

# Are we talking about the same thing? The case for stronger connections between graduate and worker employability research

Connecting  
graduate and  
worker  
employability

Jos Akkermans

*Department of Management and Organization, School of Business and Economics,  
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

William E. Donald

*Southampton Business School, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK and  
Organizational Behavior and HRM, Ronin Institute,  
Montclair, New Jersey, USA*

Denise Jackson

*School of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University,  
Joondalup, Australia, and*

Anneleen Forrier

*Faculty of Economics and Business, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium*

Received 15 August 2023  
Revised 28 August 2023  
Accepted 28 August 2023

## Abstract

**Purpose and approach** – This article presents the case for creating stronger connections between research on graduate and worker employability. We offer a narrative review of commonalities and differences between these research streams and offer thoughts and suggestions for further integration and mutual learning.

**Findings** – We outline some of the main theories and concepts in the graduate and worker employability domains. Furthermore, we analyze how these show considerable overlap, though they have barely connected with each other yet. We also formulate an agenda for future research that would spur stronger connections between the fields. Finally, we turn to our fellow authors, reviewers, and editors to encourage a more open approach to each other's work that would enable more cross-fertilization of knowledge.

**Implications** – We hope our narrative review, critical analysis and future research suggestions will lead to more collaborations and mutual learning among employability researchers in the educational, career and psychology areas.

**Keywords** Employability, Graduate employability, Worker employability, Careers, Education

**Paper type** Viewpoint

© Jos Akkermans, William E. Donald, Denise Jackson and Anneleen Forrier. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/legalcode>

**Funding details:** This study was supported by Interne Fondsen KU Leuven / Internal Funds KU Leuven (project C24 M/19/012).

**Disclosure statement:** No potential competing interests were reported by the authors.

**Data availability statement:** No dataset is associated with this submission.

**Note:** This is an invited submission by the Editor-in-Chief, Dr Jennifer A. Harrison, to Career Development International



---

## Employability research: a promising but divided scholarly area

Research on employability has gained considerable momentum, most notably in career research (Akkermans and Kubash, 2017; Byington *et al.*, 2019) and educational research (Healy *et al.*, 2022; Tomlinson, 2012). Employability is typically defined as an individual's employment potential in the internal and external labor market (Forrier and Sels, 2003). Within this research area, there is a particular emphasis on graduates' immediate and long-term career outcomes in the higher education research field (Clarke, 2018; Donald *et al.*, 2019), whereas career and psychology research primarily focuses on how employability can serve as a resource that facilitates career mobility and success (Forrier *et al.*, 2018; Fugate *et al.*, 2021).

Employability matters. Research on employability among workers – which we will refer to as *worker employability* in this article to compare it to the common term of *graduate employability* – has provided clear support for the relevance of studying employability. For example, in their review article, Fugate *et al.* (2021) concluded that employability has considerable benefits for employees, such as being a predictor of career success, serving as a resource to help deal with insecurity and challenges and enhancing work-related and general well-being. Despite the lack of a systematic overview of the findings of graduate employability research [1], research in this area also shows convincing evidence of its value for graduates, such as offering transferable and career management skills (Clarke, 2018; Tomlinson, 2012). Furthermore, research on school-to-work transitions – often separated from but closely related to (graduate) employability – has established that employability is a critical asset for successfully transitioning from education to work and laying the foundation for a sustainable career (De Vos *et al.*, 2019, 2020).

Although employability research is timely, it is also criticized for being “fuzzy” (Van Harten *et al.*, 2022). Definitions and conceptualizations of employability still tend to differ considerably across and within the streams of worker and graduate employability (Forrier *et al.*, 2018). To illustrate, research on worker employability has long been divided across three strands (Van Harten *et al.*, 2022): (1) personal strengths that increase employment potential (such as competence-based employability, see Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006), (2) perceived employability (see, e.g. Vanhercke *et al.*, 2014) and (3) job transitions (see, e.g. De Vos *et al.*, 2021). Although some empirical studies have tested the associations between these strands, such as Forrier *et al.*' (2015) test of all three in a dynamic chain, the number is surprisingly low, and comparisons are difficult due to the large variety of measurement instruments used to assess employability (Van Harten *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, graduate employability research has focused on different themes, such as individual capital and competencies and institutional policies and practices aimed at strengthening employability (Healy *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, Römgens *et al.* (2020) argued that the availability of so many different competency-based frameworks of graduate employability has hindered scholarly progress. In addition to these problems and disconnects *within* the worker and graduate employability discourses, the connections *between* them are even rarer, despite calls for more integration (e.g. Akkermans and Kubash, 2017; Clarke, 2018) as the concept of employability is, at its core, highly similar whether we talk about graduates or workers.

Some recent conceptual attempts have been made to connect the worker and graduate employability areas. For example, Healy *et al.* (2022) formulated several key pedagogical principles underlying a more integrative approach to how employability may be strengthened by reconciling ideas from the graduate and worker employability literature streams. He advocated using career development theories to increase our understanding and application of careers and employability learning. Similarly, Römgens *et al.* (2020) integrated the workplace learning and higher education literature streams to formulate several central dimensions of graduate employability learning that narrow down the wide range of available concepts across the worker and graduate employability literature. Furthermore, Donald *et al.*

(2020) combined career ecosystem and psychological contract theory to design a model that helps understand how graduates may enter their professional careers successfully and sustainably. As a final example, Akkermans *et al.* (2023) presented a model of initial employability development, emphasizing the signaling and social exchange processes that evolve between graduates and employers and that could enhance (or undermine) employability development.

Although we acknowledge that we may be positively biased toward these initiatives as we have been involved in quite a few of them, we believe these recent attempts to connect the two disciplines are highly promising. As such, our main purpose in this article is to formulate opportunities for doing precisely that. To do so, we will first critically reflect on similarities and differences in (1) theorizing and (2) conceptualizing employability across the two literature streams. In each of those sections, we will briefly reflect on recent developments in each field, after which we will reconcile them and offer thoughts on progressing research in this specific area. Then, we will formulate a more extensive agenda for future research to connect them. In the final part of this article, we will also turn to our colleagues – as authors, reviewers and editors – to facilitate such connections in future research.

### Theorizing employability

The worker employability literature has been criticized for being a-theoretical. Indeed, Forrier *et al.* (2018) observed that theories – if they are used at all – are primarily used as a post hoc means of explaining research findings instead of using theory systematically to formulate research hypotheses. Van Harten *et al.*'s (2022) literature review confirmed this, as they found that most relationships tested between employability strands were not-theory based. Despite the lack of systematic theorizing in worker employability research, we do observe several theories that have been proposed and used most often. First, although rarely tested to its full complexity (Forrier *et al.*, 2018), social exchange theory (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) has been used in employability studies to explain how employers and employees may jointly contribute to employability development as a result of economic and socioemotional exchanges at work. For example, Fugate *et al.* (2021) proposed using a social exchange perspective with a strategic human resource management (HRM) framework to understand how employability may develop within employer–employee relationships.

A second dominant theoretical paradigm has been human capital theory (Becker, 1964), often as a foundation for the value of various personal strengths. The basic idea is that investments in one's employability will result in favorable work and career outcomes, such as career success (Forrier *et al.*, 2018; Fugate *et al.*, 2021). Third, studies have increasingly leveraged the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) to study worker employability. COR theory aligns with the notion that employability is a personal resource that individuals can protect and enhance to deal with adversity and increase their well-being (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2012; Forrier *et al.*, 2018; Jabeen *et al.*, 2022). These theoretical paradigms have been criticized for being overly agentic (Forrier *et al.*, 2018). Recently, theories considering the role and interplay of agency (individual action and capability to enact change) and structure (external factors such as labor market conditions) are gaining ground in the worker employability literature, such as Bourdieu's theory of practice (see, e.g. Delva *et al.*, 2021). These theories highlight how worker employability is always contextually embedded.

The graduate employability literature has also been criticized for being a-theoretical (Healy, 2023), perhaps reflective of the applied nature of many of the higher education journals. Yet, various theoretical approaches are deployed, and several are highly prominent. First, human capital theory (Becker, 1964) is also a dominant theoretical paradigm in graduate employability studies. Recently, graduate employability researchers have extended

---

and adapted human capital theory through the notion of employability capital (Clarke, 2018; Donald *et al.*, 2019, 2023; Tomlinson, 2017). The employability capital approach retains the fundamental theoretical assumption of human capital theory, yet extends it by adopting a more holistic perspective of graduate employability to address concerns that human capital re-enforces pre-existing inequalities, cannot predict career success and fails to articulate how education augments productivity (Hooley and Sultana, 2019; Marginson, 2019).

Second, COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) also features strongly and, similarly to worker employability research, there is an emphasis on developing personal resources to better position oneself to effectively navigate the transition from school to work (Jackson and Wilton, 2017; Vanhercke *et al.*, 2014) and to increase well-being (Donald and Jackson, 2022; Nimmi *et al.*, 2021). Third, perspectives that consider the role and interplay of agency and structure also feature prominently in graduate employability literature. These perspectives adopt a more relational focus on how students' interpretation of and behaviors related to employability are inherently shaped by their personal background and dynamically negotiated with their macro context (Brown *et al.*, 2004; Tholen, 2015). If a theory is leveraged in such articles, they usually mention Bourdieu's theory of practice or Giddens' theory of structuration (see Tholen, 2015).

Analyzing the two literature streams, we observe a remarkable overlap between the fields of graduate and worker employability research in how they theorize about employability. Indeed, both streams dominantly feature human capital theory and conservation of resources theory. Moreover, the theoretical arguments used are highly similar, as research in both streams supports the notion that employability is a form of capital or a resource that individuals can build to enhance their long-term work and career prospects. This significant overlap in theorizing about employability across the streams makes it all the more surprising – and problematic – that there is so little exchange of knowledge.

Despite the similarities, we also see opportunities for mutual learning. First, although both areas are criticized for not being sufficiently theoretical, we would argue that worker employability research tends to focus on applying and advancing theory more prominently, perhaps as a consequence of career and psychology journals focusing more strongly on this issue as compared to educational journals. As a result, the level of theoretical sophistication in the worker employability field could serve to stimulate more explicit theoretical advancement in graduate employability research. More importantly, though, *both* streams would benefit from more thorough theorizing, preferably using available knowledge from both of these streams. Second, although worker employability scholars have slowly started to incorporate contextual elements, we observe that the graduate employability field has made more significant developments in this area through its more prominent focus on labor market characteristics and the role of equity and inclusion. Hence, researchers in the worker employability domain could learn from these insights to more prominently feature such factors in their research ideas and designs.

### Conceptualizing employability

As mentioned before, the worker employability literature is fragmented, with employability being interpreted along three conceptual strands: (1) personal strengths, (2) perceived employability and (3) job transitions (Van Harten *et al.*, 2022). This fragmentation hinders knowledge accumulation leading to calls for a more integrative employability approach (see, e.g. Guilbert *et al.*, 2018). Interestingly and perhaps problematically, although Van Harten *et al.*'s (2022) review shows that empirical research has still not converged on an integrative approach yet, conceptual models have been developed to achieve more integration and bring clarity. Indeed, in 2009, Forrier *et al.* (2009) presented the employability process model that develops the relationship between personal strengths, perceived employability and job

---

transitions and also adds contextual factors (such as structures of risk and opportunities, disruptive events, or opportunities to enhance one's employability). In addition to this lack of integration *between* strands, the field of worker employability research is also characterized by fuzziness *within* strands (Van Harten *et al.*, 2022). This is most particularly the case for research on personal strengths. Personal strengths come in many forms. They encompass dispositions (see, e.g. Fugate and Kinicki, 2008), attitudes (see, e.g. Van Dam, 2004) and competencies (see, e.g. Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006) and are classified in numerous ways. The movement capital classification into four dimensions, proposed by Forrier *et al.* (2009), encompasses the dimensions of human capital, social capital, adaptability and self-awareness. This classification has been used the most prominently among the personal strength models (Van Harten *et al.*, 2022) and exhibits the most robust correlation with perceived employability (Harari *et al.*, 2021).

Besides these conceptual issues, what is also problematic is the plethora of measurement instruments used. In their systematic review, Van Harten *et al.* (2022) identified 51 different instruments to measure personal strengths, 38 of which were used only once. These instruments often use different labels to measure the same or vice versa. Clearly, this is a significant problem for conceptualizing worker employability consistently and accurately. In line with Schreurs *et al.*'s (2022) recommendations for publishing quantitative research, we urge employability scholars to strive for more consistency in their use of measurement instruments and, at the very least, to be explicit about which instrument they used and why (and, if applicable, which changes they made to established scales and why). After all, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to converge on a consolidated knowledge base (e.g. through meta-analysis) of employability if we continue to use so many different scales for the same concept.

The graduate employability literature also continued to face conceptual issues related to presenting a plethora of different capital and competency-based models. More specifically, Tomlinson (2017), Clarke (2018) and Donald *et al.* (2019) conceptualized three influential capital-based graduate employability models. First, Tomlinson's model featured human, social, cultural, identity and psychosocial capital (or, as he called it, resources). Second, Clarke distinguished six forms of employability capital: human capital, social capital, individual attributes, individual behaviors, perceived employability and labor market factors. Third, Donald and colleagues proposed human capital (as a composite of six forms of capital, including social, cultural, psychological, scholastic, market-value and skills), career guidance and career ownership as determinants of self-perceived employability. Although the similarities are apparent, these models have tended to develop and be empirically validated in parallel with limited integration of ideas (Römgens *et al.*, 2020). One exception is the recent integrative employability capital growth model presented by Donald *et al.* (2023). Based on a review of the graduate employability literature between 2016 and 2022, their model offers nine forms of employability capital: social, cultural, psychological, personal identity, health, scholastic, market-value, career identity and economic capital. It also encompasses external factors (e.g. access to career counseling and recruitment process bias) that sit beyond an individual's agency and various personal outcomes (e.g. career progression, career satisfaction and well-being). Although the model has yet to be empirically tested since it was only just published at the time of writing this article, it encompasses the core dimensions of many of the capital models that have been empirically validated in the graduate employability literature. Consequently, we believe that it could offer a solid way forward to research the different types of capital valuable to graduate employability.

There is perhaps no more obvious evidence of the lack of interdisciplinary connectivity in our research domains than the existing work on employability-related capital. It is not difficult to see the similarities between concepts used in the worker and graduate employability literature streams. To illustrate, all of those models contain some form of social capital and human capital (although sometimes conceptualized in different ways and

---

sometimes implicitly rather than explicitly using that exact terminology). Although specific nuances vary across conceptual approaches, the basic underlying idea of movement or employability capital as a critical resource for graduates' and workers' employability is the same. Of course, there are differences too. For example, the conceptual models in the graduate employability literature tend to incorporate the role of stakeholders and the external environment more explicitly. Conversely, research on competence-based employability and movement capital integrates dimensions around movement and flexibility more deeply. Such differences are likely due to the specific field of research. For example, inequality and unequal opportunities are prominent topics in educational research, which has likely led to a stronger focus on structural factors impacting employability. Similarly, as worker employability research is often part of career research, this stream tends to focus on (career) transitions across the lifespan, hence focusing more strongly on adaptability and flexibility as key factors of employability. Still, despite those different nuances, the similarities are far greater than the differences. Hence, we argue that there are clear opportunities for the two fields to learn from each other in terms of conceptualizing employability.

First, worker employability researchers could focus more strongly on the various stakeholders and contextual factors involved in employability development (see also [Delva et al., 2021](#); [Forrier et al., 2009, 2018](#)). Second, graduate employability researchers could incorporate career-related factors related to movement and transitions (see also [Donald et al., 2023](#); [Healy, 2023](#); [Healy et al., 2022](#)). At the same time, we believe such research efforts should aim to consolidate and integrate the available knowledge instead of creating even more new conceptual frameworks that each include slightly different lists of elements or dimensions. Moreover, both streams – together – could start solving the conceptual “fuzziness” around concepts used in employability research. For example, it seems the term “capital” is not conceptualized consistently within and across streams. In particular, we observed that the worker employability research seems to have a narrower definition of (employability or movement) capital focusing on individual characteristics and personal strengths, whereas the graduate employability stream also considers contextual factors to be forms of capital. More consistency and clarity in defining and conceptualizing such critical terms would be an important step forward.

Overall, the past few years have seen a steep increase in employability research, resulting in many different frameworks and models across the worker and graduate employability literature streams (e.g. dispositional employability, competence-based employability, movement capital and employability capital). Given the increasing maturity of both fields, we argue that now is the time to start testing and consolidating that knowledge to critique and refine our understanding of employability among graduates and workers.

### **Future research agenda**

In the previous sections on theorizing and conceptualizing employability, we have provided several suggestions for connecting worker and graduate employability scholarship. Here, we formulate additional ideas for doing so. But before doing so, we want to take a moment and reflect on one major conclusion we have drawn. After writing this article, we are even more surprised that our fields are still considered separate research streams despite the fact that we have similar research interests, leverage similar theories and also use and develop similar conceptual frameworks. Perhaps the ultimate example of this is the significant degree of overlap in conceptual models focused on employability-related capital, such as [Forrier et al.'s \(2009\)](#) movement capital concept and [Donald et al.'s \(2023\)](#) employability capital concept. And yet, we still do not collaborate much! This lack of exchange is likely due to the academic communities we are part of and the journals we read and publish in. Still, we hope that this

---

article will show others, as it has taught us, that connections between our research fields must be developed more strongly.

### *Connections through collaboration*

Our first suggestion for research bridging the two literature streams is as straightforward as it is crucial: let us start building connections by actively collaborating on research projects related to employability. It is becoming increasingly clear that we need an interdisciplinary approach to our research and research teams. Indeed, during the writing process of this article, we have all learned much about “the other side” of employability research through our conversations, our sharing of relevant literature and writing the paper. Similarly, each of the authors of this paper has experienced rich and highly meaningful learning opportunities through collaborations with scholars from other institutions, geographical locations and fields of study, helping to advance our understanding of employability around the initial transition into work. Such collaborations show that although our fields are, until now, mostly disconnected, we can start making those connections simply by seeking each other out. In other words, as employability scholars, we each need to play a part in breaking down these research silos based on disciplines (i.e. graduate versus worker employability) but also those related to, for example, geographic and demographic factors.

Seeking collaborations also means that we can learn from the unique strengths and insights of each literature stream. For example, scholars in the worker employability literature have regularly observed a lack of solid contextualization (e.g. supply and demand mechanisms) and practical implications of employability research (e.g. [Forrier et al., 2018](#)). Related to this, research on how HRM policies and practices can influence employability is still limited (for an exception, see the recent special issue edited by [Van Harten et al., 2020](#), in the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*). We see a clear opportunity for worker employability researchers to benefit from the considerable expertise and experience that graduate employability scholars possess related to these matters related to, for example, policy and institutional practices (e.g. [Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019](#); [Minocha et al., 2017](#)). Conversely, research in the worker employability domain generally seems to adopt more sophisticated research designs (e.g. multi-wave structural path models and person-centered approaches) and a stronger emphasis on theoretical implications. This trend may be due to the publication norms in the respective research areas and journals, as psychology and career journals tend to emphasize theory-building. In contrast, higher education journals often focus on the practical value of research insights due to the applied nature of many of the prominent journals. Still, the graduate employability field may benefit from the available knowledge on research design and methods, as well as the theory building in the worker employability field.

Content-wise, both streams could inspire each other and broaden the scope of research topics in joint projects. We suggest three potential tracks for future collaborative research. First, where graduate employability research has a particular focus on the preparation for the initial transition into work and worker employability on the career path after this first transition, an opportunity for joint research is collaboratively exploring the longer-term trajectories, experiences and outcomes of graduates at work, moving beyond higher education’s problematic focus on short-term job attainment metrics ([Jackson and Bridgstock, 2018](#)). Such studies would also enhance the field of school-to-work transition research, in which longitudinal studies spanning the entire transition into work are still rare ([Blokker et al., 2023](#)). A second potential track for joint research is employability development and, in particular, work-integrated learning. Development and learning are central to employability and are part of the research debate in both streams. In worker employability research, employability development and learning are seen as part of an evolving career over time. With a background in educational science, learning is central in graduate employability

---

literature. Work-integrated learning of graduates in workplaces is where both fields' interests in employability development and learning could meet (Jackson *et al.*, 2023). Third, another potential avenue for future research is about changes in employability perceptions throughout the transition from school to work and over time. There are clear indications that such perceptions can change over time and across individuals. For example, Grosemans *et al.* (2023) identified three different patterns of employability perception changes among graduates. Similarly, Farrugia (2021) showed how the meaning of work and careers differs across graduates with or without work experience and unemployment. It is also likely that employability perceptions change as a result of disruptive events – or: career shocks – during the school-to-work transition (Akkermans *et al.*, 2021b). Building on these studies, we believe it would be highly interesting to research how perceptions of employability may develop before, during and after the initial transition into work, and which structural factors and disruptive events may impact these processes.

#### *Sustainable careers as an overarching perspective*

Researchers in graduate and worker employability fields have leveraged the sustainable career perspective to study and understand employability development. This theoretical perspective argues that, in an increasingly flexible and dynamic career landscape, building a sustainable career is about creating a career path that allows resources to be protected and renewed instead of depleted (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). According to De Vos *et al.*, achieving such a person-career fit is characterized by happiness, health and productivity, and these three elements should be somewhat balanced across the lifespan. Moreover, career sustainability is not only about individual agency but also contextual (e.g. organizational, national and cultural context) and temporal (e.g. events and changes) factors. As the sustainable career perspective offers a systemic and dynamic take on employability development, it seems particularly suited for research bridging the graduate and worker employability fields. Indeed, we have done so in several of our recent articles. For example, two recent book chapters by Akkermans *et al.* (2021a) and De Vos *et al.* (2019) used the sustainable career perspective to explain how the school-to-work transition has changed from a one-off decision to an ongoing series of learning cycles. Employability is a core factor in this dynamic perspective on the initial transition to work. This was confirmed in a recent systematic literature review of the school-to-work transition literature by Blokker *et al.* (2023), which used sustainable careers as an organizing framework and included employability as one of the outcomes of a successful transition into work.

From the graduate employability perspective, Donald *et al.* (2020) and Donald and Jackson (2023) also incorporated the sustainable career perspective as one of the theoretical foundations in their work on graduate employability and initial career entry. These works emphasize the development of personal capital resources, career ownership and a commitment to lifelong and lifewide learning during university years as critical antecedents to sustainable careers, coupled with the ability to signal their employability through a coherent and appealing employability narrative that connects them with prospective employers. Overall, though we certainly do not advocate using only one theoretical perspective in our research on employability, we believe the sustainable career perspective may be a helpful way of reconciling the graduate and worker employability research streams.

#### *Graduate and worker employability among underrepresented groups*

One issue we have not touched upon much in this article until now is the dominant focus in both graduate and worker employability research on theoretically trained individuals. This trend is clearly visible in graduate employability research, which is often published in *higher*



education journals, thereby almost by default excluding non-highly educated (or, as we prefer to say, theoretically schooled) individuals. Though not as explicitly visible in journal names, the worker employability literature also heavily leans on research among so-called *white-collar* workers. However, employability research among practically schooled or vocationally trained people is much less common. In addition to vocational and educational differences, there are many groups underrepresented so far in the employability research domain. For example, graduate and worker employability scholars could collaborate to better understand employability development among people from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, individuals with mental or physical disabilities, and those who are pursuing non-standard career paths characterized by, for example, entrepreneurship, freelancing and gig work. While employability-building activities such as work-integrated learning and peer mentoring can be transformational for everyone, systemic barriers may inhibit their engagement and there is a critical need for more inclusive practice and greater stakeholder support (Donald and Ford, 2023; Jackson *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, it is critical to adopt a broader focus to understand employability development among underrepresented and potentially disadvantaged groups, as there may be an increasing “employability gap” between the “haves” and the “have nots” if left unstudied and unsupported (see, e.g. Forrier *et al.*, 2018).

### A turn to our colleagues

In this final section of our article, we turn to our fellow authors, reviewers and editors who are active in the area of employability research. After all, building stronger connections between graduate and worker employability research starts with the people conducting and assessing the research. Therefore, we end this article by highlighting several observations and suggestions that we hope will lead to more fruitful collaborations and cross-over of knowledge.

First, we encourage you all – including us! – to look beyond our usual and comfortable research silos when conducting employability research. We realize there is a lot of new research emerging even within each stream, let alone across the two streams, making it difficult to keep track of the latest insights. Still, our article shows there is considerable overlap in how we theorize and conceptualize employability, thereby offering many opportunities for mutual learning. Therefore, we believe it would be helpful and enriching for our research if we would actively try to search for (new) employability research outside of the “usual suspect” journals that we may follow. For example, educational researchers could consult the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* or *Career Development International*, whereas career researchers could examine *Studies in Higher Education*. More broadly speaking, using varied keywords and being open to research from a domain that might be less familiar would be an important first step toward finding each other’s work and being able to use it to advance our knowledge of employability. This argument also applies to reviewers and editors, who are likely used to a certain theoretical or conceptual perspective on employability. Yet, when you review or edit a manuscript leveraging insights from “the other” side of employability research, please be open to them and consider whether it might enrich the current understanding of employability in your specific area. Also, for editors specifically, it would be valuable to invite reviewers from both streams when manuscripts on employability are submitted, as it would enhance the odds of receiving balanced reviews that incorporate insights from both areas.

On a related note, we want to call attention to another issue that prevents the effective sharing of knowledge between the graduate and worker employability streams. When preparing and writing this article, we became increasingly aware of some differences in research approaches between the two fields. More specifically, it seems that there are different perceptions of “what good research is” and “how research should be done” between

---

the educational (i.e. graduate employability) and career and psychology (i.e. worker employability) journals. These differences can be quite fundamental (e.g. the focus on theoretical versus practical implications) but also seemingly small (e.g. the choice of words and writing style). Hence, although we share an interest in a similar topic (with a somewhat different focus) and study it in similar ways (and experience the same issues – e.g. conceptual fuzziness), integration is and will remain difficult as long as the rules of the game are different. It is almost as if we play a similar game in a different league. Therefore, this is an open invitation to journal editors and reviewers to question their own rules of the game and be open to different “ways of doing”. Moreover, it is, once again, a call for more collaboration between researchers, as the best way of getting to know each other’s rules of the game is by actively discussing them and working together on projects.

### Conclusion

Before setting out to write this article, we felt that stronger connections were necessary between the graduate and worker employability streams. During the process, we became even more convinced of this. Indeed, through our conversations and writing process, we have learned much from each other. In that sense, this project embodies exactly what we hope will happen more broadly in research on employability: more conversations and collaborations between graduate and worker employability researchers. This could happen through joint research, special issues, conferences and many other ways. But they all start with the same thing: making connections. So let’s connect!

### Notes

1. Though some reviews of the graduate employability are available, they typically focus on specific themes within this literature, such as stakeholder perspectives (Cheng *et al.*, 2022), transnational education (Schueller, 2023) or employability capital (Donald *et al.*, 2023).

### References

- Akkermans, J. and Kubash, S. (2017), “Trending topics in careers: a review and future research agenda”, *Career Development International*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 586-627, doi: [10.1108/CDI-08-2017-0143](https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-08-2017-0143).
- Akkermans, J., Blokker, R., Buers, C., Van der Heijden, B.I.J.M. and De Vos, A. (2021a), “Ready, set, go! School-to-work transition in the new career”, in Marshall, A. and Symonds, J. (Eds), *Young Adult Development at the School-To-Work Transition: International Pathways and Processes*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 77-106, doi: [10.1093/oso/9780190941512.003.0004](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190941512.003.0004).
- Akkermans, J., Rodrigues, R., Mol, S.T., Seibert, S.E. and Khapova, S.N. (2021b), “The role of career shocks in contemporary career development: key challenges and ways forward”, *Career Development International*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 453-466, doi: [10.1108/CDI-07-2021-0172](https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-07-2021-0172).
- Akkermans, J., Tomlinson, M. and Anderson, V. (2023), “Initial employability development: introducing a conceptual model integrating signalling and social exchange mechanisms”, *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. (ahead-of-print), No. (ahead-of-print). doi: [10.1080/1359432X.2023.2186783](https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2023.2186783).
- Becker, G.S. (1964), *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 15-28.
- Blokker, R., Akkermans, J., Marciniak, J., Jansen, P.G.W. and Khapova, S.N. (2023), “Organizing school-to-work transition research from a sustainable career perspective: a review and research agenda”, *Work, Aging and Retirement*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 239-261, doi: [10.1093/workar/waad012](https://doi.org/10.1093/workar/waad012).

- Bridgstock, R. and Jackson, D. (2019), "Strategic institutional approaches to graduate employability: navigating meanings, measurements and what really matters", *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, Vol. 41 No. 5, pp. 468-484.
- Brown, P., Hesketh, A. and Williams, S. (2004), *The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Byington, E.K., Felps, W. and Baruch, Y. (2019), "Mapping the journal of vocational behavior: a 23-year review", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 110, pp. 229-244, doi: [10.1016/j.jvb.2018.07.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.07.007).
- Cheng, M., Adekola, O., Albia, J. and Cai, S. (2022), "Employability in higher education: a review of key stakeholders' perspectives", *Higher Education Evaluation and Development*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 16-31, doi: [10.1108/HEED-03-2021-0025](https://doi.org/10.1108/HEED-03-2021-0025).
- Clarke, M. (2018), "Rethinking graduate employability: the role of capital, individual attributes and context", *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 43 No. 11, pp. 1923-1937, doi: [10.1080/03075079.2017.1294152](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1294152).
- Cropanzano, R. and Mitchell, M.S. (2005), "Social exchange theory: an interdisciplinary review", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 31 No. 6, pp. 874-900, doi: [10.1177/0149206305279602](https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206305279602).
- De Cuyper, N., Mäkikangas, A., Kinnunen, U., Mauno, S. and De Witte, H. (2012), "Cross-lagged associations between perceived employability, job insecurity and exhaustion: testing gain and loss spirals according to the COR theory", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 33 No. 6, pp. 770-788, doi: [10.1002/job.1800](https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1800).
- De Vos, A., Akkermans, J. and Van der Heijden, B.I.J.M. (2019), "From occupational choice to career crafting", in Gunz, H., Lazarova, M. and Mayrhofer, W. (Eds), *The Routledge Companion to Career Studies*, Routledge, Oxon, NY, pp. 128-142.
- De Vos, A., Van der Heijden, B.I.J.M. and Akkermans, J. (2020), "Sustainable careers: towards a conceptual model", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 117, 103196, doi: [10.1016/j.jvb.2018.06.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.06.011).
- De Vos, A., Jacobs, S. and Verbruggen, M. (2021), "Career transitions and employability", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 126, 103475, doi: [10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103475](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103475).
- Delva, J., Forrier, A. and De Cuyper, N. (2021), "Integrating agency and structure in employability: bourdieu's theory of practice", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 127, 103579, doi: [10.1016/j.jvb.2021.103579](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2021.103579).
- Donald, W.E. and Ford, N. (2023), "Fostering social mobility and employability: the case for peer learning", *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 28 No. 3, pp. 672-678, doi: [10.1080/13562517.2022.2145467](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2022.2145467).
- Donald, W.E. and Jackson, D. (2022), "Subjective wellbeing among university students and recent graduates: evidence from the United Kingdom", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Vol. 19 No. 11, p. 6911, doi: [10.3390/ijerph19116911](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19116911).
- Donald, W.E. and Jackson, D. (2023), "Sustainable career ecosystems: setting the scene", in Donald, W.E. (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Sustainable Career Ecosystems for University Students and Graduates*, IGI Global, PA, pp. 1-13, doi: [10.4018/978-1-6684-7442-6.ch001](https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-7442-6.ch001).
- Donald, W.E., Baruch, Y. and Ashleigh, M.J. (2019), "The undergraduate self-perceptions of employability: human capital, careers advice and career ownership", *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 44 No. 4, pp. 599-614, doi: [10.1080/03075079.2017.1387107](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1387107).
- Donald, W.E., Baruch, Y. and Ashleigh, M.J. (2020), "Striving for sustainable graduate careers: conceptualization via career ecosystems and the new psychological contract", *Career Development International*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 90-110, doi: [10.1108/cdi-03-2019-0079](https://doi.org/10.1108/cdi-03-2019-0079).
- Donald, W.E., Baruch, Y. and Ashleigh, M.J. (2023), "Construction and operationalisation of an employability capital growth model (ECGM) via a systematic literature review (2016-2022)", *Studies in Higher Education*. doi: [10.1080/03075079.2023.2219270](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2219270).
- Farrugia, D. (2021), "Youth, work and 'career' as a way of talking about the self", *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 35 No. 5, pp. 856-871, doi: [10.1177/0950017020947576](https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017020947576).

- 
- Forrier, A. and Sels, L. (2003), "The concept of employability: a complex mosaic", *Human Resources Development Management*, Vol. 3, pp. 102-124, doi: [10.1504/IJHRDM.2003.002414](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJHRDM.2003.002414).
- Forrier, A., Sels, L. and Stynen, D. (2009), "Career mobility at the intersection between agent and structure: a conceptual model", *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 82 No. 4, pp. 739-759, In the issues, doi: [10.1348/096317909X470933](https://doi.org/10.1348/096317909X470933).
- Forrier, A., Verbruggen, M. and De Cuyper, N. (2015), "Integrating different notions of employability in a dynamic chain: the relationship between job transitions, movement capital and perceived employability", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 89, pp. 56-64.
- Forrier, A., De Cuyper, N. and Akkermans, J. (2018), "The winner takes it all, the loser has to fall: provoking the agency perspective in employability research", *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 4, pp. 511-523, doi: [10.1111/1748-8583.12206](https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12206).
- Fugate, M. and Kinicki, A.J. (2008), "A dispositional approach to employability: development of a measure and test of implications for employee reactions to organizational change", *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 81 No. 3, pp. 503-527, doi: [10.1348/096317907X241579](https://doi.org/10.1348/096317907X241579).
- Fugate, M., Van der Heijden, B.I.J.M., De Vos, A., Forrier, A. and De Cuyper, N. (2021), "Is what's past prologue? A review and agenda for contemporary employability research", *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 15 No. 1, doi: [10.5465/annals.2018.0171](https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2018.0171).
- Grosemans, I., De Cuyper, N., Forrier, A. and Vansteenkiste, S. (2023), "Graduation is not the end, it is just the beginning: change in perceived employability in the transition associated with graduation", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 145, Article 103915, doi: [10.1016/j.jvb.2023.103915](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2023.103915).
- Guilbert, L., Carrein, C., Guénoilé, N., Monfray, L., Rossier, J. and Priolo, D. (2018), "Relationship between perceived organizational support, proactive personality, and perceived employability in workers over 50", *Journal of Employment Counseling*, Vol. 55 No. 2, pp. 58-71, doi: [10.1002/joec.12075](https://doi.org/10.1002/joec.12075).
- Harari, M.B., McCombs, K. and Wiernik, B.M. (2021), "Movement Capital, RAW model, or circumstances? A meta-analysis of perceived employability predictors", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 131, 103657, doi: [10.1016/j.jvb.2021.103657](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2021.103657).
- Healy, M. (2023), "Careers and employability learning: pedagogical principles for higher education", *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 48 No. 8, pp. 1303-1314, doi: [10.1080/03075079.2023.2196997](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2196997).
- Healy, M., Hammer, S. and McIlveen, P. (2022), "Mapping graduate employability and career development in higher education research: a citation network analysis", *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 47 No. 1, pp. 799-811, doi: [10.1080/03075079.2020.1804851](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1804851).
- Hobfoll, S.E. (1989), "Conservation of resources: a new attempt at conceptualizing stress", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 44 No. 3, pp. 513-524, doi: [10.1037/0003-066X.44.3.513](https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.44.3.513).
- Hobfoll, S.E., Halbesleben, J., Neveu, J.-P. and Westman, M. (2018), "Conservation of resources in the organizational context: the reality of resources and their consequences", *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 5, pp. 103-128, doi: [10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032117-104640](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032117-104640).
- Hooley, T. and Sultana, R.G. (Eds) (2019), *Career Guidance for Social Justice: Contesting Neoliberalism*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxfordshire.
- Jabeen, Q., Nadeem, M.S., Raziq, M.M. and Sajjad, A. (2022), "Linking individuals' resources with (perceived) sustainable employability: perspectives from conservation of resources and social information processing theory", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 233-254, doi: [10.1111/ijmr.12276](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12276).
- Jackson, D. and Bridgstock, R. (2018), "Evidencing student success and graduate employability in the contemporary world-of-work: renewing our thinking", *Higher Education Research and Development*, Vol. 37 No. 5, pp. 984-998, doi: [10.1080/07294360.2018.1469603](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1469603).
- Jackson, D. and Wilton, N. (2017), "Career choice status among undergraduates and the influence of career management competencies and perceived employability", *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol. 30 No. 5, pp. 552-569, doi: [10.1080/13639080.2016.1255314](https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2016.1255314).

- Jackson, D., Dean, B. and Eady, M. (2023), "Equity and inclusion in work-integrated learning: participation and outcomes for diverse student groups", *Educational Review*. doi: [10.1080/00131911.2023.2182764](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2182764).
- Marginson, S. (2019), "Limitations of human capital theory", *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 44 No. 2, pp. 287-301, doi: [10.1080/03075079.2017.1359823](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1359823).
- Minocha, S., Hristov, D. and Reynolds, M. (2017), "From graduate employability to employment: policy and practice in UK higher education", *International Journal of Training and Development*, Vol. 21 No. 3, pp. 235-248, doi: [10.1111/ijtd.12105](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijtd.12105).
- Nimmi, P.M., Kuriakose, V., Donald, W.E. and Nowfal, M. (2021), "HERO elements of psychological capital: fostering career sustainability via resource caravans", *Australian Journal of Career Development*, Vol. 30 No. 3, pp. 199-210, doi: [10.1177/10384162211066378](https://doi.org/10.1177/10384162211066378).
- Römgens, I., Scoupe, R. and Beusaert, S. (2020), "Unraveling the concept of employability, bringing together research on employability in higher education and the workplace", *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 45 No. 12, pp. 2588-2603, doi: [10.1080/03075079.2019.1623770](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1623770).
- Schreurs, B., Duff, A., Le Blanc, P.M. and Stone, T.H. (2022), "Publishing quantitative careers research: challenges and recommendations", *Career Development International*, Vol. 27 No. 1, pp. 79-98, doi: [10.1108/CDI-08-2021-0217](https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-08-2021-0217).
- Schueller, J. (2023), "Transnational education, labor market outcomes and graduate employability: a scoping review", *Career Development International*, Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 196-216, doi: [10.1108/CDI-05-2022-0121](https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-05-2022-0121).
- Tholen, G. (2015), "What can research into graduate employability tell us about agency and structure?", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 36 No. 5, pp. 766-784, doi: [10.1080/01425692.2013.847782](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.847782).
- Tomlinson, M. (2012), "Graduate employability: a review of conceptual and empirical themes", *Higher Education Policy*, Vol. 25, pp. 407-431, doi: [10.1057/hep.2011.26](https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2011.26).
- Tomlinson, M. (2017), "Forms of graduate capital and their relationship to graduate employability", *Education + Training*, Vol. 59 No. 4, pp. 338-352, doi: [10.1108/ET-05-2016-0090](https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-05-2016-0090).
- Van Dam, K. (2004), "Antecedents and consequences of employability orientation", *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 29-51, doi: [10.1080/13594320344000237](https://doi.org/10.1080/13594320344000237).
- Van der Heijde, C.M. and Van der Heijden, B.I.J.M. (2006), "A competence-based and multidimensional operationalization and measurement of employability", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 45 No. 3, pp. 449-476, doi: [10.1002/hrm.20119](https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.20119).
- Van Harten, J., De Cuyper, N., Guest, D., Fugate, M., Knies, E. and Forrier, A. (2020), "Introduction to special issue on HRM and employability: mutual gains or conflicting outcomes?", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 31 No. 9, pp. 1095-1105, doi: [10.1080/09585192.2020.1740457](https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2020.1740457).
- Van Harten, J., De Cuyper, N., Knies, E. and Forrier, A. (2022), "Taking the temperature of employability research: a systematic review of interrelationships across and within conceptual strands", *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 145-159, doi: [10.1080/1359432X.2021.1942847](https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2021.1942847).
- Vanhercke, D., De Cuyper, N., Peeters, E. and De Witte, H. (2014), "Defining perceived employability: a psychological approach", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 43 No. 4, pp. 592-605, doi: [10.1108/PR-07-2012-0110](https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-07-2012-0110).

### Corresponding author

Jos Akkermans can be contacted at: [j.akkermans@vu.nl](mailto:j.akkermans@vu.nl)

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

[www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)