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Interrogating theoretical and empirical approaches to employability in different global regions

Omolabake Fakunle¹  | Helen Higson²

¹Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

²Aston Business School, Aston University, Birmingham, UK

Abstract

This special issue expands the scope of a panel presentation at the Society for Research into Higher Education Annual Conference 2019 and makes two identified contributions to the field. First, drawing from existing literature, this introductory paper proposes three categorisations of employability as: outcomes approach, process approach and conceptual approaches. This moves beyond normative conceptualisation of employability from mostly the outcomes approach. The applicability of the categorisation is further enumerated by the diversity of contributions in this special issue that highlights (a) the complexity in the field and (b) the interrelatedness of the categories. Second, the special issue puts together a rarely combined collection of global perspectives on conceptualisations of employability, and insights from research on little studied groups in Western and non-Western contexts (the UK, Portugal, Australia, the Indo-Pacific Region, Germany, Kenya and Kazakhstan). The papers, therefore, illustrate the need to widen our scope of understanding employability beyond current dominant perspectives. The broadening that is required in employability discourses is further needed in view of unprecedented disruption brought on higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests the need to rethink our conceptualisations of employability amidst uncertainty and potential disruption to the future of work.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Employability is largely conceived as a measurable economic outcome for graduates and institutions. This points up both the importance of graduates as key contributors to economic development, and the role of higher education to facilitate the process of developing graduates for the labour market. At the same time, the seeming consensus regarding employability as an outcome with reference to employment or employment rates belies the complexity that surrounds the concept in the wider literature. Early on we want to point out that, related to this complexity, we acknowledge that the educational, research and service aims of higher education institutions are not limited to developing graduate employability (Agasisti et al., 2011; McCowan, 2015). The ability of higher education to contribute to employability is, however, an old debate, outside the scope of this special issue. Despite this, the tendency to regard the purpose of education as more than for its own sake, puts employability at the centre of debates on the social and economic responsibility of higher education.

As a concept, much has been written about employability. It is therefore warranted to briefly discuss key discourse on this much-debated, complex and contested concept. The edited book by Tomlinson and Holmes (2017), 'Graduate employability in context: theory, research and debate' highlighted the complex, contentious and multi-faceted nature of employability as a concept and policy. The book offers alternative ways of thinking about the problem of the graduate employability agenda within political and economic contexts. They examined the employability agenda as a strategic policy undertaken by governments in Western countries, with a growing emphasis on the economic value of graduates. They, however, cautioned that the book did not set out to proffer a particular answer to solve the employability challenge. This caveat emphasises the continuing challenge to define employability. In a similar vein, Williams et al. (2016) asserted that there is no dominant definition of employability. Their claim derives from their 'first systematic search of English Language employability literature' in which they identified 88 components from 16 conceptualisations of employability (p. 897). In contrast to Tomlinson and Holmes' (2017) focus on the employability agenda driven by political and economic dimensions, Williams et al. (2016) examined discourses around employability at an individual level. In this regard, they suggested that the literature places emphasis on three dimensions of employability; capital components, career management, and contextual components. The capital components include human capital (skills that the individual possesses that enhances economic productivity), social and cultural capital (Bourdieu's theory on how social connections convert to economic capital), and psychological capital. Drawing on the work of Luthans (2002), psychological capital is related to how employability can be enhanced by individual characteristics, such as 'confidence, hope resilience, positive self-evaluation and personality traits such as conscientiousness' (p. 890). Career management has two parts, signal management and self-management. Both aspects reiterate the importance of the ability of the individual to navigate through the world of employment, with reference to job acquisition and relevant training. Echoing other authors (e.g., Clarke, 2018; Sin & Amaral, 2016) who attest to the growing importance of employers in employability-related discourses, Williams et al. (2016), describe contextual components from the standpoint of employers who exert influence on recruitment. The dimensions of employability outlined by Williams et al. (2016) fit into competence-centred and employment-centred approaches (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014).

Williams et al. (2016), Tomlinson and Holmes (2017) and more recent work by Römgens et al. (2020) present broad representations of employability in the literature from a Western perspective. There are, however, missing narratives in these dominant discourses on employability, such as in non-Western contexts (Okolie et al., 2020). In addition, although Williams et al. (2016) express the aim not to focus on the 'superiority of a single theory in understanding employability' (p. 897), the human capital theory remains the dominant conceptualisation of employability.

Through an overview of the academic debate and literature within the last three decades, we propose three distinct, though interrelated, categorisations of employability: outcomes approach, process approach and conceptual approaches. We will thereafter highlight how the papers in this special issue reflect these approaches or

deviate from normative accounts that concentrate mainly on an individualistic and instrumental outcomes-based approach. By critically interrogating the dominant discourses in employability from, on the one hand, a Western perspective, and on the other hand, economic oriented accounts tending towards human capital, we can identify gaps and contribute to a wider understanding of employability.

Our special issue contributes to the field by firstly mapping employability discourses against three clear categories or conceptual framework. This clarifies the flow of the multidimensional aspects and debate on employability. Secondly, the proposed framework is further strengthened by its relevance and applicability to conceptual and empirical work conducted in different global contexts. The papers in this special issue, therefore, provide examples to underpin the reliability of the categories. We discuss below the interrelatedness of the categories to further highlight the complexity in the field.

1.1 | Outcomes approach

The outcomes approach is the dominant conceptualisation of employability. This approach is competence-centred and employment-centred (Clarke, 2018; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014), as it focuses on the development of individual characteristics, work-related factors, and quantitative measurement of employability using data on employment. The definition of employability within this sphere consists of, individual capability, including skills and attitudes to obtain, retain and move through employment (Cole & Tibby, 2013; Hillage & Pollard, 1998), work-readiness of graduates (Archer & Davison, 2008), response of policy makers to industry requirements (Clarke & Lunt, 2014), and external factors, such as conditions of the labour market (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). A key aspect of the outcomes approach relates to the collection of quantitative data on employment as evidence of employability. For example, in the UK, since the mid-2000s, the Higher Education Statistics Agency has collected The Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) six months after graduation from UK institutions (this changed to the Graduate Outcomes survey collected from Leavers 15 months after graduation from 2017/18). This approach posits the DLHE data as a measure of employability, based on employment rates. This coheres with policy, for example, the Dearing report in the UK in 1997, which explicitly stated the role of higher education to enhance graduate employability skills, and ultimately, employment rates. The approach, however, fails to account for factors that could impinge the recruitment process (Harvey, 2001a), such as labour market conditions (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005) and socioeconomic barriers of those from disadvantaged backgrounds, which, as Moreau and Leathwood (2006) argued underpin inequalities of access to employment. This brings to the fore, a criticism of the outcomes approach, as many researchers argue that there is a tenuous link between employability and employment or employment rates (Bridgstock, 2009; Brown et al., 2003; Harvey, 2001a; Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017; Woodley & Brennan, 2000). Several authors, including Brown et al. (2003) have stressed the need to reconsider the dominant economic positioning of employability as a measurable outcome. It should be pointed out that the criticism of the outcomes approach is not intended to undermine the importance of students' expectation to seek and secure suitable graduate employment. The point here is that a causal link between employability and employment is problematic when it is solely understood through the outcomes. Furthermore, the outcomes approach largely ignores what Harvey (2001) describes as a practical approach that 'audits' the employability development opportunities (EDOs) offered to students at the institution, which is examined next.

1.2 | Process approach

The process approach is conceived taking into account the employability strategy at the institutional level. This approach relates to the observation by Clarke (2018) that 'current conceptualisations [of employability] do not adequately articulate the role of higher education institutions versus the role of the individual in developing the skills

and attributes' (p. 1924). The process approach encompasses the employability initiatives that are afforded within an institution. These initiatives are implicitly or explicitly embedded in programmes and through the Careers Service. Examples include work experience opportunities, skills-development opportunities embedded in the curriculum, including group work, presentation, and career-oriented activities, such as mock interviews and writing CVs. The process approach differs from Holmes' (2013) notion of employability as processual, that focusses on the individual (skills, attributes and identity). By contrast, it aligns with what Harvey (2001a) describes as an 'employability audit', that is an assessment of the effectiveness of the EDOs offered to students at the institution (p. 106). Harvey (2001a), however, cautioned that an employability audit should not be seen as a simplistic output measure, but an indication of a process and an assessment of where and how that process can be improved. A pilot audit conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) in 1999 provides an example of the process approach in practice. The HEFCW conducted an employability audit of EDOs offered by all Welsh institutions (see Harvey, 2001b).

Consistent with the extant literature, a lack of a common definition for employability was a key issue across the Welsh institutions. There were also inconsistencies in terminology, for example, placements, could mean optional or compulsory part of a course or lasting a few days to 12 weeks. The employability audit prompted an assessment of the impact of employability provisions and the alignment of strategic aims and actions (Harvey, 2001b). The assessment of institutional initiatives and ensuing action to enhance EDOs alludes to the importance of a process approach to assess the student experience. As will be discussed later, recent research reported in this SI illustrates the importance of the process approach to examine consistencies and divergences in EDOs across programmes in a single institution, and in several institutions across different countries.

1.3 | Conceptual approaches

Conceptual approaches to examine employability encompass a range of theoretical frameworks. Dominant conceptualisations of employability, as has been discussed, are underpinned by human capital theory which emphasises the importance of education to develop a skilled and productive workforce for economic growth (Becker, 1975).

Based on their argument that employability as a notion has been subject to little conceptual examination, Brown et al. (2003) proposed the positional conflict theory. Their theoretical framework is premised on the 'duality of employability' (p. 107) that comprise the absolute and relative dimensions of employability. The 'absolute' dimension of employability includes the skills and capabilities needed to get a job. The 'relative' dimension of employability depends on other factors, such as labour market conditions and cultural and social capital.

A more recent conceptualisation of employability through the theoretical lens of critical realism (Cashian, 2017) has been described as 'an original and potentially very insightful way of understanding employability' (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 29). This point was reiterated by Kahn (2017) who alluded to the importance of critical realist perspectives in research in higher education. Critical realism offers a theoretical lens to interrogate the complex interplay of agency and the surrounding social structures and dominant causal accounts of employability (Cashian, 2017).

McGrath et al. (2017) provide a different conceptual lens of looking at the agency-structure dimension of employability. Citing the narrowness of the human capital theory, they raise the need for a 'capability-employability' account that focuses on individual agency. Importantly, they focused on migrants studying in England, whom they described as 'a group that is marginal to the mainstream discourse' on employability (p. 239). This chimes with the focus in this special issue of interrogating different dimensions of employability from diverse perspectives, including marginalised groups.

1.4 | The interconnectedness of the three approaches

The three approaches to employability above each contain variations and common aspects. As has been discussed (1.3), scholars have differing conceptual approaches to examining employability. This underpins a categorisation (conceptual approaches) that encapsulates emerging development in the field and the critical interrogation of existing dominant conceptualisation of employability from the human capital perspective.

Demonstrating the importance of underlying theoretical construct, the human capital theory, as a dominant conceptual approach, underpins the economic instrumentality and individuality inherent in the outcomes approach.

The process approach highlights the importance of systems and structures within higher education. This explains how structural affordances or constraints may impact the agentic capability of students with reference to their ability to access or to engage in EDOs in the institution. This fits with the conceptual theorisation of agency/structure framework from a critical realist perspective (Cashian, 2017), and the capability-employability account (McGrath et al., 2017). Mapping the distinction as well and interconnectedness of the conceptual and outcomes or process approach contributes to understanding employability and provides conceptual clarity.

1.5 | Relating the three approaches to the special issue

Employability discourses point to a growing interest from diverse perspectives. Within the last four years, researchers have reviewed different theoretical and empirical conceptualisations of employability in different global contexts including the UK, Australia and the USA (Blackmore et al., 2016; Clarke, 2018; Guilbert et al., 2016; Potts, 2018; Römgens et al., 2020; Suleman, 2018; Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017). The lack of unanimity on a commonly accepted conceptualisation of employability is not necessarily problematic. Rather, this highlights the complexity in the field and continuing review of employability in higher education discourses can be considered as evidence of robust and critical debate and development of the studies in the field. As Tomlinson (2017) puts it, 'the debate of HEI's in boosting graduate employability...will continue for some time' (p. 13). It also shows the importance of context and the challenge of existing paradigms.

The papers in this special issue contribute to a reflective and critical examination of the idea of employability from diverse countries and perspectives. The papers reflect the three approaches enumerated above. First, the special issue includes two conceptual papers from authors in Portugal, the UK and Switzerland (Fatema, Kahn and Resenterra). Second, the outcomes approach is evident in the theoretical paper by a German Scholar (Behle) and the empirical papers by authors located in Kenya and the UK (Arakawa et al.), Kazakhstan (Jonbekova et al.) and Australia (Tran and Do). The paper by Fakunle, another author located in the UK, adopts the process approach.

It is not surprising that the outcomes approach is dominant in many papers in the special issue. At the same time, two observations are worth noting (1) as we posit in this paper, there is a need for the review of employability to broaden beyond the dominant contextualisation of employability from a Western perspective. Despite the framing from human capital outcomes approach, the papers that look at under-studied country contexts (Kenya and Kazakhstan) and people (such as international students) contribute to our understanding. (2) We can tease out nuances in the complex nature of employability and commonalities and differences in methodological and conceptual approaches across different countries and disciplinary contexts. The interrelatedness of the 3 approaches is embodied in the example of the Australian New Colombo Project reported in Tran and Do's paper. Their paper reveals how the process approach (employability-related initiatives put in place at the national level by the Government) can be linked to the outcomes approach (expected career outcomes) directly related to human capital development (as the underpinning conceptual construct). Fakunle's research, however, adopts a process approach (institutional context) that involved a critical examination of EDOs for international students during their

study in a UK higher education institution. Her paper identifies the 'policy void' in intersecting employability and internationalisation policy, and its impact on international student employability.

The papers report empirical research conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the authors have highlighted how their work raises important points to be considered towards broadening understandings of employability amidst uncertain current and future education and work scenarios.

2 | PAPERS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The papers provide insights on issues in employability-related discourses from conceptual perspectives and empirical studies conducted in different continents and across disciplines. Aligning with the conceptual approaches discussed above, two papers offer a reconceptualisation of employability. The paper by Suleman explores the potential and limitations of economic theories to define employability. The paper seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis, noting that contingent employability encompasses economic factors, as well as acquired skills, and self-perception. The approach in the paper diverges from using human capital development as the dominant economic framework of understanding employability, by examining non-economic factors that encompass personal and social conditions.

Kahn and Resenterra use critical realistic perspectives to re-conceptualise employability. This contributes to the emerging discourse on the importance of applying critical realism as a lens to understand employability (Cashian, 2017) in order to probe how students' agency towards developing their employability are enabled or constrained within the surrounding social structure. Whilst acknowledging the importance of critical realism and the centrality of agency to extend the discourse around employability, Kahn and Resenterra go further by proposing the 'collective' approach towards employability. They conceptualised employability as a graduate's capacity to go beyond their individualistic self-interest to contribute to the collective agenda of shared objectives in the workplace. They further highlight how such an approach aligns with the fundamental purpose of higher education's contribution to society.

Reflecting the outcomes approach, Behle discusses a holistic understanding of employability by examining the context of higher education provision in Germany. She revisits the history, current positioning and debates that centre on the role of higher education to improve graduate employability. Using the example of the *Duales system* (apprenticeship integrated into vocational schooling, leading to a recognised vocational qualification), she points attention to the need to understand that there are various routes to employability, rather than a focus on undergraduate transition to employment that still accounts for dominant discourses.

Four empirical papers include a range of studies conducted within institutions and comparatively across countries in different global contexts. Two papers present findings from studies conducted in the UK and Australia. The paper by Fakunle examines the perceptions of international Master's students in the UK. Tran and Do focus on the experiences of Australian undergraduate students' studying across the Indo-Pacific region, as part of the Australian government's New Colombo Plan (NCP) initiative aimed at enhancing employability through student mobility. Both papers restate the point that many studies have been conducted on employability. Despite expansive research on employability, student perspectives largely remain missing, in general (Tymon, 2013), and barely any attention is given to international students' perspectives on employability (Huang, 2013) and how this is factor regarding their rationales to study abroad (Fakunle, 2019, 2020). This means that, notwithstanding the increasing attention to employability in the wider literature (Clarke, 2018; Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017), few authors make the connection between employability and study abroad (Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020; Jones, 2012; Matherly & Tillman, 2019).

Congruent with a process approach, Fakunle examines the extent to which EDOs in the institution have an impact on international student perceptions on developing their employability during a one-year Masters-level study in the UK. The paper draws on data from a qualitative research using semi-structured interviews with

international students studying in four programmes in the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in a Scottish university. Crucially, she points to how her research conducted pre-Covid demonstrates the need for understanding international students' perspectives on employability development to inform strategic higher education policies. As such, evidence from students can inform policy development to assess institutional processes that will enhance student employability. The paper further points to future areas of research to examine the intersection of internationalisation, employability, technology and virtual learning and working.

Tran and Do attest to much-discussed literature around student employability based on student mobility from Australia to Anglophone countries. They argued that 'critical inquiry is warranted regarding how Australian students' learning abroad in the Indo-Pacific region affects their employability and career directions'. Their analysis of policy documents and an online survey of more than 500 NCP students and alumni from a range of disciplines including STEM, Medicine, Economics, Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, foregrounds their conceptualisation of graduate employability that is shaped by post-study abroad connections with the host community and country.

Two empirical papers report employability-related research in little-studied contexts in Kenya and Kazakhstan. Arakawa et al. report the findings of a case study involving collaboration between pharmacy colleagues in universities in Kenya and the UK. They contend that measures of employability from a Western perspective do not necessarily meet the needs of students in non-Western countries. Echoing Behle's point regarding the need for the expanded lens of constructing employability, Arakawa et al. used the example of the introduction of competency-based education (CBE) in pharmacy programmes in Kenya to highlight collaborative efforts amongst key stakeholders to develop sustainable employability development strategies. They make a key argument as to the need for employability strategic approach that best fits country needs.

As employability is widely perceived as an expected graduate outcome, Jonbekova et al.'s paper examine the employment experiences of Kazakhstan's government scholarship alumni in STEM fields. Their paper provides a critical empirical examination of normative assumption that international study confers enhanced employment outcomes. Their analysis of 45 interviews conducted with returnees to Kazakhstan after study abroad revealed positional advantages of studying abroad. However, congruent with Di Pietro (2019), they found challenges to pathways to employment after study abroad. They attribute the challenges to the intersectionality of socio-economic and cultural factors, intergenerational clashes, and regulations related to the scholarship programme. Their research highlights the need for evaluation of government policy to not only create study abroad scholarship programmes but a need for evaluation of such policies, and internal factors that might have an impact on employment outcomes after study abroad. Overall, a key point across all the papers in this special issue is the need for a broadening of current understandings of employability.

3 | THE IDEA OF EMPLOYABILITY—MOVING FORWARD

The papers in this special issue present a range of perspectives and research on employability. The conceptual and empirical papers from different global contexts and disciplines discussed above attest to the complex and multifaceted exploration of the idea of employability. Similar to Brown et al. (2003), the papers highlight the dominant economic lens in framing employability, conceptually and in practice. This underpins the need for continuing interrogation of the idea of employability.

The papers in this special issue aim to provide evidence and conceptual frameworks, and to inform employability-related policy and strategic initiatives in different countries. For example, to address employability challenges, Arakawa et al., reiterate the importance of 'competency-based education' (CBE) in pharmacy programmes in Kenya. They stress the need for strategic leadership and coordinated collaborative effort. The importance of such collaborative strategic policy initiatives is evident across the papers in this special issue, including Tran and Do's research on Australia's Colombo project that highlights possibilities inherent in regional policy initiatives. However, the research by Jonbekova et al., reveals challenges that may be associated with a lack of a

coordinated policy with regards to the study-abroad scholarship programmes. This further lends to the argument that it is difficult to attribute a causal link between studying abroad and employment outcomes (Di Pietro, 2019).

The paper by Fakunle points out the lack of integration of internationalisation and employability agendas as an example of mismatch in current higher education policy in the UK, a top destination country for international students. This mismatch has implications for international student perspectives on developing employability during study abroad. The need for policy development in this area of internationalisation is particularly important considering that for international students, developing their employability is an intended outcome for studying abroad (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). Relatedly, congruent with other empirical studies conducted with undergraduate students in European Union countries (Andrews & Higson, 2008), non-EU international students valuable work experience during their study experience (Fakunle, 2020). It, however, remains to be seen how work experience can be integrated into learning for all students.

Research into the experiential/practical aspect of employability will continue to benefit from future research. This is especially pertinent considering how COVID-19 pandemic has made the integration of technology into the delivery of higher education as an imperative area of policy development. The recent disruption underpins the need for higher education to (re)position and (re)strategise support for graduate transition to living and working with technology. This goes beyond the occasional use of online learning or blended learning as a complementary pedagogical tool. How this reconceptualisation of delivery of higher education is taken forward and embedded in policy and practice is yet to be realised.

Tomlinson and Holmes (2017) remind us about the explosion in interest in the tripartite relationship involving graduate employability, higher education and the economy. They reiterate the importance of the employability agenda in 'so-called liberal economies such as the UK and Australia' (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 2). They, and other authors, point up the dominant framing of graduates as key contributors to economic development in a national, albeit a mainly Western context. However, higher education has gone global. As Fakunle (in this special issue) reminds us, the focus on the national context of employability development, for example in the UK higher education landscape, can be linked to a policy void in relation to international students' employability. In addition, papers in this special issue highlight the importance of employability in non-Western contexts, an area that remains under-researched.

Massification, internationalisation and employability are top priorities in higher education policy. This suggests that there will be growing participation in higher education in national and international contexts. The imperative to develop employability policies to meet the needs of all students is unlikely to abate. There is therefore a need to develop integrated, collaborative, and equitable strategies to address employability challenges in higher education. We have highlighted key approaches, perspectives and accounts to contribute to assessing these challenges, and for future research.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the supplementary material of this article.

ORCID

Omolabake Fakunle  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1729-7934>

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