

# 46 Connecting conceptual and practical dimensions of employability

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## Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

## Abstract

This paper draws on existing literature and research to contribute towards addressing a key challenge and long-time debate regarding the relationship between higher education and employability. This paper expounds a tri-dimensional conceptual framework that captures the opportunities, complexities, and challenges in making connections between higher education and employability. Three dimensions of employability are put forward: outcomes, process, and conceptual approaches. The presenters will discuss the connections and distinctions between the three approaches, contributing to scholarly debates and discourses on what conceptual employability is. Crucially, empirical research and theoretical constructs will be drawn upon to support the categorisation of employability into three distinct, though interrelated dimensions, proposed by the presenter in their co-authored article recognised in 2023 as a top cited paper in the Higher Education Quarterly journal. The presenters will discuss the practical implications of adopting the conceptual framework for research-policy engagement on a major higher education agenda.

## Full paper

This conference presentation serves three purposes. First, speaking to the purpose of SRHE, it shares a successful research story that started from a panel presentation at the 2019 SRHE conference in Newport which in itself inspired a collaborative special issue published in Higher Education Quarterly Journal in 2021. The editorial paper, co-authored by the presenters was recognised in 2023 as a top cited article in the journal, demonstrating impact and resonance with a wider audience. Second, since meeting at a workshop organised in 2014 by the SRHE, the presenters demonstrate how SRHE events and conferences facilitate a nurturing environment for established academics and newer researchers to build a strong academic relationship together. It is important to be intentional in our discussion about the value of this nurturing collaboration which is often not discussed but crucially important and perfectly aligned to SRHE's aim and commitment to providing a platform for collaboration and exchange of ideas to advance research and scholarship. The third and central aim of our presentation is to share the conceptual framework we proposed in our editorial paper. The paper proposes a conceptual framing of employability from three interrelated dimensions; outcomes, process, and conceptual approaches. The presentation offers an opportunity as researcher and university leader/policy-maker to articulate how our proposed tri-dimensional framework captures the opportunities, complexities, and challenges in making connections between higher education and employability. Hence, we make a case for linking academic research and policy development, which as noted in the conference call, remains a perennial issue in higher education. Related to the topic of our presentation, we suggest that continuing contestation with academic-policy engagement is underpinned by a lack of clarification as to what conceptual employability is. We aim to contribute to addressing this well-discussed conceptual fog. A key starting point is the limitation of a dominant normative framing of employability from a human capital conceptual approach which is contested when causally measured based on employment outcomes. We propose that a process approach allows institutions to assess the employability development opportunities available for students. Our presentation will highlight the connection and the distinction between the outcomes, process, and conceptual approaches. We will draw on empirical research and prominent as well as emerging theoretical constructs (Cashian, 2017; Clarke, 2018; Fakunle & Higson, 2021; Harvey, 2001; Suleman, 2018; Tomlinson, and Holmes, 2017) to support the categorisation of employability into the three dimensions proposed in our framework. This paper thus provides a novel analytical lens for assessing and enacting research-policy engagement on a major issue that surrounds the practical integration of employability in the delivery of higher education in a globalised world.

## References

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