exposed to thematic and cloud analysis using NVivo Software.

4. Analysis and Results

The initial search yielded 4,073 potentially relevant records. After removing 763 duplicates, 3,310 unique records remained, of which 45 manuscripts were included, retrieved in full, and subjected to in-depth data extraction. The findings of this review are categorized into two primary dimensions. The first dimension broadly examines the evolution of the employability concept (EC) and the academic contributions shaping its development. The second dimension focuses on specific components within the EC, including employability skills (ESs), predictors, determinants, models, measurement approaches, and theoretical constructs employed in the literature.

4.1 Utmost contributions to the Employability Concept

Amidst the current literature, the subsequent key contributions (Governmental Contributions (GCs), Organizational Contributions (OCs), Higher Education Contributions (HECs), and Individual Contributions (ICs)) were identified with tremendous impacts on the evolution of the EC:

4.2 Government Contributions

In making policies for educational arenas that affect the EC, the government integrated efforts (GIE), which were considered the first set of contributions (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Across different countries, the GIE has consistently been proven through commitments to regulatory frameworks, enacted laws, and educational policies to provide an effective skills-building mechanism (Ferguson & Gilmore, 2007). The government arrangements were not bound to this scope but were geared towards boosting full-time employment in the world of work (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Ferguson & Gilmore, 2007). Hillage & Pollard (1998) claimed that governments would support those jobseekers or perhaps workers who were confronted with professional transition or abandoned from the labour market (LM) due to biases or discrimination, by developing policies conceivably to ease the entry for workers to the world of work.

4.3 Organizational Contributions

The second set of efforts to promote the EC was recorded from the OCs. Organisational External Environments (OEE) have been frequently exposed to rapid sea changes due to numerous factors, such as recruitment and dismissal policies, technological advancements, changes in the global market, customer demands, and new regulations (Van Dam, 2004). This dictated that businesses manage their policies and strategies accordingly for better total quality management, competitiveness, adaptability, and functional flexibility (Nauta et al., 2009). The exposed organizational changes due to environmental dynamism are a trigger for adapting to the skills-building orientation, which boosts the EC. Van Dam (2004) used the term "employability orientation" (EO) to delineate employers' attitudes toward prompt organizational changes and promoting flexibility through building employees' skills (ESs) and lowering turnover rates. Thus, the EO became one of the organisation's chief objectives. Awareness of job conditions, career development, job vacancies, and employment transitions was counted as an employability activity (Van Dam, 2004). It was the corporations' moral responsibility to incorporate these activities into their strategic plans, to secure the fulfilment of employees' rights on the organisations' side. Businesses had to give impetus to the moves aiming at developing employees' flexibility, adopting the EO approach, being attentive to employees' loyalty, and minimising turnover (Nauta et al, 2009). An innovative initiative emerged in the work of Eby et al (2003) using "marketability" to substitute the use of employability. They stated that employees should always be briefed about the firm's strategic plans, strategies, and procedures. This was deemed significantly essential and served as a roadmap for workers to make predictions about their career success and perceived internal and external marketability skills.

4.4 Higher Education Contributions

Education is always a top priority for recruiters when deciding on recruitment, aiming to expand the organisation vertically or horizontally. It also matters for individuals to acquire knowledge for better human resource quality. Hence, universities were enumerated as the third contributors to the EC. European Union Policies (EUP) stirred and persuaded the HEIs to concentrate on customer demand and to favor action-oriented or "market-driven" tendencies through developing the students' ESs (Prokou, 2008).

Scholars (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Bridgstock, 2009; Moreland, 2006; Yorke, 2006; and Yorke & Knight, 2003) examined the role of HECs in triggering the EC. They assumed that HECs bear an increasingly significant role in providing graduates with the desirable knowledge and skills required by the LM. This initiative would be accomplished through dedicated programs, extra-curricular activities, and internships. So the university stand was quite visible and dominating. This urged a mere necessity for the amalgamation of knowledge, personal skills, and abilities (PSA) based on employers' expectations.

4.5 Individual Contributions

The fourth group of attempts to develop the EC was recorded on the side of ICs. Individuals, both workers and job seekers, have recoded tirelessness and strive to contribute to skills development. This set of contributions was tailored with three main factors: Socio-demographic factors (SDFs) (education level, Groot & Maassen Van den Brink, 2000), personal factors (PFs) as competences and professional expertise, Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), dispositions to attain and sustain employment (openness to changes at work, Fugate & Kinicki, 2008) and the PE. Apart from external elements that fostered the evolution of EC, an inherent dimension has been unavoidable and has played a big part in the progression trend.

4.6 Inherent Elements and Adopted Theories

4.6.1 Employability skills

The ESs were one of the key driving forces to generally influence the EC, as well as the PE, as one of the inherent elements of the EC. To better outline the notion of employability and the PE, immense attention was diverted to the skills dimension of the EC. Various studies have shown that skills are the core content that nourishes the EC. Thus, the skills dimension as a factorial phenomenon remains outstanding. Many scholars (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Ferguson & Gilmore, 2007) explored the ESs, such as TSs, PSs, job-seeking skills, adaptability, etc., aiming to facilitate the ease of comprehending the EC, the PE, and pertinent elements. Table 1 demonstrates a breakdown of papers according to their contributions in identifying the ESs.

Table 1
Employability Skills reviewed in the literature

Authors	Skills identified	Authors	Skills identified
Hapidah & Mohd Sahandri, (2011)	Academic skills, connectivity skills, personality	Noraidah et al, (2009)	A soft skill, entrepreneurial skills, basic computer skills, linguistic skills,

A.K. Ziauddin & Mohammad Azim, (2016)	management skills, and exploration skills. Communication, people skills, basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, and industry-specific skills.	Pool & Sewell (2007)	communication skills, writing skills, and lifelong learning skills. Entrepreneur skills knowledge, skills, attitudes, career development job finding skills, presentation skills, job getting skills, curriculum vitae, job experience, and techniques of appearing in front of an interview panel.
	Creativity, flexibility, independent autonomy, working in a team, and communication. Problem-solving, communication, teamwork, information technology, and self- management.		
Employability Group (2004)			

Source: Authors' compilation

4.7 Conceptual Theories adopted by Researchers pertinent to perceived employability

4.7.1 Human Capital Theory

Researchers relied on theoretical concepts to support their empirical or non-empirical themes. Relevant conceptual theories legitimised authors to present a rationale for their designated titles through referencing the assumed conceptual theory. For instance, Anette Wittekind et al (2010) vindicated their assertions based on Human Capital Theory (HCT), illustrating that the effect of job-related qualifications on employability perhaps can be validated through the use of the HCT. This theory suggests that an individual's human capital refers to his/her qualifications, knowledge, skills, and experience that probably lead to an increase in earnings and work productivity (Becker, 1993; Rosen, 1987; Schultz, 1971).

4.7.2 Social Cognitive Theory

Another communal theory that has been exposed to broader use amongst the researchers was the social-cognitive theory (SCT). The idea was that a significant part of the EC involves the ability to present ESs to the world of work in an expected manner. The ability to present skills is similar to the concept of interviewing and self-efficacy (Tay Ang & Van Dyne, 2006). However, the decisive point in Bandura's (1986, 1997) SCT is an individual's beliefs about his or her capabilities to execute a specific task. This idea, however, represents the notion of the PE.

4.7.3 Social Cognitive Career Theory

The significance of career confidence and career control is reflected in the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent, 2013). Psychologically, the theory underlined the importance of individual expectations, motivations, and involvement in outlining career planning and control. While sociologically, it is asserted that opportunity is structured by external, controlling variables (Millar & Shevlin, 2007). The theory was

adopted by Denise Jackson & Michael Tomlinson (2020) as a base in their work, which supports the existence of cause-and-effect relations between career planning and the PE.

4.7.4 Social Exchange Theory

Irene Trullas et al (2017) adopted the social exchange theory (SET) to describe students' perceived organisational support (POS). POS provides insights into individuals' perceptions of the organisation's stance on facilitating strategies for skills development. The authors argued that the concept of POS is derived from the SET and has been widely used in organisational behaviour research to expound constructs such as employee performance and well-being (Kurtessis et al., 2017). More theories exemplified in the table below 2:

Table 2

Common Theories adopted by Authors

S.No	Theories	Authors
1	Social Ties and Student Learned Helplessness Theory (Seligman & Maier, 1967)	Jefferey et al (2012)
2	Social network theory, Aldrich & Zimmer (1986)	Kilduff & Brass (2010)
3	Network capital theory	Saša Batistic Alex Tymon (2017)
4	Social exchange theory	Van Dam (2005) & Benson (2006)
5	Bandura's (1998) self-efficacy theory	Solberg et al. (1998)
6	Social capital theory, Coleman (1988)	(Bozionelos, 2003; Seibert et al, (2001)
7	Appraisal theory, Lazarus & Folkman (1984)	Brownhilder Ngek Neneh (2019),
8	The theory of planned behaviour, Icek Ajzen (1942)	Yuanlu Niu, et al (2019)
9	Motivation orientation theory and Motivation Need Theory, David C M.(1917)	Laura Cortellazzo and et al (2020)
10	Conflict theory of management, Collins (1971)	Schoenfeld (2002)
11	Signaling theory (Pence, 1973)	Jean-Luc Cerdin, Yuan Liao & Kushal Sharma, (2020)
12	Career construction theory, Mark L. Savickas (1997)	(Savickas, 2005)
13	Conservation of Resources Theory, Stevan E.Hopfall (1989)	Nele De Cuyper et al,(2012)
14	Self-determination theory, Edward L.Deci (1942)	Emma L. Peasland, et al, (2019)

Source: Author's compilation

4.8 Approaches to Individual Perspectives of the Employability Concept

4.8.1 Definition and Characteristics

Apart from other perspectives around the EC, such as political, educational, organisational, and human resource management, the individual perspective merely focused on personal belief in one's own skills for employment (Rothwell, 2015). Three key approaches to the individual perspective of the EC were found in the extant literature, namely competency-based employability (CBE), trait-based employability (TBE), and PE. According to De Vos et al. (2011), the CBE often overlooks PSAs that feasibly qualify individuals for job opportunities. While the TBE approach appeals to the traits such as proactive attitudes of individuals, helping them during job research (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008). Subsequently, the PE approach focuses further on intrinsic personal factors (self-capacities, attitudes, and skills) as well as external factors (labour market and students' qualifications) that are perceived to influence the process of obtaining employment (Batistic & Tymon, 2017). However, the PE is defined as an individual's perception of his or her possibilities to attain and sustain an occupation (Vanhercke, De Cuyper, Peeters, & De Witte, 2014). Two motives convinced authors to pay extra attention to the PE: first, unlike objective reality, perceptions are crucial factors that dictate individuals to make a significant leap to portray their career roadmap (Roskies & Louis Guerin, 1990). Thus, numerous researchers wrote manuscripts on PE (Vanhercke et al., 2014). Second, contrasting other subjective interpretations of the IE, the PE was branded as more holistic due to dichotomized factors: personal (competencies, dispositions) and contextual (knowledge of jobs on the labour market) (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Vanhercke et al, 2014).

4.8.2 Characteristics of Perceived Employability

As found in the extant literature, the PE is characterised by four distinct features that distinguish it from other approaches; first, it is a "subjective evaluation" that signifies a psychological interpretation of employability. This ensures theoretical diversification. For instance, individuals with a homogeneous platform and socio-demographic profiles will conceivably perceive their employability differently (Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010).

Second, the PE has been interpreted as "possibilities" (Berntson & Marklund, 2007) which encompasses a broad conception sidelong the pertinent factors; as personal (competences) (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), structural (level of jobs, networks) (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003; Forrier & Sels, 2003; Griffith, Steel, Allen, & Bryan, 2005; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005) and organizational (support for career development) (London, 1993; Ng et al., 2005). The third characteristic referred to "obtaining and maintaining" employment, which is safeguarded by cohesive networks. This indicated that the PE is momentous for several stakeholders within the world of work and throughout the worker's career. Besides, the PE has been regarded as vigorous in three career phases of Cron & Slocum's Career Phases (1986), which are consolidation and maintenance of employment, transitions, and exploration of the LM. In an agile economy and technology dynamism, employees necessitate compatibility (Westphal, 2002). So, skills development becomes inevitable (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). This is inscribed under the consolidation and maintenance of Cron & Slocum's Career Phases (1986). Moreover, employees imaginably wish to transition to other positions. They are obliged to perceive employability for those potential positions (Berntson & Marklund, 2007; Rothwell &

Arnold, 2007; Van Dam, 2004). This is assumed for unemployed individuals as well (Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010; Westaby & Braithwaite, 2003). Transitions generally occurred between jobs, organizations, and sectors. So the PE tailored to transitions in and out of the workplace, such as maternity leave and retirement (Pronzato, 2009), which is referred to as the career phase of transitions.

The fourth characteristic of PE is “employment” possibilities, either with the current employer (on the internal labour market) or with another employer (on the external labour market). This classification is meant as perceived internal and external employability, respectively (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2010; Eby et al, 2003; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). So the PE is deemed as an integrative concept with more implications for several concerning groups in the workplace. It also takes both personal and contextual factors into account.

4.8.3 *Perceived Employability Relative Constructs*

Inspections on the PE have generated a sphere wherein other constructs are also to be investigated for cause and effects or correlations. This trend led the various constructs to be borrowed or explored based on a certain contextual field to examine the PE. In their research, Bezuidenhout & Coetzee (2010) adopted career self-management, cultural competence, self-efficacy, career resilience, sociability, entrepreneurial orientation, proactivity, and emotional literacy as constructs to examine their relations with PE. Besides, Denise Jackson et al (2017) had justified their research on Rothwell's (2008) model, where the constructs such as University reputation, the field of study (FOS), and LM were found to be influential to graduates' perceived employability (GPE). Also, knowledge, skills, and self-confidence were found to be correlated with the PE in research conducted by HA Koloba (2017). Luca Caricati (2016) also highlighted a positive effect of experience, social networks, and personal traits (PTs) on the PE. Variables such as a personal network of job seekers, their career, and knowledge about market demands, indicated the likelihood of the IE in research by Paola Magnano et al (2019). William E. Donald et al (2019) adopted social capital, cultural capital, psychological capital, scholastic capital, market value capital, career advice, and career ownership as major constructs alongside the PE. In constructing a conceptual model of their study, Oluyomi S. Pitan & Colette Muller (2019) had placed greater attention on the two significant variables (university reputation and experiential learning), which are vital in obtaining jobs. Furthermore, a massive focus on the role of variables such as competencies, environment, and dispositions in employability is noted by Dorien Vanhercke et al. (2014). Antonio et al (2017)'s model articulated supply vs. demand, university reputation, skills, and abilities as main constructs in their study to examine the PE.

Table 3
Relative Constructs of Perceived Employability

Researchers	Constructs	Items
Bezuidenhout & Coetzee, (2010)	Self-perceived employability	Career self-management, Cultural competence Self-efficacy, Career resilience, Sociability, Entrepreneurial orientation, Proactivity, Emotional literacy

Denise Jackson et al, (2017)	Perceived Employability	My belief My University My field of study is the Labour market
Luca Caricati (2016)	Perceived Employability	Perceived skills, Experience Network Personal traits Labour market

Source: Authors' compilation

4.9 Approaches Taken to Treat Perceived Employability

Researchers in general have taken altered approaches to treat PE. In their models, some of them positioned the PE as an independent variable; others considered it as dependent, and some as a moderator/mediator. A conceptual network of relations was developed by Sherine Fathy El-Fekey et al (2018) wherein perceived employability attributes (PEA) were cited as an independent variable affecting the employability gap. Core self-evaluation and university brand served as moderating variables in the model, respectively. Unlike this, the PE was seen as a dependent variable affected by personal and external factors in a conceptual model designed by Eivis Qenani et al (2014). Marilyn Clarke (2017) utilized the term graduate employability (GE), which secured the position of dependency in their model. So, human capital, social capital, and individual behaviour were assigned independent positions. Moreover, Antonio et al (2017) have structured a conceptual model wherein the university brand, demand vs. supply, skill, and ability are reflected as independent variables with a positive effect on the PE. Meanwhile, Jibao GU et al (2018) have shown a positive effect of course workload and course challenges on the PE. A supported moderating role of supervisor-student relationships, student-student relationships, and motivation was also observed in the study. The PE was found to have a moderating role affecting the relations between emotional self-efficacy and career satisfaction in the work of Kristianto Nico Ari (2019). Furthermore, Maja Curic Dražić et al (2018) set employability as a dependent variable influenced by the locus of control. The relationships were moderated by ambition. An illustration of further models is depicted below in the table:

Table 4
Approaches Taken by Researchers in Constructing Models

Researchers	Independent Variables	Dependent Variables	Mediating/moderating Variables
Sherine Fathy El-Fekey et al (2018)	Perceived Employability Attributes Career self-management Cultural competence Career resilience Proactivity Entrepreneurial orientation Sociability Self-efficacy Emotional literacy	Employability Gap	Core Self-Evaluation University Branding

Eivis Qenani et al (2014)	Individual Factors: Personal capital variables External factors: University's reputational capital The state of the external labor market	Self-perceived employability	
Marilyn Clarke,(2017)	Human Capital: Skills Competences Work Experience Social Capital: Network Social class University ranking Individual Behavior: Career Self-management Career Building Skills	Graduate Employability	
Antonio et al (2017)	University reputation Demand vs. supply Skill and ability	Self-Perceived Employability	
Jibao Gu and et al (2018)	Course workload Course challenges	Perceived Employability	Supervisor- student relationship Student– student relationship Motivation believe
Kristianto Nico Ari (2019)	Emotional Self-efficacy	Career Satisfaction	Self-perceived employability

Source: Authors' compilation

4.10 Factors Affecting Perceived Employability

As previously mentioned, the PE is a holistic concept, networked with different internal and external elements. This interaction allowed numerous factors to influence the concept. Some of the most common and recurring factors are listed in the subsequent content. Scholars have dealt with the state of the labour market (SLM), university image (UI), and field of study (FoS) as external factors that influence PE. The intrinsic dimension was not left unchecked. Several internal factors were also explored, such as self-efficacy, self-evaluation, and individual skills (ISs). In addition, the health condition of workers was also studied as an internal factor (Bernston & Marklund, 2007; Bernston, Na'swall, & Sverke, 2008; and De Cuyper, et al, 2008). Besides, communication and personal qualities were perceived to be complementary to the concept. Others, like anticipation, optimization, and corporate sense and balance, have been studied as the IFs to the PE (Van der Heijden et al, 2009). Individual tendency to adapt to a new facet of job premises and accept fresher challenges was an important asset that feeds the PE. Thus, the Adaptability skills of individuals and career development play a significant role in fostering the

PE. Organisations always attempted to be the best recruiters, looking for the best candidates to implement the right-person-for-the-right-job policy. Thus, recruiting agencies preferred to look after high-ranking sources to find the best of their choices. This initiative disclosed the prominent role of institutional reputation as the best education providers in the market. Swigon, 2016; Oluyomi S. Pitan & Colette Muller, 2019). It is justified that the role of the University's reputation and curricula in students' perceptions of employability is undeniable. Jolly (2012) also found that individuals should learn technical knowledge as well as soft skills required by potential positions. These skills should be programmed by educational institutions in extra-curricular activities methodically during the student's courses. Thus, the university image and curriculum are considered to affect the PE. However, the alignment between the job description, job specification, and job requirements is considered significant. Hence, the decision on the quality of the developed skills in the individuals was not only made by the University or the student. It should be integrated with the employer's desire to fulfill job-fit conditions. So, the selected field of study (SFS) would be based on the labour market demand. The SFS, based on the labour market demand, externally affected the PE (Rothwell et al, 2009). Besides, competition is a fundamental element in the LM. This has a profound effect on the individual perspectives who decide to occupy a new vacant position, giving them the impetus to enter the competition trend with suitably high preparation. Moreover, the perceived labour market competition (PLMC) also affected PE (Koloba, 2017). However, a rapid change in the external world of work may prompt individuals to develop ESs accordingly. Another element within the LM that affects the PE is workplace etiquette (WE). This works well with current employees who willingly tend to transition to other positions. The WE is an accumulation of ethical values that empower employees to uphold the organization's ethical norms and cope with the organizational code of conduct that helps accomplish the firm's objectives. The WE paves the path for workers to improve their behavioural talents and acquire professionalism accordingly. It fosters employees' loyalty to the organisation, which, in turn, may lead them to enjoy benefits from offers for other positions. In their study, Mukherjee and Salazar (2014) highlighted the effects of workplace etiquette on PE as significant in contexts where cross-cultural communication plays a dominant role. The study found that the globalisation era has created a platform for multiculturalism, diversification, and exclusive ethical norms in business, which have flourished in the EC. In addition, Harry T et al (2018) found significantly positive effects of social network (SN) on the PE. Students' Social contacts were found to be a driving force in the study. Generally, as per Paterson (2017), findings indicate that the PE remains a subjective concept affected by both environmental and intrinsic personal traits (IPTs).

Table 5
Summary of Factors Affecting Perceived Employability

Factors	References
Anticipation skills, Optimization, Personal Flexibility, Corporate sense, and balance.	Van der Heijden et al.,(2009)
Adaptability skills, Career Development	Fugate & Kinicki (2008)
Quality of graduate employability	Nwogu, G.A. et al (2015)
Career development supported by the organization	
University's stand, University curricula	Swigon, (2016).

Educational Institutions, Extra-curricular activities	Jolly (2012)
Employability skills needed by the market	Koloba,(2017)
Employability skills needed by the global market, Educational Institutions	(Chithra, 2013)
Technical and Soft skills, including creative thinking and leadership	Rampersad & Patel (2014)
The reputation of one's alma mater (Institutional Reputation)	University Of Sussex School Of Education (2006)
University brand, Fields of study, Self-confidence, commitment to research and participation in extra activities, University commitment, government policy, organizational strategies, mid-career workers, wider society.	Rothwell (2008)
Workplace Etiquette	Mukherjee & Salazar (2014)
Ethical Behavior	Sunitha (2014)
Higher Education, Marketable Skills	Wilton (2011)
University Reputation	Oluyomi S. Pitan & C. Muller (2019).
Perceived Labour Market Competition (PLMC)	Chou et al (2012)
University Curriculum, Student Interpersonal Relationships	Kamau (2017)
Curriculum	Jibao Gu, Di Zhao & Jianlin Wu (2018)
Students Social Networks	Harry, T et al (2018)
Environment and Intrinsic Personal Traits	Paterson (2017)
Education, organisation support for career planning, skills development, and individual tendencies to dispositions.	Anette Wittekind et al (2010)
Students' Responsibilities in involving educational and skill-building activities	(Dr. Laura Bradley (2018)
Perceived Skills, Experience Networks, Personal Traits, and Labour Market	Luca Caricati (2016)
A personal network of job seekers, their careers, and knowledge about job opportunities in the market,	Paola Magnano, et al (2019)
Social capital, Cultural capital, Psychological Capital, Scholastic capital, Market value capital, Careers advice, Career ownership	William E. Donald et al (2019)
University Reputation, Experiential Learning	Oluyomi S. P. & Colette Muller (2019)
Competences, Environment, Dispositions	Dorien Vanhercke et al (2014).
Supply vs. demand, University Reputation, skills, and abilities	Antonio et al (2017)

Source: Author's compilation

5. Thematic Analysis

5.1 Word Cloud Analysis

Word cloud analysis was conducted as an initial exploratory technique to identify the most frequently occurring terms within the qualitative dataset. This visual representation highlights key themes based on word frequency, with larger, bolder words indicating higher frequency. By generating the word cloud, the researchers were able to quickly grasp the dominant concepts, patterns, and areas of emphasis expressed by participants or within the selected textual data.

The significance of this method lies in its ability to offer an intuitive and immediate overview of the data landscape, guiding further qualitative coding and thematic analysis. In this study, the word cloud served as a foundational step to pinpoint recurrent terms, which informed the subsequent development of coding frameworks and thematic categorization in NVivo. It also helped in narrowing the focus on core concepts relevant to the research objectives.

Figure 2
Word Cloud



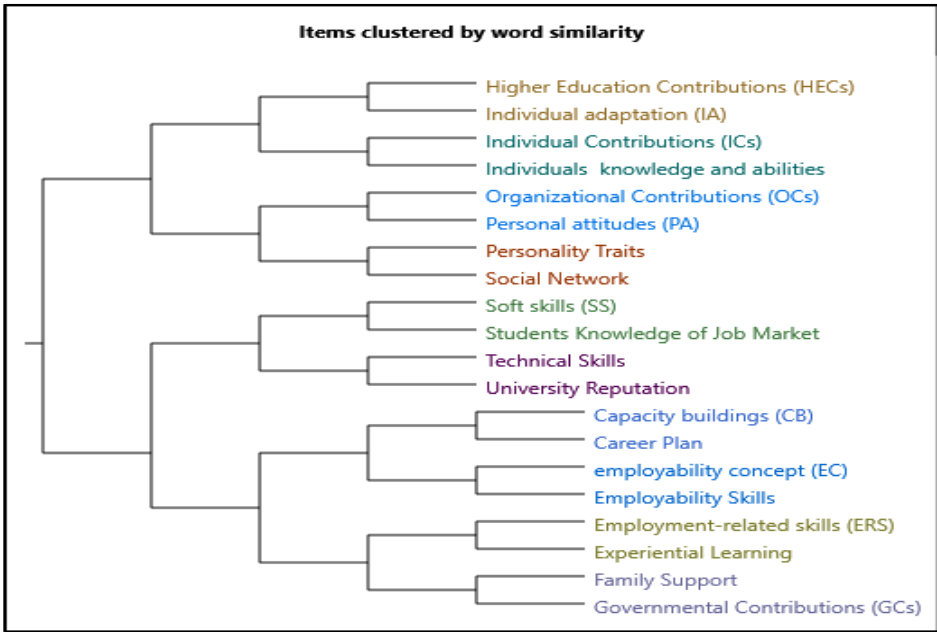
Source: NVivo illustration Word Cloud

5.2 Items Clustered by Word Similarities

Following the initial word cloud analysis, qualitative data items were further analyzed through clustering based on word similarities. This technique groups responses or text segments that share common vocabulary or linguistic patterns, allowing researchers to uncover underlying relationships between concepts. In NVivo, this process uses algorithms to assess verbal similarity and automatically categorize text items into clusters. Each cluster represents a thematic grouping, enabling the identification of common concerns, sentiments, or conceptual linkages across the dataset.

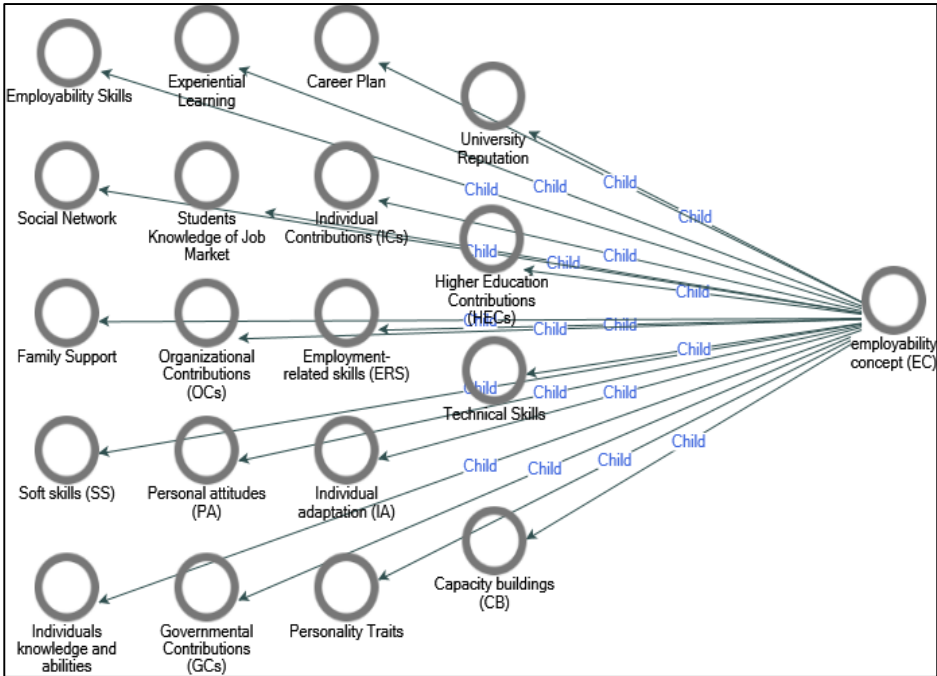
The purpose of clustering by word similarity is to support pattern recognition, streamline coding efforts, and enhance thematic clarity. It provides a data-driven foundation for constructing categories or themes, particularly in large datasets where manual sorting may be time-consuming or subjective.

Figure 2
Items Clustered by Word Similarities



Source: Nvivo output

Figure 3
Thematic Networks



Source: Nvivo Output

5.3 Interpretation of Internal and External Determinants of Perceived Employability

The dendrogram illustrating “Items clustered by word similarity” provides a clear visualization of how the components of perceived employability (PE) are conceptually interconnected. The analysis identifies two broad dimensions: internal determinants, rooted within the individual, and external determinants, shaped by institutional, organizational, and socio-environmental contexts. Together, these dimensions highlight that employability is both a personal endeavor and a shared responsibility, influenced by systemic support structures.

5.3.1 Internal Determinants

Internal determinants represent the personal capacities, attributes, and mindsets that individuals cultivate to enhance their employability. Individual Adaptation reflects one’s flexibility in responding to changing work environments, while Individual Contributions capture proactive engagement in academic and professional activities. Knowledge and Abilities encompass the intellectual and technical competencies essential for effective job performance, and Personal Attitudes—including motivation, confidence, and resilience—shape persistence and professional behavior.

Personality traits influence interpersonal interactions, leadership potential, and collaborative effectiveness, complemented by Soft Skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Awareness of the job market supports informed career decision-making, whereas Technical Skills provide the specialized expertise demanded by specific industries. A clearly defined Career Plan offers strategic direction, while understanding the Employability Concept and developing Employability Skills enhances workplace readiness. Finally, Employment-Related Skills, including CV writing, interviewing, and professional etiquette, translate learning into tangible, employable actions. Collectively, these internal factors form the human foundation of employability, nurtured through education, self-development, and reflective practice.

5.3.2 External Determinants

External determinants refer to the structural, institutional, and social elements that influence employability opportunities and outcomes. Higher Education Contributions reflect universities’ roles in equipping students with knowledge, values, and practical exposure. Organizational Contributions emphasize the importance of employer partnerships through internships, training programs, and curriculum alignment, while University Reputation enhances graduates’ perceived employability by signaling institutional quality.

Broader systemic enablers include Capacity-Building Initiatives, such as workshops and professional training, and Experiential Learning, which links theoretical knowledge to real-world application. Social and emotional support, including Family Support, provides stability and encouragement. Governmental Contributions, encompassing policy frameworks, national qualification standards, and employability programs, create an enabling environment for skill development and job creation. Finally, Social Networks highlight the relational dimension of employability, where connections with peers, mentors, and professionals offer guidance, information, and access to opportunities.

Together, internal and external determinants demonstrate that perceived employability is not solely an individual trait but a dynamic outcome shaped by personal effort, institutional support, and broader societal structures.

6. Discussion

This study shows that perceived employability (PE) is shaped by both what students bring to the table and the support they receive from their environment. The dendrogram analysis revealed two precise dimensions: internal determinants, rooted in personal skills, attitudes, and behaviors, and external determinants, shaped by institutions, organizations, and broader social contexts. Together, these dimensions highlight that employability is not just an individual effort—it is also influenced by the structures and relationships surrounding students.

6.1 Internal Determinants

Internal determinants form the foundation of employability, reflecting the personal capacities and mindsets that students actively develop. *Individual Adaptation* captures flexibility in navigating changing work environments, while *Individual Contributions* reflect proactive engagement in learning and professional activities. *Knowledge, Abilities, and Technical Skills* provide the expertise needed for effective performance, and *Personal Attitudes*—such as motivation, confidence, and resilience—help students persist through challenges.

Personality traits and *Soft Skills*, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, shape how students interact and collaborate. Awareness of the job market and having a *Career Plan* allow for informed, strategic career decisions. Understanding employability concepts and developing practical *Employability Skills*, including CV writing, interviewing, and professional etiquette, translates knowledge into tangible action. Altogether, these internal factors highlight that employability begins with the individual and is built through continuous learning, reflection, and self-development. These findings align with prior studies emphasizing the role of personal agency, adaptability, and proactive behaviors in employability (Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010; Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Ergün & Şeşen, 2021; Ananthram, 2024).

6.2 External Determinants

External determinants complement personal efforts by creating opportunities, guidance, and support. *Higher Education Contributions* show how universities equip students with knowledge and practical experiences. *Organizational Contributions*, like internships, training programs, and partnerships, help students apply their skills in real-world contexts, while *University Reputation* signals quality and can influence employer perceptions of graduates.

Systemic supports, including *Capacity-Building Initiatives* and *Experiential Learning*, bridge theory and practice, enhancing confidence and readiness. *Family Support* provides emotional encouragement, and *Governmental Contributions*, such as policies and national qualification frameworks, create an enabling environment for skill development. Finally, *Social Networks*—connections with peers, mentors, and professionals—offer guidance, opportunities, and career insights. Together, these external factors illustrate that employability thrives not only on individual effort but also on supportive environments and relationships (Sabri, Charfeddine, & Bouchoucha, 2021; Simiyu & Misuko, 2021; Pattanayak & Arora, 2021).

6.3 Interplay of Internal and External Determinants

The findings also emphasize that employability emerges from the dynamic interplay between personal abilities and environmental support. Internal determinants give students the skills, mindset, and motivation to succeed, while external determinants provide the structures, experiences, and networks that allow these capacities to flourish. This perspective aligns with multidimensional frameworks of employability, where individual agency and systemic support reinforce one another (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006; Liu et al., 2022; Vanhercke, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2014).

In short, employability is not purely a personal trait or a product of the environment—it is co-created. Students contribute effort, skills, and attitudes, while institutions, organizations, families, and policy frameworks offer the scaffolding that allows these qualities to translate into real opportunities. Recognizing this dual responsibility provides a more holistic understanding of employability and points to strategies for nurturing it effectively.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the dynamic interplay of internal and external determinants shapes perceived employability. Internal factors—including Individual Adaptation, Individual Contributions, Knowledge and Abilities, Personal Attitudes, Personality Traits, Soft Skills, Awareness of the Job Market, Technical Skills, Career Planning, Understanding of the Employability Concept, Employability Skills, and Employment-Related Skills—reflect students' personal capacities, mindset, and proactive behaviors that form the foundation of employability.

External factors—including Higher Education Contributions, Employer Contributions, University Reputation, Capacity-Building Initiatives, Experiential Learning, Family Support, Governmental Contributions, and Social Networks—provide the structures, opportunities, and relational resources that allow these personal competencies to translate into meaningful career outcomes.

The findings highlight that employability is co-created: students' skills and attitudes interact with supportive environments provided by institutions, organizations, families, and policy frameworks. Holistic approaches that integrate personal development with systemic support are essential for preparing graduates to meet evolving labor market demands. Future research should examine the interaction of these determinants over time, explore context-specific differences, and adopt longitudinal designs to capture the evolving nature of employability.

8. Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for higher education institutions, students, policymakers, and future research.

For higher education institutions, the results underscore the need to design holistic curricula that go beyond disciplinary knowledge. Programs should integrate technical expertise with soft skills, adaptability, career planning, and reflective practice to strengthen students' internal determinants of employability (Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010; Jackson & Wilton, 2016). Equally important is the promotion of experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, mentoring programs, and industry partnerships, which allow students to apply their skills in authentic, real-world contexts and reinforce the connection between individual effort and

environmental support (Simiyu & Misuko, 2021). Additionally, institutions can enhance employability perceptions by leveraging their reputation and networks, strengthening alumni connections, fostering employer relationships, and offering career services that facilitate access to social capital and professional guidance.

For students, the study highlights the value of taking a proactive approach to career development. Actively cultivating internal competencies through learning, reflection, and engagement with professional opportunities enables students to navigate complex labor market demands effectively (Ergün & Şeşen, 2021; Ananthram, 2024). At the same time, students should fully utilize external supports—such as internships, workshops, mentorship programs, and professional networks—to amplify the impact of their personal skills. Strategic career planning, including aligning personal strengths with labor market trends and sector-specific demands, further strengthens employability and enhances readiness for emerging opportunities.

Policymakers and employers also play a crucial role in shaping employability outcomes. Structural supports, including policies, national qualification frameworks, and employability programs, create enabling environments that facilitate the development and recognition of student competencies (Pattanayak & Arora, 2021). Encouraging collaboration between higher education institutions, industry, and government ensures that graduates acquire skills that are relevant and responsive to evolving labor market needs. Moreover, initiatives that support professional networks and mentorship programs help students translate internal motivation and competencies into real opportunities, bridging the gap between education and employment.

Finally, the study points to directions for future research. Scholars should examine the interaction between internal and external determinants to better understand how environmental supports may amplify or moderate the impact of personal competencies on employability outcomes. Comparative studies across countries, sectors, and cultural contexts can reveal how the relative influence of internal versus external factors varies, providing insight into context-specific strategies for employability development. Longitudinal approaches are also recommended to track how internal and external determinants jointly influence students' employment trajectories, career progression, and well-being over time.

9. Limitations

This study, while insightful, has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The findings are drawn from a specific qualitative context and may not fully represent employability perceptions across different regions, cultures, or labor markets. As local economic and institutional realities shape employability, the results should be interpreted with contextual sensitivity. The study also relied on self-reported perceptions, which may reflect personal biases or confidence levels rather than objective employability outcomes. In addition, the focus on higher education graduates limits the generalizability of results to other groups, such as vocational learners or mid-career workers.

Moreover, while key internal and external factors were identified, their relative influence and interactions were not empirically measured. Future mixed-method or longitudinal studies could explore how these factors evolve. Finally, as the research took place amid rapid technological and labor market changes, participants' views

may reflect a period of transition rather than stable conditions. Acknowledging these limitations reinforces the study's core message: employability is complex and continually shaped by both personal and systemic forces—calling for ongoing research and reflection.

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