**Do Employability Programmes in Higher Education Improve Skills and Labour Market Outcomes? A Systemic Review of Academic Literature**

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**Abstract**

We conducted a systemic literature review of the academic literature on activities organised by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with the aim of improving skills associated with employability and to facilitate labour market outcomes. The final search resulted in 87 papers identified through a sequence of keyword search followed by an iterative evaluation of the relevance of each paper. Papers in the corpus were analysed using an evaluation research framework and classified in terms of the activities, outputs, and outcomes they described. They were also classified in terms of the nature of the research design used. The reviewed literature is typically centred on one of three stakeholders: HEIs, students or employers. It suggests all stakeholders value employability activities for similar reasons. Generally, they are seen as vital part of HEI education programmes, facilitating the development of diverse skills that are desirable in the labour market as well as de-risking labour market entry for students and appointments for employers by alleviating information asymmetries. The evidence base is dominated by small-scale case studies and evaluations that are not sufficiently robust to infer about causal impacts of employability activities on students’ development and labour market outcomes. Moreover, the corpus is skewed towards studies of Work-Based Learning (WBL). We argue that to achieve a comprehensive evidence based academic research is needed on more diverse forms of employability activities, such as larger scale “embedded employability” activities.

Keywords: Employability; Skills development; graduate outcomes; Work-based Learning; Higher Education Institutions

# **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to examine current academic understanding of how and to what extent dedicated employability activities in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) facilitate employability and ultimately graduate labour market outcomes. These employability activities are taken to encompass any activity organised within HEIs to help students improve their employability and successfully navigate the labour market – from classroom-based activities to placements and internships. Diverse examples of these can be found in best practice case studies, such as compiled by Advance-HE in the UK (Norton & Dalrymple, 2020) and the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) in the United States[[2]](#footnote-2).

Employability has become part of the higher education mainstream globally (Matherly & Tillman, 2015) as can be witnessed by publication of higher education rankings based on indicators of employability, such as QS[[3]](#footnote-3) and THE[[4]](#footnote-4). Employability has been at the centre of labour and educational policies in recent decades with international institutions such as the United Nations and the OECD promoting employability solutions (McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). More recently, the influence of employability in policy debates can be seen through several publications of the European Union (EU), including the 2016 Skills Agenda and the Bologna declaration. In the United Kingdom (UK) the influence of employability thinking can be seen in public policy focus on graduate outcomes, e.g., in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (DBIS, 2016).

The term employability has been criticised as a fuzzy notion, often ill-defined and sometimes not defined at all (Gazier, 1998 p. 298) and being a “buzz-word” that is more often used than properly understood (Philpott, 1999). Several definitions of employability can be found in the literature to date and as Cheng et al (2022) point out in their review, perceptions vary between different stakeholders. Hillage & Pollard (1998, p.1) argue employability is about “having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required”. This is challenged by Brown et al (2003), who argue that employability is not only about the individual, but also economic context and job competition. Therefore, they define it as “the relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment” (p. 111). Similarly, McQuaid & Lindsay (2005) review the use of the term in policy discourse and highlight the risk of reducing employability simply to an individual attribute. Instead, they present a broader framework that also takes account of personal circumstances (e.g., caring responsibilities) and external factors. Yorke (2006, p. 8), stresses that employability should be seen in probabilistic terms and the conception of skills needs to be broad, defining employability as “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations”. A recent literature review by Peeters et al (2019) proposes a classification for the different categories of skills that may contribute to employability and be cultivated through employability activities in HEIs.

In order to map the current research frontier on the impact of employability activities in HEIs, we adopt an evaluation stance seeking to identify evidence on the pathways through which employability activities impact on students and their graduate outcomes and to what extent these activities can be deemed to be effective. To classify findings, we adopt simple conceptual framework of a logic model (see McLaughlin & Jordan, 2015, on use of logic models in evaluation research) of activities, outputs and outcomes identified separately for each of three stakeholders, (prospective) graduates, HEIs and employers.

Our conceptual framework entails analysing the main stakeholders involved in the process. The first are the (prospective) graduates themselves, who need to possess and develop the required set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, attributes, and understandings that allow them (i) to find and retain sustainable employment; (ii) obtain a new one when needed; and (iii) to bring their know-how and skills to the employers to ensure their proper and effective functioning. The second actors are the HEIs, which oversee facilitating appropriate learning to support school-to-work transitions. This coincides with HEIs increasingly combining academic with vocational learning (Martin et al. 2020) and historically vocationally centre institutions having been transformed into HEIs, such as the post 1992s in the UK or universities of applied sciences in Austria and Germany (Powell & Solga 2010). The third are the employers that are assumed to coordinate with the HEIs to indicate which skills and abilities are mostly required. These three groups of stakeholders are nested within a policy environment shaped by government (Reid, 2016; Watkins et al, 2018).

The corpus consists of 87 academic papers published in the last two decades that were identified though a sequence of keyword search followed by an iterative evaluation of the relevance of each paper. This literature suggests all stakeholders value employability activities for similar reasons. They are seen as vital part of HEI education programmes, facilitating the development of diverse skills that are desirable in the labour market as well as de-risking labour market entry for students and appointments for employers by alleviating information asymmetries. However, the evidence base is dominated by small-scale case studies and evaluations, mostly carried out by the providers themselves. These are not sufficiently robust to infer about causal impacts of employability activities on students’ development and labour market outcomes. Lack of suitable data is an obvious limitation for any prospective evaluation of employability activities. However, even before an evaluation can be designed and data collected, it is necessary to establish a clear theory of change, i.e., what are employability activities intended to achieve and how? Purpose of employability activities tends to be implicit rather than explicit and one of the contributions of this review is to articulate a theory of change for employability activities based on the evidence extracted from the corpus. Another limitation of the reviewed literature is its lack of comprehensiveness in the coverage of different modality of employability activities. It is skewed towards studies of Work-Based Learning (WBL) programmes with a notable gap of work looking at less intensive “embedded employability” programmes in HEIs.

The next section sets out our methods and descriptive findings. The third section provides thematic discussion of the corpus. In the fourth section we provide a brief evaluation of the corpus and set out avenues for future research, before concluding.

# **Methods and Descriptive Findings**

The purpose of the literature review is to summarise available evidence on the mechanisms through which employability programmes may support labour market outcomes of graduates and their effectiveness. A systematic review of literature is defined as research that examines rigorous and transparent evidence produced by secondary sources for solving a problem previously conceptualized (Oakley, 2012: vii) and providing a “short cut to the pool of research knowledge in a given area” (James, 2012, 5).

Table 2 sets out the clusters of search terms used to identify the long list of papers that were then manually screened for inclusion. The papers to be included in the literature review needed to refer to an employability activity of some description (list A), focus on employability, skills or similar (list B) as well as labour market outcomes (list C). A group of terms relating to lifelong learning and adult education terms (list D) was used to exclude articles focussing on such programmes. Moreover, to narrow the search to focus on the higher education level, a range of search terms were included to delimitate higher education (list E).

Table 1 HERE. Search by list of keywords

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Search terms | Number of hits |
| A (EA) | 7,102 |
| A (EA)+B (competence) | 4,686 |
| A (EA)+B (competence) + C (outcome) | 730 |
| A (EA)+B (competence) + C (outcome) + D (not LLL) | 644 |
| A (EA)+B (competence) + C (outcome) + D (not LLL) + E (HE) | 156 |

As detailed in Table 1, the successive application of the keyword search terms identified 156 academic publications listed in the SCOPUS and Journal Citation Report (JCR) databases and published in the period 2002 to 2022.

Table 2 HERE. Groups of search terms used to identify the initial corpus of papers.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| LIST A | employability activities (EA) | "graduate career guidance" OR "graduate career planning" OR "graduate employability skills programme" OR "graduate employability skills program" OR "academic employability skills development" OR "employability skills programme" OR "employability skills program" OR "employability skills training" OR "work-based training" OR "work-based learning" OR "work based training" OR "work based learning" OR "on-the-job training" OR "young graduate programme" OR "young graduate program" OR "Employability programme" OR "Employability program" OR "Employability initiative" OR "Workplace learning" OR "Workplace readiness" OR "Skills programme" OR "Skills program" OR "Work-related learning" OR "Embedded employability" OR "Credit-bearing employability" OR "embedding employability" |
| LIST B | competence terms | "Capability" OR "Competence\*" OR "Competence-based" OR "Competency indicator" OR "Core skills" OR "Employability skills" OR "employability" OR "Expertise" OR "Integration of knowledge" OR "Integration of skills" OR "Key competencies" OR "key competences" OR "Key skills" OR "Learners" OR "Learning power" OR "Proficiency" OR "Transversal skills" OR "Vocational" OR "skills" OR "practical" OR "hard skills" OR "soft skills" OR "occupational skills" OR "craft skills" OR "adaptive skills" OR "transferable skills" OR "Talent" OR "Graduate attributes" OR "Graduate skills" OR "Employability skills" OR "Workplace skills" OR "Labour market skills" OR "Embedded skills" OR "up-skill" OR "up-skilling" OR "skills matching" OR "graduate attributes" OR "Noncognitive skills" OR "Cognitive skills" |
| LIST C | programme outcomes | "employment" OR "labour market situation" OR "labor market situation" OR "labour market integration" OR "youth labour market" OR "youth labor market" OR "wage\*" OR "salary" OR "earning" OR "labour market insertion" OR "job\* recruitment" OR "school to work transition" OR "school-to-work-transition" OR "work placement" OR "hiring" OR "engagement" OR "labour force" OR "Global labour market" OR "Graduate labour market" OR "Graduate job market" OR "Graduate success" OR "Graduate outcomes" OR "graduate to work transition" OR "graduate labour market" OR "graduate careers" |
| LIST D (not) | LLL terms | "lifelong learning", OR "CPD" OR "continued professional development" OR "professional development", OR "continuing education" OR "continuing education" OR "adult education" OR "ongoing learning" |
| LIST E | Tertiary education level terms | "higher education" OR "college" OR "university" OR "university education" OR "post-compulsory education" OR "vocational universities" OR "technical colleges" OR "higher technical" OR "university of applied sciences" |

These 156 papers were reviewed for inclusion by the research team and non-relevant papers excluded from the corpus after successive closer examination. This screening process is summarised in Table 3 and resulted in a final corpus of 87 academic articles and peer-reviewed books sections. Figure 2 shows the process of searching and selecting bibliographic references (see A3 for the full list).

Table 3 HERE. Overview of the screening process

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Scopus results | = | 156 |
|  | Screening by title | - | 37 |
| Screening by abstract | - | 31 |
| Full text screening: | - | 1 |
| Final corpus | = | 87 |

All the papers were read from start to finish by the authors. The lead author issued batches of papers to each team member, who then proceeded to read and summarise. To harmonise examination of each paper, an extraction form was conceived (see Appendix A1) based on our conceptual framework. To classify papers in terms of research design we adopted the criteria devised by Gorard et al. (2019). This framework rates the strength of research design across four dimensions, Design, Scale, Completeness of Data and Quality of Data. Each dimension has 5-points scale. This categorisation is summarised in Table 4 below. For moderation, the research team met at regular intervals to present and discuss findings reported in the extraction forms.

**Table 4 HERE. Research design quality evaluation grid**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Design** | **Scale** | **Completeness of data** | **Data quality** | **Rating** |
| Strong design for research question | Large number of cases per comparison group | Minimal missing data, no evidence of impact on findings | Standardised, independent, pre-specified, accurate | 4 |
| Good design for research question | Medium number of cases per comparison group | Some missing data, no evidence of impact on findings | Standardised, independent, not specified, some errors | 3 |
| Weak design for research question | Small number of cases per comparison group | Moderate missing data, no evidence of impact on findings | Not standardised, independent, pre-specified, some errors | 2 |
| Very weak design for research question | Very small number of cases per comparison group | High level of missing data, no evidence of impact on findings | Weak measures, high level of error, too many outcomes | 1 |
| No consideration of design | A trivial scale of study, or number is unclear | Huge amount of missing data, or not reported | Very weak measures, or accuracy not addressed | 0 |

Data from the extraction forms was analysed using the following steps. First a deductive classification was undertaken, where publications where categorised in terms of what steps in the logic model (activities, outputs, outcomes) they spoke to and the perspective of what stakeholder they described. Second, we then proceeded to examine the data inductively (Strauss, 1987) identifying topics in the publications and examining the relationships between these categories. Finally, we synthesize the findings of selected studies to develop and inform further the logic model (Gough et al. 2012) and clarify on aggregate how these might augment our understanding.

Most of the corpus (60 studies out of 87) is made up of similar articles on small case studies evaluating WBL programs at a quasi-atomistic scale (a specific course in a degree program, a specific faculty, or a specific HEI). They share a simple research design, usually qualitative with limited amount of interviews to students (sometimes connected with a survey), HEIs personnel and, more rarely, employers involved in placement and internship (5). Studies tend to be from Anglo-Saxon institutions, mostly England, Scotland, US, and Australia, with some notable exceptions for instance from Malaysia, Iran, and India. Several publications are descriptive, and some can best be described as opinion pieces. A minority adopt an explanatory approach (Tomic & Zilic, 2020; Lim & Lee, 2019), and 21 out of 87 use quantitative analysis (almost exclusively based on surveys). More than half are very recent in fact 56% of the papers were published within the last 7 years.

Table 5 HERE. Research design

# **Thematic Findings**

In this section, we summarize the findings of the literature review. This is designed to integrate our findings in an amalgam that is “greater than the sum of the individual studies” (Gough et al. 2012, p. 283). It reveals that many different employability programmes take different form such as internships; WBL programmes and project-collaboration with firms. After having systematized the evidence and extracted the information through the literature review extraction form, ascertained the main categories and the relationships among them, thematically, we identify three main categories together with some subcategories to consider when engaging with employability programmes in HE sector. The categories identified are in relation to the actors involved in employability practices: HEIs, students and graduates; and firms. The logic model informed by our survey of the literature is shown in below.

Table 6 HERE. Employability activities, outputs, and outcomes by actor.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | **Activities** | **Outputs** | **Outcomes** |
| **Students** | ● Courses and placements and part-time working opportunities | ● Application of existing knowledge | ● Competitive advantage in gaining employment |
| ● Exposure to the workplace  | ● Work experience | ● Gain control and awareness in the development of their working careers |
| ● Specific skills or careers modules | ● Ability to transfer knowledge acquired academically to diverging work contexts  | ● Increase professional network |
| ● Project learning | ● Informal social networks in the process of selection | ● Transversal skills |
| ● Time commitment for students | ● Work practices, feedback, and reflective self-learning | ● Improvement of graduates’ career adaptability |
|  | ● Ability to identify their own skills | ● Smoother and successful school-to-work transition experience  |
|  |  | ● Gender differences in graduate self-reported skills acquisition |
|  |  | ● Racial barriers in hiring and engaging with international students from other ethnic cultures |
|  |  | ● Competitive employment preparation behaviour |
| **Firms** | ● Interplay between HEIs and firms and professions in the training of future graduates | ● Risk reduction in recruitment | ● Reduction of skills mismatch |
| ● Train students (financial and HR inputs) | ● Collecting more accurate information about the capabilities of potential employees | ●Reduction of recruitment cost |
| ● Remuneration for students and HEIs | ● Tailored competences adapted to firm needs |  |
| ● Time commitment for employers | ● Increase cooperation among HR |  |
| ● Involvement in the design and delivery of training  |  |  |
| **HEIs** | ● Time commitment for academics | ● Long and co-adaptive process between HEIs and firms | ● Render the decision making in curriculum development more flexible to labour market needs |
| ● Application and selection process | ● Adaptation of the content of the curriculum |  |
| ● Resources for administrative staff and academics |  |  |
| ● Setting and governing employability programmes |  |  |
| ● Mentoring and support to students |  |  |
| ● Establishing long term relationships with employers |  |  |

## **HEIs and characteristics of the programmes**

Usually, HEI activities in order to promote employability include a wide range of activities, going from brief visits to worksites, or job-shadowing to observing the process of work, to school-based enterprise, work-placements, internships, and apprenticeships (Stern, 1999). HEIs are essentially the initiator and the key players in setting and governing employability programmes. The involvement and ties with local environment and economy varies largely by type and historical mission of HEIs. According to Beaven et al., (2009), the role of employability programmes is to facilitate success in a specific field, therefore emphasis is on practical measures that HEIs can deploy, such as training in transferable workplace skills through placements, part-time working opportunities, and specific skills or careers modules.

### **What do employability programmes in HE do?**

From the corpus analysed, we find that fostering employability (with various tools and modes) is predominantly seen by HEIs to adapt and improve the curricula offered to students (Smith et al., 2019; Beaven et al., 2009; Drake et al., 2009, Thomson, 2010). As noted by Saville et al., (2020), in the UK the Leitch Review emphasised the importance of raising the attainment of the workforce by providing vocational education beyond ISCED level 5. Work experience is thought to supplement learning, enabling it to see how theory is applied in practice (Little & Harvey, 2007) and improve personal and transferable skills, such as communication, confidence, perseverance, and empowerment (Helyer, 2011; Lim & Lee, 2019). Employability programmes may enhance students critical thinking and “encourage them to reach their creative limits to look for new ideas, identify new approaches, and create new solutions” (Soltani et al., 2013, p. 173). Cross-exposure with workplace settings yields valuable experience and helps to improve problem-solving skills (Kasa et al., 2020). Moreover, Doss et al. (2021) argue WBL in HE can contribute to improved engagement with learning and grade-attainment. Further potential benefits include improvement of graduates’ career adaptability, optimism, and a smoother school-to-work transition (Kepir Sávoly et al.,2020).

Several studies argue that WBL improves confidence about doing a task and this in turn reinforces perseverance and effort (Thomson, 2010; Lester & Costley, 2010). However, as highlighted earlier, this feature cannot be deduced a priori from participation in a WBL settings (Feldman 2016; Kettis et al., 2013). Some authors argue that classroom-based learning lacks features of work-based learning that enable students to learn how to transfer knowledge to real-world scenarios (Chen & Adefila, 2020). Fletcher-Brown et al., (2015), point to the importance of “live project learning” giving students exposure to the workplace resulting in personal, professional growth and self-confidence (Santiago, 2009). In a similar vein, Thatcher et al., (2016) report that WBL facilitates learning through dialogue and service engagement. Such programmes combine the theoretical knowledge previously acquired with practical content and are deemed to be beneficial for the acquisition of transversal skills, such as communication and technical skills, teamwork, and adaptation to change (Hervás et al., 2012; Soltani et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2018).

Based on a systematic literature review, Feldmann (2016) concludes that WBL strengthens student motivation and transferable skills because it exposes them to variable situations. This is further endorsed by Dogara et al., (2020), Hegarty & Johnston (2009) Woodley & Beattie (2011) and Yorke (2011) who all emphasised that learning is essentially a social and experiential process, and that for WBL to be effective, the pedological design should have the student in the centre, ensuring effective student experience, reflection, and assessment. However, Kettis et al., (2013) emphasises the need to get away from the “magic ingredient of placement” approach, advocating more structure and training for academics in providing WBL support for students. Gomes et al., (2018) and Diver, (2021) go further, poor, or inappropriate placements having a negative impact on motivation. Conversely, a temporary loss in confidence during WBL can be interpreted as a growing awareness of their own weakness and skill gaps, providing further motivation to learn more strategically in their remaining years in HE (McKinnon & McCrae, 2012).

A substantial share of the corpus studied internships as a route to promote employability. Qualitatively, internships are seen to impact on student’s learning in similar ways as WBL. Internships are seen as a way to develop transferable skills and enhance the ability to transfer knowledge acquired academically to diverging work contexts and to constantly adapt to these contexts with the aim of systematically renewing actions (Smith et al., 2017, Moscardo & Pearce 2007). As a practical experience for applying academic concepts, internships deepen students’ understanding of an organization or profession (Hervas et al., 2012). As presented in Table 1, internships can also provide students with an opportunity to improve their personal, professional, and social skills, promoting career prospects (McKinnon & McCrae, 2012). Internships also foster students’ ability to make decisions and cope with complex real-life scenarios (Hervás et al., 2012). Beaven et al., (2009), point out that students place high value on learning through challenging practical projects and being ‘thrown in at the deep end’.

### **What is the right balance of skills?**

A key challenge facing HEIs seeking to cultivate the employability of their prospective graduates is determining the most appropriate balance of skills for successful labour market engagement. The underlying idea is that there is an optimal combination of general and specific competencies that is required by firms (Pouratashi & Zamani, 2019; Chen & Adefila, 2020; Forsyth & Cowap, 2017). On the one hand, several authors highlight the importance of acquiring specific (or vocational) competencies, as they can considerably reduce the extent of job-education mismatches (Heijke et al., 2003; Verhaest & Baert, 2018).

Pegg & Caddell (2016) invoke the notion of a “work ready” graduate, with discipline specific knowledge and industry specific skills developed through experience in the workplace. Verhaest & Baert (2018), point out that graduates endowed with specific competences are characterized by lower unemployment rates, and higher starting salaries. However, there may be a trade-off as vocational skills are specific to field and job position and therefore vocationally educated individuals have a higher risk of long-term unemployment if they are not able to find a matching job right after graduation (Verhaest & Baert, 2018).

These general or transversal skills are part of the self-management capacity of work or the ability to work as a team and to retrain if needed. They include, for instance, the capacity of writing a job application, adaptation, career management, resilience and stress management skills, team-working, autonomous initiative (Thomson, 2010; McKinnon & McCrae, 2012; Smith et al., 2019; Wylie & Cummins, 2013). There is a view that employers prefer general over specific skills. Bertolini & Goglio (2017) observe that this tendency is further increased by the process of flexibilization of the labour market, where employers want immediately deployable workers but often do not want to bear the cost of training. Therefore, general skills may positively affect the probability of finding a suitable job (Lim & Lee, 2019). Indeed, workers with more generic type of education appear to be more likely to participate in training once in the labour market (Heijke, et al., 2003). Finally, generic degrees, being more focused on a wider type of knowledge and basic skills, may facilitate the process of learning in a changing context and seem to lower the costs of occupational mobility (Verhaest & Baert, 2018).

Traditional vocational education has been criticized for not providing a sufficient theoretical foundation for graduates to continue learning and adapting throughout their working lives, and pure academic education, is often described as too theoretical (Stern, 1999; Bertolini & Goglio, 2017). Ideally, WBL can improve students’ academic performance and develop work-related capabilities at the same time. Linking students’ part-time employment with their classroom studies therefore may contribute to educational achievement, while still allowing students to gain valuable work experience (Wylie & Cummins, 2013).

## **Students’ awareness of employability**

A key extrinsic motivation for engaging with employability enhancing activities is that it is likely to improve chances of obtaining a job (Forsyth & Cowap, 2017), being appointed at a higher grade, and obtaining higher salary (Santiago, 2009). Moreover, it provides insight into a particular industry or type of employment (Little & Harvey, 2007; Raven, 2018) and students can increase their professional network, both in the firms where they realise the internships as well as in client companies (Hervás et al., 2012). Yet, several studies highlight student naivety about employability. Smith et al., (2017) report on a programme that attempted to underpin students’ networks so that they became familiar with a variety of professional identities. The researchers noticed that many students thought internships simply happened or passed by them, but they could not do much to avail of these opportunities. Gbadamosi et al., (2019) and Fletcher-Brown et al., (2015) both noted the lack of student investment in networking with employers in placements.

McManus & Rook (2021) observe that sometimes students do not understand the importance of having work-ready skills for a successful school-to-work transition. This is critical as lack of awareness makes students less likely to make an effort to acquire them. They argue that it is important to both explain to students the importance of having work-ready skills and cultivate students’ ability to identify their own skills (McManus & Rook, 2021). Similarly, Diver (2021) highlights the need to ensure adequate practical and emotional preparation of students for placement experiences.

### **Social stratification and social reproduction**

There is evidence that professional bodies are working in partnership with HEIs to embed standards and curriculum composition within the degree structure to enable a smoother route to professional accreditation (Knox & Stone, 2019; Pepper & McGrath, 2019; Borah et al., 2019, and Armitage-Chan & Jackson, 2018).

Our literature search revealed that when looking at the success of WBL initiatives there are other confounding elements at play, as the role of social and cultural capital in the success of graduates in the workplace, many of whom hail from lower socio-economic groups. Bertolini & Goglio (2017) highlight that when employers use informal social networks in the process of selection, they can reinforce social inequalities. Herbert et al., (2020) argue that it is very difficult for students from non-professional social backgrounds to compete unless they can be inducted into that culture early in their studies through WBL. This should include exposure to work practices, feedback, and reflective self-learning. They argue that such approaches should be formalised in new credit bearing approaches which reward appropriate engagement and learning. Walsh & Powell (2018) highlight the example of Birbeck University of London, that developed an institutional approach designed to improve skills, networks, confidence, intrinsic motivation, and creativity of all students.

Other specific examples of inequality of outcomes in the literature search found gender disparities, cultural barriers, and racial issues. Analysing four main discipline groups (engineering, liberal arts, math/science/IT studies) in a private university in Manila, Santiago (2009) finds significant gender differences in graduate self-reported skills acquisition which also vary largely across disciplines. Santiago (2009) also identifies a significant gap in women’s starting salary, although no direct effect is found by gender in skills acquisition. Other researchers have highlighted cultural barriers that exist for many from traditionally collectivist cultures, not instilled with the individual competitiveness necessary in the modern workplace. Research from Gbadamosi et al., (2019) highlighted the importance of part time employment in changing self-efficacy attitudes of Cambodian students in the workplace. Moreover, there are indications that international students have not always benefited from WBL placements. Both Sonnenschein et al., (2019) and Sutherland et al., (2021) highlight racial barriers in hiring and engaging with international students from other ethnic cultures.

## **Employers, labour markets and economic context**

Why do employers engage with the various forms of HE led employability programmes? Some of the literature in the corpus suggests this is facilitated by government policy, for instance programs for economic development in developing countries (Dogara et al., 2020; Haron et al., 2019; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Mobarak, 2019; Chen & Adefila, 2020). Another example is from Australia, which in 2016 has introduced a National strategy for Work Integrated Learning (WIL) as a formal component of degree programmes to facilitate career readiness. However, this has led to a shortage of WIL placements, which disadvantages students lacking in networks and awareness of labour market opportunities (Jackson, 2018, Woodley & Beattie (2011).

Moscardo & Pearce (2007) examining students work experiences in the Australian tourism sector argue that the main benefit for employers’ is risk reduction in recruitment. Also, Beaven et al. (2009) suggest that WBL can improve the recruitment process, as most employers tend to consider work-based learning, and especially work placement activities, as a valid way of gaining experience. Moscardo & Pearce (2007) also find that WBL model reduces the time commitment required of employers to train staff. Reinhard et al., (2016) argue that a key feature for co-operation between HE and employers is relying on a pool of several firms which can reduce the risk of partnerships for HEs and students.

### **Skills-mismatch and economic contexts**

Several studies point towards the existence of a gap between skill formation in the education system and employers’ needs, as main contextual trait of national labour markets (Saville et al., 2020) or of specific sectors within them (Kasa et al., 2020; Beaven et al., 2009). For bridging those gaps in skills and qualifications, it is observed that one of the most effective environments for employed individuals to learn is in the workplace (Lester & Costley, 2010). In an integrated approach to degree programmes the workplace becomes a source of academically valid learning, rather than simply a site for gaining experience and applying what has already been learned” (Lester et al., 2016, p. 10).

There are examples in the corpus illustrating how economic and labour market contexts interacts with behaviour of employers and graduates. Lim & Lee (2019) argue that job competition in South Korea has increased due to a combination of weaker employment growth and increased educational attainment. This has led to a competitive employment preparation behaviour, where young people are seeking to distinguish themselves through additional qualifications, internship, and career counselling. Conversely, Bertolini & Goglio (2017) point out that in Italy, which has a high proportion of young people with low levels of qualifications and high youth unemployment, employers prefer informal methods of selection to guarantee trust, downplaying importance of formal qualifications (Bertolini & Goglio, 2017).

# **State of the literature and avenues for future research**

The 87 papers included in this systemic literature paint an overall positive picture of the use of employability activities as part of HE curricula. However, when the state of the literature is reflected against the challenges faced by young people entering the labour market or the need of HEIs to prioritise resources, it is clear that the academic research community could do more to inform the decisions of stakeholders, from students, to HEIs, employers and government policy makers.

## **Need for more comprehensive view of employability activities**

As mentioned in Section 2 the scope of the corpus is dominated by studies of WBL programmes. Whilst these studies are welcome, there is a dearth of studies looking at more diverse forms of employability activities. For instance, Norton & Dalrymple (2020) in their collection of case studies of employability in UK HEIs highlight several examples where employability is facilitated not through direct placement with employers but by embedding employability activities in the curriculum, such as through curricular frameworks, specific employability and skills training modules, and assistance with career planning and networking. It is important to obtain evidence on the effectiveness of such approaches, especially as they are likely to be less resource intensive and easier to scale up for HEIs than placements and internships. This begs the question, what is the prevalence of different types of employability activities in HE? To date we are not aware of any comprehensive survey of employability activities in a particular HE system or even a single institution, which is a lacuna that awaits future research.

## **Employability, diverse labour market contexts and heterogenous outcomes**

A nascent theme that’s emerging in the employability literature (as summarised in section 3.3.1) are analyses of how different socioeconomic and institutional contexts influence the incentives of employers and affect the opportunities of prospective graduates. This territorial perspectives chimes with the theoretical criticism of Brown et al (2003) who argued that employability prospects of any individual were always contingent on local labour market conditions. Theoretically, there is need to work on fleshing out more explicitly how employability and labour market outcomes interact with labour market and economic conditions. Empirically, there is need for more evidence on the magnitude of how graduate attributes translate into labour market outcomes under different economic conditions and how stakeholders can contribute to it (Hodgson & Spours 2013).

Getting a firm handle on the territorial perspective is important, as within a European context, graduate employment outcomes are varied, ranging from double digit youth unemployment in some parts of Southern Europe to being negligible (for an overview see Scandurra et al, 2021). However, even where graduate labour markets are buoyant, such as in the UK, there is evidence of growing dispersion of graduate outcomes (Walker & Zhu, 2008) and labour market inequalities across sex (Fortin et al, 2017), class (Friedman & Laurison, 2020) and race (Brynin et al., 2019). There are indications of social origin effects in the employability literature (3.2.1) and need for further research into how employability activities might be used to reduce inequality in labour market outcomes.

## **Causal estimates of impact of employability activities**

HEIs employability programmes are deemed to provide faster transition to employment for graduates. However, most of the studies in the corpus do not assess graduate labour market outcomes empirically, but focus on the characteristics of WBL training, looking at possible benefits for the students in terms of future opportunities on the labour market. An important next step in understanding the impact of employability activities is to conduct more empirical research linking what happens at the level of the HEI with subsequent graduate labour market outcomes. A further difficulty is evaluating whether observed impacts are caused by employability activities or whether employability rich programmes attract a selected body of students that are aware of employability issues and would have fared better than average in the labour market regardless of the details of the study programmes? Whilst it is well known that achieving or approximating random assignment in education research is difficult, there are numerous examples of such studies in other fields of research on the interaction between education and labour markets, such as active labour market programmes (for an overview see Card et al, 2010).

A further aspiration to pursue towards a more comprehensive evidence base on the impact of employability activities is identifying differential effects of programmes of varying designs and intensities in different settings. Moreover, there is need for more diverse vantage points that of HEIs. Only four of the 87 publications have examined the views of all three stakeholders, employers, students, and HEI providers on the outcomes of specific WBL programmes (Hegarty & Johnston, 2009; Fletcher-Brown et al., 2015; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Reinhard et al., 2016). Most of the studies presented examine only the learners’ perspective or occasionally along with that of the HEI provider.

# **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to examine current academic understanding of how and to what extent dedicated employability activities in HEIs facilitate employability and ultimately graduate labour market outcomes. We performed a systematic literature review on employability published in peer reviewed academic journals and we reviewed 156 papers and ultimately included 87 papers for extraction. More than half (56%) were published within the last 7 years. They are predominantly case studies of employability activities in UK and Australian HEIs and are skewed towards placements and internships. We grouped the literature into 3 broad themes in line with who was the focal stakeholder of the study: students, HEIs or employers. Further sub-themes were identified to guide the discussion of the corpus.

The literature suggests all stakeholders value employability activities for similar reasons. They are seen as vital part of HEI education programmes, facilitating the development of diverse skills that are desirable in the labour market as well as de-risking labour market entry for students and appointments for employers by alleviating information asymmetries. To strengthen the evidence-base on the impact of employability activities in HEIs we suggest several avenues for future research. There is need to study a more comprehensive range of employability activities, in particular various forms of embedded employability work. The relative nature of employability (Brown, 2003) is under theorised, and it is important to identify explicitly how a) economic contexts influences outcomes and b) how socioeconomic backgrounds give rise to inequality in employability. Finally, it is crucial to strengthen the research design of empirical evaluations of employability activities to include outcomes, control for selection effects and determine the relative effectiveness of different approaches.

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2. See for instance a wide range of best practice case studies published by NACE: https://www.naceweb.org/career-development/best-practices/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/employability-rankings/2022> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/press-releases/global-employability-rankings-2021> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)