

STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYABILITY AND THE RELEVANCE OF SKILLS - TOWARDS A SYSTEMIC DESIGN FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a systemic employability design framework to address the mismatch between stakeholders' current views of employability and the relevance of skills. A qualitative approach using systems thinking was deployed, and participants from relevant government departments, the private sector, HEI, and graduate employees from two telecommunication organizations were selected through purposive sampling. A thematic approach was used to analyze the data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The data was captured using ATLAS.ti, and thematic analysis was conducted. Key factors contributing to the mismatch included the lack of an ecosystem, stakeholder collaboration, lack of understanding of the relevance of skills, employability skills as an asset, inadequate education systems reform, socio-economic factors, macroeconomic context, employability mindset, lack of a focused strategy and employability awareness. A framework is recommended for a sector-specific ecosystem design that could foster stakeholder collaboration, including a shared understanding of employability, shared objectives and ways of working and formalized partnerships for implementation and scalability. Relevant skills should be defined and career paths integrated at all levels of education, including bridging into other sectors or opportunities. Sector-specific focused strategies should be developed, including employability-defined outcomes that can be measured, evaluated, and reported holistically to ensure stakeholder accountability. A strategy should be developed to engage individuals on employability and create awareness of career paths enabled through face-to-face and digital guidance.

Keywords: employability; stakeholder collaboration; skills, systems thinking.

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1. Introduction

The global decolonization of education (Geneva Graduate Institute, 2021) and the call for education to address unemployment amidst the fourth and fifth industrial revolutions (World Economic Forum, 2020) highlight pressing concerns. The mismatch between stakeholders' current perspectives on employability (Scandurra, Kelly, Fusaro, Cefal, & Hermann, 2023) and the relevance of skills demanded by jobs (World Economic Forum, 2023) underscore the need for action to address the mismatch. Therefore, governments, policymakers, and training institutions must comprehend what actions must be taken to rectify the situation or address the inherent challenges.

Unemployment is a global phenomenon (World Economic Forum, 2023), with the significant concern being its upward trajectory (Maisiri, et al., 2019) against the background of the impact of the fourth and fifth industrial revolutions and the resultant disruption on the skills demand (Maisiri & van Dyk, 2021). The fourth and fifth industrial revolutions are the current and developing environments in which the pace of technological advancements and digitization are changing how we live and work. The fourth industrial revolution has several implications for education and skills development, including rethinking education systems and developing more creative and innovative approaches (Kayembe & Nel, 2019). Several researchers (Manyika, Lund, Chui, Bughin, Woetzel, Batra, Ko, & Sanghvi, 2017) posited that “the automation of most jobs will continue until the arrival of the fifth industrial revolution, which will lead to a decline in demand for traditional employment”. In 2030, approximately 400 million to 800 million people will be displaced by automation worldwide; therefore, these people must find new jobs (Ali, Al-Sultan, & Al Rubaie, 2022).

From a macroeconomic perspective, a lack of employability opportunities contributes to frictional and structural unemployment and affects the labour force's productivity (Pologeorgis, 2023). The result is an impact on the standard of living of a country, as measured by its gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, and on its economic growth potential, measured by aggregate demand and the GDP (Pologeorgis, 2023), where consumer spending has the most significant impact on GDP and economic growth. When consumers do not spend on goods and services, businesses do not invest in capital and labour or expand to meet changing consumer demands. As a result, the economy slows down, and unemployment increases, setting the stage for an economic recession. Therefore, employability is vital to a nation's labour force and society's well-being (Pologeorgis, 2023). According to some researchers (Lorraine, Xia, Coutts, & Adam, 2022), governments are grappling to adequately respond to the rapid pace of labour market change through digitalization and automation, as public policies to protect workers lag in digital transformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a reconceptualization of the nature of work and the workplace and has accelerated the digital transformation, expediting labour market disruption and the shift of government services and people's livelihoods onto virtual and digital platforms (Lorraine et al., 2022). New business models in organizations and

evolving worker preferences create new types of work, which are viewed as disruptive to the traditional norms of permanent full-time dependent employment (OECD, 2019).

The employability debate has generated numerous papers, funded research projects, conferences, and policy statements over the past 15-20 years, both within the higher education sector and from close stakeholders, including employers, government agencies, and academia. A macro-level debate about the relationship between employability and economic growth (Cashian, Clarke, Richardson, & Mark, 2015) is, however, ignored. Despite efforts to address the concerns, the same narrative is still evident (International Labour Organisation, 2020), with higher levels of unemployment being posited, notably among the youth (World Economic Forum, 2023).

There is thus a need to clarify the current situation, given that the discourse on employability remains tethered by traditional notions of jobs, skills, and education. A shift in perspective advocates for a holistic reassessment, encompassing changes in the definitions of work and the recognition of a new set of fundamental skills essential for navigating a world, challenging the conventional notions about the permanence of jobs (Deloitte Human Capital Trends Report, 2023).

2. Literature Review

The OECD (2019) posits technological progress, globalization, and ageing populations as the most cited labour market trends. It analyses their implications for job quantity, job quality, and inclusiveness, the three critical dimensions of the OECD Jobs Strategy framework (OECD, 2018). The United Nations (2020) elaborated on the five megatrends: climate change, demographic shifts, particularly ageing, urbanization, the emergence of digital technologies in the fourth industrial revolution, and inequalities, stating its impact on sustainable development, given its causality and by asserting that "the megatrends do not merely influence each other; they also often act in combination, reinforcing their impacts. For example, existing inequalities in education and income can explain some of the technological divides between different groups in society, and they can intensify adverse consequences as continued technological innovation deepens existing inequalities" (United Nations, 2020, p. 4).

Decision-makers and employees face massive systemic changes affecting their future working lives and communities, relating to new skills required, job quality, and the high prevalence of skill mismatches and inclusivity (Lorraine, et al., 2022). While unemployment is a global phenomenon (World Economic Forum, 2023), with the significant concern being its upward trajectory (Maisiri, et al., 2019), digital technologies do not simply affect the volume of jobs; they also transform how work is conceptualized and how people perform their jobs. In 2025, the World Economic Forum (2023) estimates that 85 million jobs may be lost due to a shift between humans and machines, while 97 million new roles may be created as humans, machines, and algorithms integrate. By 2025, humans and machines will work equally on tasks. Therefore, for

many workers, the principal effect of digitalization will be felt through changes in the nature and content of work within a transformed work environment.

The impact of digital change on work and employment is multifaceted (Lorraine, et al., 2022). However, there are increasing concerns about the quality of some new jobs. If large segments of the workforce cannot benefit from the promising opportunities the economy generates, worker disparities may increase. The most critical challenge for policymakers is to prevent such growing inequalities. Failing to do so will result in a future of work with more profound social cleavages and increasing discontent, which could negatively impact productivity, growth, well-being, and social cohesion (OECD, 2019). In this context, Lorraine et al. posited that digitalization has posed new challenges to the world of work.

The International Labour Organisation (2021, p. 15) reports that the world faces unprecedented challenges that will profoundly impact employees, businesses, economies, and societies. Skills development and lifelong learning are essential in enabling enterprises, workers, and institutions to adapt to and shape megatrends and seize opportunities, which calls for adjusting policies and systems. The global skills mismatch, low-paid and low-productivity jobs, informal sector problems, significant unemployment, and resulting socio-economic and political issues have made employability a top priority on the policy agenda of most political actors (Singh and Ehlers, 2020). These authors further contend that the fourth industrial revolution, focused on AI and globalization, is driving structural shifts in the labour market, which require policy actors to reconsider their education policies. The government relies on education policies, especially lifelong learning policies, to ensure that individuals remain in the labour market for as long as possible. This, however, assumes that the education curriculum, skills, and outcomes are aligned with the needs of the labour market, which is not necessarily the case, given that its relevance is questioned (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Some researchers (Williams, Dodd, Steele, & Randall, 2016) concluded that the employability construct must first be defined and its components identified to address the relevance of skills and state that "presently, dissatisfaction has been voiced around how employability is assessed, for example, within Higher Education (HE)." This supports the mismatch (Scandurra et al., 2023) of the current views on employability (Tymon, 2013) and the need for a systemic and transdisciplinary approach (Gibbons et al., 1994; Carayannis, 2016) to address the relevance of skills (Artress, 2017). Scandurra et al. (2023), citing Philpott (1999), also criticized the term employability as a fuzzy notion, often ill-defined and sometimes not defined at all, and is a buzzword that is more frequently used than properly understood. The authors argued that several definitions of employability are available in the literature to date, citing Cheng et al. (2022), who noted that perceptions differ among stakeholders. Several researchers (Cheng et al., 2022; Mawson & Haworth, 2018; Oliver, 2015; Wilks et al., 2017) posit that the

literature consensus is that employability is core to HE. Employability has varied understandings among key stakeholders in higher education (Sin, et al., 2017), resulting in a lack of coherence regarding its meaning and subsequent measurement (Tymon, 2013). Therefore, an agreed definition of employability has been called for to ensure that higher education institutions (HEIs), employers, and policymakers are all working towards similar goals (Small, et al., 2017, p. 16).

A clear understanding of how different stakeholders understand employability must be developed, since employability implies the positional dimension of being employable without necessarily being employed (Brown, et al., 2003). In addition, stakeholders' definition of their part in achieving employability must also be clarified. There are many differences beyond the term's meaning because they focus on how employability should be developed, how it can be developed, and the responsibility of various stakeholders in providing it (Tymon, 2013). In the absence of clarification on what employability means and what role HEIs or other stakeholders should play in achieving it, there will be confusion about accountability and measurement within a particular sector and context.

In the past 15-20 years, various sources within the HE sector, as well as closely associated stakeholders such as employer organizations and government-sponsored reports, have contributed to the employability debate by submitting papers, funding research projects, conferences, and policy statements. Leaving aside the macro-level debate around the relationship between employability and economic growth. Employability 'skills' - or 'attributes' as the more recent term suggests - have a long history (Cashian et al., 2015). The approach has generally focused on employers' perceptions of what they expect and the skills or attributes graduates require to succeed in the labour market. This approach has produced numerous lists of employability skills, sometimes called soft skills.

Cashian et al. (2015) posit that much of the work on employability focuses strongly on undergraduate students and big business. While both areas are essential, several issues of increasing importance are rarely discussed, let alone subjected to empirical inquiry. Employability-related practice-based work is often focused on finding out 'what works' through case studies and individual examples of practice. However, it does not consider what 'employability' truly means and whether focusing on acquiring 'skills and attributes' is the correct approach. According to some researchers, the study of employability differs across disciplines (Römgens, Scoupe & Beausaert, 2020), hence the need for a more integrated approach.

Several researchers (Siivonen, Isopahkala-Bouret, Tomlinson, Korhonen & Haltia, 2023) posit that employability can be understood as a "socially and culturally mediated phenomenon, a social process, and an object of study." Brown et al. (2003) state that the term employability implies "the positional dimension of being employable, but not necessarily in employment," a significant definition of employability that stakeholders do not necessarily understand in this study. Siivonen et al. (2023) argue that employment and employability are often used interchangeably and further posit that

employability has become a normative ideal that sets new demands for graduates, as they are in continual need of development and ensuring their suitability and potential for future jobs.

According to an insights report (World Economic Forum, 2023), between the period of 2023-2027, approximately 83 million jobs are projected to be lost between 2023 and 2027, and 69 million jobs will be created, resulting in a structural churn of 152 million jobs, constituting 23% of the 673 million employees studied, and a loss of 14 million jobs, or 2% in employment. Many developing economies (World Economic Forum, 2023) have experienced a comparatively slow labour market recovery from the disruptions induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, with formal unemployment in South Africa increasing to 30% by Q4 2022, 5% higher than the pre-pandemic period. The COVID-19 pandemic expedited the predicted impact on jobs from 2030 to 2020 (World Economic Forum, 2018), which is evident in South Africa.

In South Africa (SA), for the second quarter of 2023, unemployment was recorded at 32,6%, comprising people, translating to 7,9 million individuals, with the expanded unemployment rate being 42.1%, or 11,9 million (Stats SA, 2023). Youth unemployment, aged 15-24, recorded the highest unemployment rates of 60,7%, making them more vulnerable to unemployment than the older age groups (Stats SA, 2023). In SA, varied views and concerns have also been raised at a 4IR colloquium (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2019) discussing the current state of unemployment and how 4IR will affect employment in South Africa in the future, since robots and machines are now doing work that used to be done by humans. In these views, South Africa could lead the African continent in technological advances if the government stayed at the forefront of pioneering 4IR policies and plans to ensure employment does not suffer a setback during the COVID-19 pandemic, but reskilling would need to occur. As a result of the unpreparedness during the initial lockdown, 2.24 million jobs were lost. In the second quarter of 2021, employment remained 1.44 million lower than before the lockdown, masking the possibility of preexisting inequality deepening (Altman, 2022).

The deeper concerns are about stakeholders' current views on employability (Scandurra, et al., 2023) and the mismatch (World Economic Forum, 2023). These views have been evident since more than a decade ago (World Economic Forum, 2013) when key stakeholders consistently discussed the need for alignment to address the mismatch in the impact of education and debate whether the problem is structural or systemic; however, the term employability, itself, a 'buzzword,' more often used than properly understood (Scandurra et al., 2023 citing Philpott, 1999). This shift in perspective advocates for a holistic reassessment, encompassing changes in the definitions of work and the recognition of a new set of fundamental skills essential for navigating a world, challenging conventional notions about the permanence of jobs (Deloitte Human Capital Trends Report, 2023).

The above scenario warrants a study to address the mismatch between the stakeholders' current views of employability and the relevance of the skills by developing a systemic employability design framework to implicitly address the challenges. Thus, this study will aim to develop a conceptual framework to facilitate an "outside-in" approach that could address the mismatch (World Economic Forum, 2023) between the stakeholders' current views (Tymon, 2013) of employability and the relevance of skills (Artress, 2017) for a systemic employability design. A systemic employability design should include all the key concepts and factors that contribute to the current views of employability, be responsive to learning, be sustainable, and be modified in different contexts. In light of the above, this study aims to assess the current views of government, employers, the private sector, HEIs, and graduates on employability and the relevance of skills, critically analyze key factors contributing to the mismatch between stakeholders' current views of employability and the relevance of skills and evaluate the mismatch between stakeholders' current views of employability and the relevance of skills and develop a conceptual framework of a systemic employability design responsive to learning and address the mismatch.

3. Research Methodology

The problem that this study intends to address is the mismatch between the stakeholders' current views of employability (Scandurra, et al., 2023) and the relevance of the skills (World Economic Forum, 2023) for a systemic employability design. The researcher is therefore approaching this problem from a systems thinking, "outside-in" approach, given the complexity of the research problem, by using systems thinking to elicit participation to understand the current views (Tymon, 2013) of employability and the relevance of skills (Artress, 2017), to develop a conceptual framework for a systemic employability design. For this study, the current views on employability (Tymon, 2013) will be those of government, employers, HEIs, and graduates, with the addition of private sector organizations challenging the status quo and driving initiatives for employability.

The researcher's paradigm for this study will be from an interpretive perspective, adopting a relativist (Gerrard, 1991) position and using a systems thinking approach, given that this research aims to gain perspectives and insights from people related to the problem, which are the current views. Gerrard (1991) stated, "To adopt the relativist approach is to accept that the interpretive process is indeterminate." Therefore, an interpretive stance will be evident since an interpretive perspective allows researchers to better understand a particular phenomenon and its complexity in its unique context rather than generalizing knowledge to the whole population (Creswell, 2018).

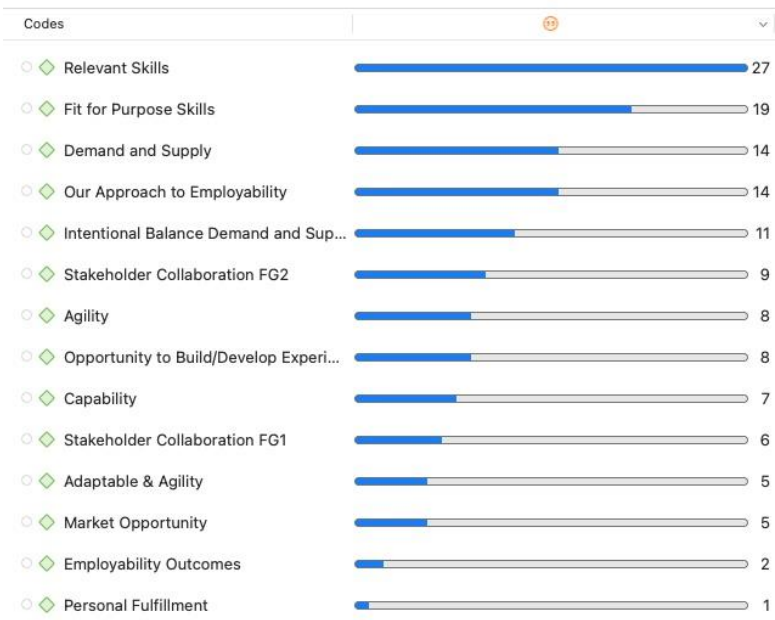
Given this study's complexity and relativist approach, the researcher has elected to adopt an ontological view of subjectivism, given that relativism implies that all views are important and aims to understand their views on the problem. From an epistemological perspective, the researcher has adopted an interpretive and systems thinking lens to

view the problem. Data was collected through focus groups and one-on-one interviews with a purposeful sample of respondents, selected from relevant government departments, the private sector, HEI, and employees, including graduates employed in two (2) telecommunication organizations and recorded via MS Teams. The data was transcribed and captured using ATLAS.ti for further coding and analysis.

4. Research Findings

Figure 1 reflects the merged emerging themes from the two focus group interviews.

Figure 1: Emerging Themes from Focus Groups 1 and 2



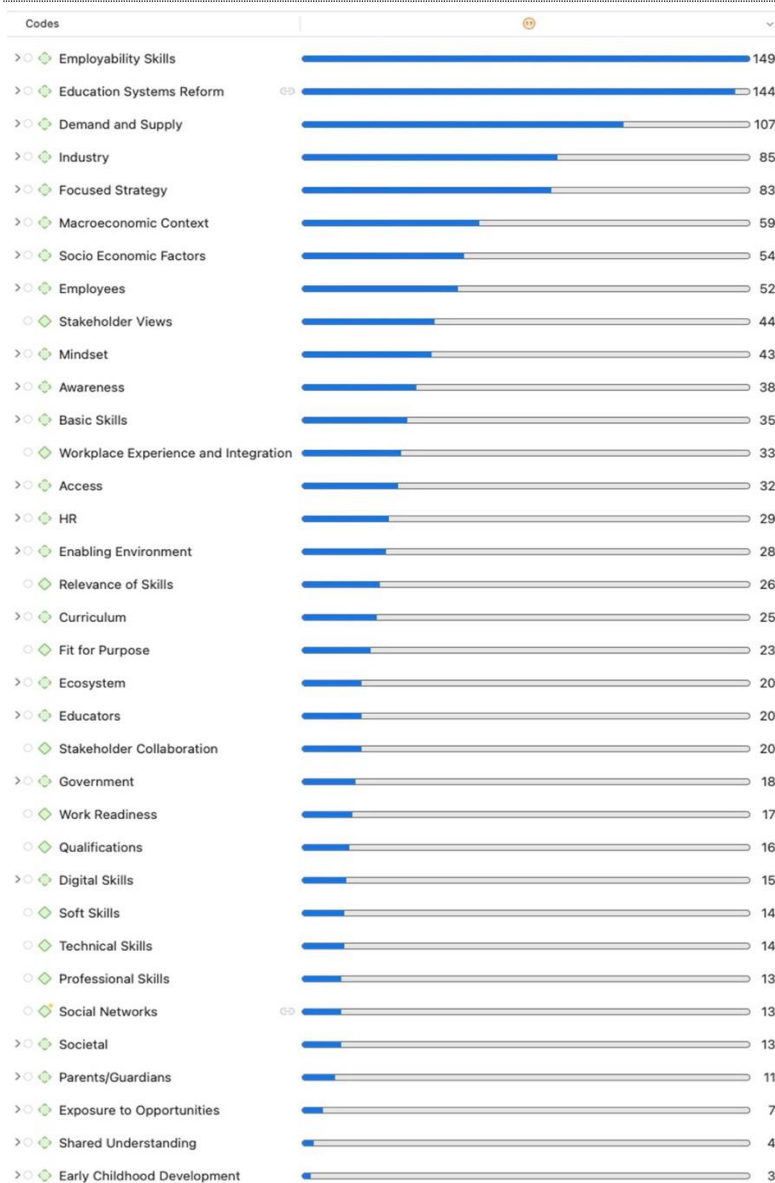
The above (14) themes were organized in order of their 'groundedness', highlighting the top-to-bottom themes for validation against the themes emerging from the interviews to ensure the integrity of the findings. To verify the most important emerging themes based on the 'groundedness', a code cloud view was extracted from ATLAS.ti, as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Code Cloud extracted from ATLAS.ti for Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2



Based on the 'groundedness' and code cloud, the 14 themes emerging from focus groups one (1) and two (2) highlighted relevant skills, fit-for-purpose skills, and demand and supply as the top 3 emerging themes. Figure 3 reflects the themes which emerged from the 41 one-on-one interviews.

Figure 3: Emerging Themes from the one-on-one interviews



The emerging themes from the 41 interviews and the two focus groups were then merged to establish common themes and sub-themes as captured in ATLAS.TI and represented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Merged Emerging Themes

THEMES: Transcripts		THEMES: Focus Groups				Groundedness
Main Theme		Sub-Theme		136		
Ecosystem	237	Stakeholder collaboration FG1		6	23	260
		Stakeholder collaborationFG2		9		
		Enabling environment	Opportunity to Build/Develop Experience FG1	8		
Demand and Supply	148	Fit for Purpose	Skills FG1	19	49	197
		Demand and Supply	Demand and Supply FG2	14		
		Market Opportunity FG1		5		
		Intentional Balance Demand and Supply FG1		11		
Employability Skills	149	Adaptable & agility FG1		5	21	170
		Agility FG2		8		
		Capability FG2		7		
		Personal fulfillment FG2		1		
Education Systems Reform	158			0	0	158
Relevance of Skills	85	Relevant skills FG2		27	27	112
Mindset	84	Our approach to employability FG1		2	2	86
Focused Strategy	86	Employability Outcomes FG2		14	14	100
Socio Economic Factors	65			0	0	65
Macroeconomic Context	59			0	0	59
Awareness	38			0	0	38

Figure 4 reflects the final merged themes following a triangulation of the themes which emerged from both data sources.

Figure 4: Triangulated themes extracted from the Interviews and Focus Groups



5. Discussion of key findings

5.1. Lack of Ecosystems and Stakeholder Collaboration

The findings highlight the need for ecosystems involving various stakeholders to address education, skills development, and employment issues. Collaboration among all stakeholders is seen as crucial for designing effective solutions, ultimately improving employability in the country through formalized partnerships with key players like high-volume employers and associations to drive meaningful change.

The findings reveal a general lack of stakeholder collaboration, an inability to understand employability, and the inequities of South Africa's history. They also highlight the social structural barriers that impede employability and the relevance of

skills. Additional support for the findings is provided by the Geneva Graduate Institute (Geneva Graduate Institute, 2021), where the social structural barriers and the decolonization of education and its impact on employability are reiterated.

The challenges identified through the analysis are further underscored by the literature's emphasis on decolonization and the call for education to address unemployment by improving infrastructure, access to technology, labour market and policy alignment. These findings provide insight into digital inequality and the divide that impacts their ability to engage in economic activities, given the speed at which technology advances and digitization occurs. Recent literature by Ruiu and Ragnedda (2024) delves deeper into digital inequality and divide, highlighting this as digital poverty and suggesting that social inequalities are both the outcomes of and triggers for different forms of digital and social exclusion. Creating enabling environments and access for individuals with foundational skills, relevant training, and adaptability is key to breaking the poverty cycle and improving employability.

The role of an ecosystem is critical in developing a conceptual framework for a systemic employability design that can address the mismatch. Additional support for the thematic analysis findings is provided by Adner (2017), who delves into the ecosystems, highlighting their value and alignment as a collective to stay abreast of the pace of change. A clear understanding of how stakeholders interpret employability must be distinguished from employment, as employability implies the positional dimension of being employable but not necessarily in employment (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003).

5.2. *Intentional balancing of Demand and Supply*

Demand and supply are key factors contributing to the mismatch between stakeholders' current views of employability and the relevance of skills. On the supply side, creating opportunities aligned to the future of work is also key in balancing demand and supply, i.e., over-supply and under-capacity of fit-for-purpose individuals. A key factor contributing to this is being demand-led and producing the relevant skills to meet industry or sector-specific demands, not as a blanket approach, but as sector-specific. Additional key factors contributing to achieving this are understanding the future of work, forecasting the demand, creating opportunities and matching opportunities to where individuals are in their employability life cycle.

The research findings align with the literature that emphasizes the notion of balancing demand and supply by comparing labour supply and demand as the number of job openings and the number of people looking for work and then advising which industries experience surpluses (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). The literature highlights that to balance the demand and supply, skills are mainly being discussed from a HE perspective, in isolation, not necessarily factoring in the 'duality', being "relative and absolute concepts," (Bonnard, 2020) i.e. the relevance of knowledge, skills, and attributes

acquired by an individual, relative to the supply and demand within the market for jobs. The concept of "duality" as posited by Brown et al. (2003) is, therefore, a critical factor in designing a conceptual framework, one that aligns more closely to the requirements of current and future, i.e. balancing demand and supply.

The research findings also highlight the concept of 'employability life cycle', referring to an employee life cycle or career maturity model. This finding resonates with the literature by Rahim, Jaafar, and Arsad (2021), who discuss the importance of career maturity at different stages in making career decisions and adaptability. Moreover, it highlights key factors such as the labour market's competitiveness and ambiguity, resulting in increased unemployability, job insecurity, and forced career transitions for workers, particularly among young people, which then creates the necessity to be able to adapt to the new challenges of employment to survive in the future, requiring individuals to develop career adaptability. Furthermore, Super's career model (Careers.govt.nz, 2017) emphasizes the importance of developing a self-concept. Self-concept changes over time and develops as a result of experience.

The findings align with existing literature, highlighting employability as a work in progress throughout one's working life (Yorke & Knight, 2006). Employability is about sustaining fitness for work, and therefore, there can be no formal or static definition given the vicissitudes of a market that workers must remain adaptive to. This broader and outward-facing conception of employability has also been accompanied by an inward focus on unpacking employability skills, mainly from an HE perspective.

5.3. *Employability Skills as a Potential Asset*

Employability skills as a concept have not been formally defined, nor is there empirical evidence in this regard; however, the concept emerged from the research findings as skills that are not necessarily taught in education and that do not fit the general skills categorization of soft, hard, technical, digital, and professional skills. Employability skills are the qualities and skills that make an individual more employable; however, they are somewhat intertwined with soft and professional skills. There seems to be some confusion between soft skills and employable skills, which need to be redefined.

The findings align with existing literature by Hillage and Pollard (1998), which closely aligns with the relevance of skills as employability assets. Moreover, employability depends on the assets they possess, the ways those are presented in the context of work (i.e., what they know), skills (what they do with what they know), and attitudes (how they do it) (Hillage, Pollard, 1998)

Other publications (Indeed, 2023) mainly refer to traditional 'soft skills' or employability skills such as communication, teamwork, reliability, problem-solving, organization and planning, initiative, self-management, leadership, learning, and technology. Similarly, the same employability skills are found on other websites, e.g., Coursera (2023). By

comparing these findings with the relevant literature, the study highlights the inconsistencies in defining employability skills. Whilst these are often referred to as soft skills, work-readiness skills, or foundational skills, they are deemed a key factor contributing to the mismatch between stakeholders' current views of employability and the relevance of skills. Both sources emphasize the need to define employability skills, potentially broadly or per sector.

5.4. *Lack of Understanding of the Relevance of Skills*

The primary findings reveal significant challenges in understanding the categorization of skills in general and their relevance. Skills, per se, whilst not explicitly defined in the broader definition of employability, are discussed as a construct of employability and competencies interchangeably. Skills are more than just knowledge; they involve the ability to apply that knowledge effectively. The thematic analysis highlights a significant shortage of hard skills, specifically digital skills, as well as a need to better articulate and recognize soft skills that can be easily taught. Basic digital literacy and adaptability are becoming increasingly important, along with skills that differentiate humans from computers in unstructured tasks.

The findings align with existing literature, which emphasizes employability and skills as two interrelated concepts that are essential for individuals to participate and succeed in the labour market and society. However, these concepts are complex and multidimensional, and they have been defined and measured in various ways by different scholars, disciplines, and contexts. Furthermore, recent literature by Suleman (2021) highlights that HCT leaves many aspects unexplained as it fails to detail the skills that should be acquired at school, where scholars were unable to disconnect the sources of skills from the skills themselves and, consequently, educational attainment remained a black box in terms of information provided on skills and that the detailing of skills is beyond the scope of HCT.

The global skills mismatch, low-paid and low-productivity jobs, problems of the informal sector, significant scale unemployment, and resulting socio-economic and political issues make it a key priority on the policy agenda for most policy actors (Singh & Ehlers, 2020). The structural shifts in the labour markets are led by the fourth industrial revolution, which focuses on AI and globalization and forces policy actors to reconsider education policies.

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remain employed for as long as possible. This, however, assumes that education curriculum, skills, and outcomes are aligned with the needs of the labour market, which is not necessarily the case, given that its relevance is questioned (World Economic Forum, 2020).

5.5. *Inadequate Education Systems Reform*

South Africa today is the most unequal country in the world. In a recent report (Spaull, 2019), these inequities are reflected in the education system due to the historical relationships between education and the labour market. Two decades after apartheid, it is still the case that the average South African child's life chances are still determined not by their ability or the result of hard work and determination but rather by the colour of their skin, the province where they were born, and the wealth of their parents. The reality of these conditions is so deterministic that one can predict, before a child turns seven, whether they will inherit a life of chronic poverty and sustained unemployment or a life of dignity and meaningful work. The education system, being a key producer of skilled individuals, contributes to economic growth.

The findings align with existing literature highlighting the mismatch between graduates' qualifications and employers' needs (Mansour & Dean, 2016). Employers do not employ students because they lack exposure to job market realities and appropriate employability skills. These appropriate skills are referred to as the 'lack of soft or non-technical skills needed for employment'. This affirms the mismatch between the qualifications and the market needs.

This is supported by Spaull (2019), who claims that it is possible to predict with some precision whether a child will inherit the same fate of living in chronic poverty and unemployment or a life of dignity and meaningful employment before their seventh birthday. Moreover, there needs to be a drive to provide career guidance and marketing alternatives to become more employable, especially where individuals do not have access to universities. Qualifications frameworks need to be revised in order to produce more relevant curricula and fit-for-purpose individuals in response to changing labour market dynamics. Education system reform is a key barrier to our educational institutions' developing individuals with the relevant skills and experience to be more employable.

5.6. *Socio-Economic Factors*

The findings highlighted economic inclusion and activity as key factors that can contribute toward the development of a conceptual framework for a systemic employability design, as it can bring back integrity to people, especially those who have been disadvantaged. The importance of being inclusive, especially in peri-urban and rural areas, was emphasized as it not only has an impact on the economy but everyone, given the tax burden of unemployment and government dependency. If not included in

economic activities, this implies that individuals will become dependent on the state and ultimately on taxpayers.

The findings highlighted socio-economic factors like poverty that play into malnutrition and the well-being and safety of students. Crime and safety impact students' ability to access universities, which needs to be addressed. The focus is on addressing challenges disadvantaged individuals face in the job market, including exclusionary recruitment practices and employer affiliation with universities. The findings align with existing literature, emphasizing the different lenses through which employability can be viewed: societal, organizational and individual (Thijssen, et al., 2008).

5.7. *Macroeconomic Context*

The findings highlight the main challenge currently in South Africa, which is the economy, since it impacts the ability of organizations to acquire specific critical skills, even when needed. There is a need for skills like data science, but acquiring them may be limited by economic constraints and organizational structures that favour a lean workforce. Participants highlighted key factors like high transport costs, data costs, and non-linear pathways to employment for young people, exacerbating the issue. Initiatives like micro-enterprises and promoting the informal economy are seen as potential solutions. Addressing unemployment is crucial for economic sustainability, social stability, and reducing reliance on the state. Matching skills to job demand is essential to boosting productivity and economic growth.

Moreover, the thematic analysis highlighted that companies face challenges in finding employees with digital skills due to the under-supply; different sectors have varying levels of staffing needs, and companies seek to diversify their workforce for better representation. Employability and skills need to be balanced to improve economic conditions. In a capitalistic society, businesses prioritize profits and may not readily share knowledge for industry advancement. Industry associations can play a role in fostering collaboration and long-term industry growth. South Africa's education history affects current skills development, and economic constraints impact organizations' ability to acquire critical skills. The economic and political climate influences job opportunities and firms' focus on cost reduction rather than expansion. The mismatch between graduates' skills and job market demands hinders employment. To drive economic growth, there must be better alignment between education outcomes and workforce needs.

The thematic analysis emphasizes factors like economic conditions, political climate, and policy changes impacting job opportunities. South Africa faces challenges in job creation due to structural issues, globalization, and automation. The impact of unemployability on the GDP growth rate and overall output in the country implied that employability opportunities might need to be exploited in growth sectors, with higher demand to balance the supply and demand challenge.

The findings align with existing literature, emphasizing that digital technologies do not simply affect the volume of jobs; they also transform how work is conceptualized and how people perform their jobs (World Economic Forum, 2023). The World Economic Forum (2023) estimates that, by 2025, 85 million jobs may be lost due to a shift and divide between humans and machines, whereas 97 million new jobs may emerge that are better suited to the shift between humans, machines, and algorithms. By 2025, humans and machines will spend the same time working on tasks. Therefore, for many workers, the principal effect of digitalization will be felt through changes in the nature and content of work within a transformed work environment.

Moreover, the impact of digital change on work and employment is multifaceted (Lorraine, et al., 2022). However, there are increasing concerns about the quality of some new jobs. If large segments of the workforce cannot benefit from the promising opportunities the economy generates, worker disparities may increase. The most critical challenge for policymakers is to prevent such growing disparities. Failing to do so will result in a future of work with more profound social cleavages and increasing discontent, which could negatively impact productivity, growth, well-being, and social cohesion (OECD, 2019).

Through the thematic analysis, varied views from stakeholders emerged, highlighting the need for having the right mindset to drive a focused strategy by creating awareness of employability. This shift in perspective advocates for a holistic reassessment, which encompasses changes in the definitions of work and the recognition of a new set of fundamental skills essential for navigating a world. It challenges conventional notions about jobs, employment, and employability. This objective aims to provide a systemic understanding of the mismatch between stakeholders' current views and the relevance of skills. By comparing the thematic analysis findings with existing literature, this research seeks to contextualize these views within the broader theoretical frameworks by identifying and analyzing the key factors contributing to the mismatch between stakeholders' current views of employability and the relevance of skills and fields for further study. Using this comparative stance, the study aims to provide a broader understanding of stakeholders' current views of employability, the relevance of skills, and their impact on a systemic employability design.

5.8. *Employability Mindset*

The thematic analysis highlighted the varied views of stakeholders, including the private sector, government, industry, employees, and education, as well as their mindsets and approaches to employability and the relevance of skills. Mindset is a key factor in employability, especially given the varied views and need for stakeholder collaboration and creating a shared understanding.

The main mindset shift is in the way we think of employability, given that it seeks to find a solution to the unemployment problem. There is also a mindset around social conditioning and status that a degree or qualification will get you a job, which is flawed, as the ability to apply relevant skills makes an individual more employable. The impact of this is felt in industry as they have to invest more time and money in individuals to ensure they have the necessary industry knowledge and are fit-for-purpose. Given the socio-economic challenges, a younger workforce, and automation, organizations must also review their exclusionary recruitment practices and flexible working hours.

These findings resonate with literature discussing mindset theory (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Yeager, 2019), highlighting that people's explanations for a success or a failure (their attributions) can shape their reactions to that event with attributions of failure to a lack of ability leading to less persistent responses to setbacks than attributions to more readily controllable factors, such as strategy or effort (Weiner, 1985).

The thematic analysis emphasized the need to address stakeholders' perceptions of employability and qualification as key mindset shifts. This finding resonates with Williams et al.'s (2016) conclusion that the definition of employability has shifted throughout history and continues to be contested. A critical challenge is whether employability is distinct from employment; in other words, can a person be employable but still unemployed? Moreover, Yorke et al. (2006, p. 8) further concluded that employability is not the same as employment, supporting the view of Williams et al. (2016) and being a critical factor in developing a conceptual framework.

Understanding the relationship between what the educational institution produces as skilled individuals and what the market demands is key. Many employers have stated that despite graduates having qualifications, they still need to train them, given their limited industry knowledge. This means that educational institutions and industry must align, and the curriculum should be sector-led.

5.9. Focused Strategy

The findings from the thematic analysis highlighted a need for a focused strategy, emphasizing the importance of creating an ecosystem, a shared understanding of employability and stakeholder collaboration to create a focused and demand-led strategy. Stakeholder collaboration and commitment were highlighted as crucial for progress in addressing skills deficits and enhancing competitiveness in the technology industry. Implementing technology-driven education, creating meaningful opportunities through hubs, and fostering partnerships between training institutions and employers are vital. Encouraging the growth of local industries, investing in skills development, and aligning with market demands are critical for sustaining economic growth and job creation in South Africa.

5.10. Employability Awareness

The thematic analysis emphasizes the need for greater career awareness in schools, mentorship programs, and better alignment between education and job market needs. There is a call for career paths and guidance and a reference to awareness of employability earlier in an individual's education to better prepare individuals for the evolving job market.

The mismatch in skills needed for the job market originates from early education choices and a lack of exposure to diverse career options. Systemic issues in education, such as subject choices affecting career paths, were discussed, as was the need for practical skills development in universities and colleges. They stress the importance of aligning education with job market demands and guiding individuals toward relevant and in-demand careers from an early stage. The lack of awareness will also result in individuals not studying the right courses, which could result in demotivation or not being employable, as what they study could also be irrelevant or not in demand.

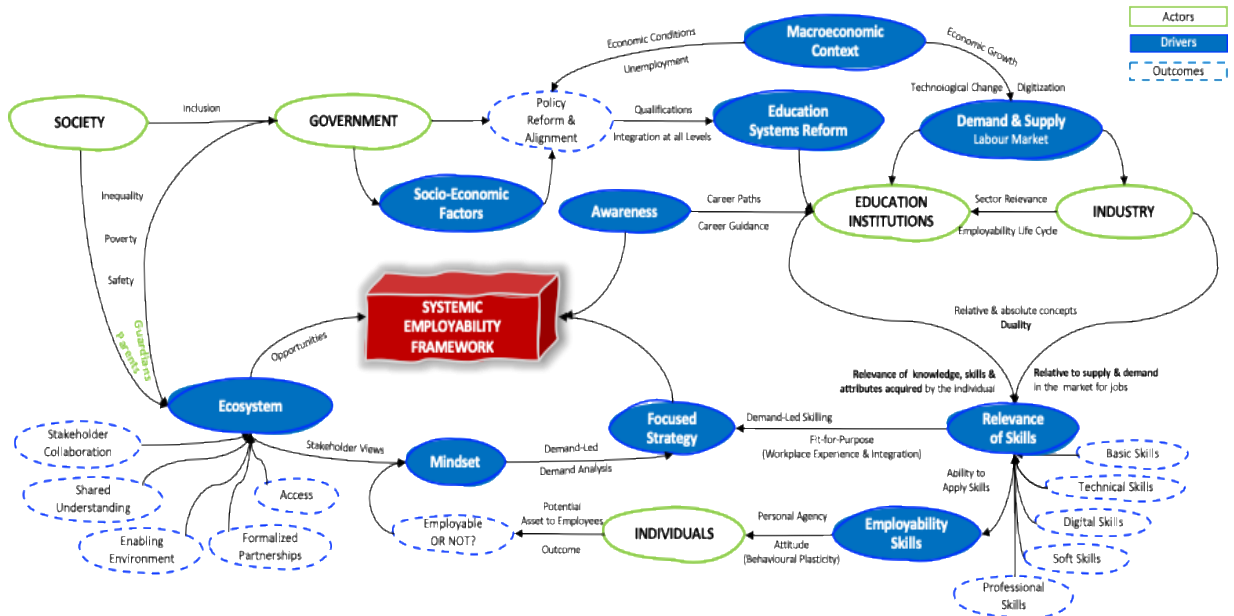
These findings align with the literature by Artress et al. (2017), which highlights that much of the literature argues that engaging with employability has value and sets out a range of models and concepts for intervening in students' employability.

6. Proposed Systemic Employability Framework

Figure 5 below illustrates the systemic employability framework (SEF) and its ten (10) key themes and sub-themes, including stakeholders interviewed for this particular study, so not exhaustive. The SEF provides a comprehensive view of all the elements contributing toward a systemic employability design that can be responsive to learning and address the mismatch between stakeholders' current views of employability. A systemic employability design is critical, given globalization, digitization, rapid technological change, and unemployment. Unemployment is a global phenomenon (World Economic Forum, 2023), with significant concern being its upward trajectory (Maisiri & van Dyk, 2021) in light of the fourth and fifth industrial revolutions and its disruption on the skills demand (Maisiri & van Dyk, 2021). Worldwide, automation is expected to displace 400 million to 800 million people by 2030, forcing them to find new jobs (Ali, et al., 2022).

As illustrated in Figure 5, applying a systemic employability framework seeks to address the mismatch between the stakeholders' current views on employability and the relevance of skills to mitigate high levels of unemployment, given the impact of digitization and disruption on jobs.

Figure 5: Systemic Employability Framework



Source: Researcher

The Systemic Employability Framework (SEF) should commence by understanding the macroeconomic context, market demands, where jobs are, what they look like, and how to supply the demand, being work-ready individuals. To achieve this, an ecosystem needs to be established where stakeholders with the right mindset define a shared understanding of employability. The market needs to develop a focused strategy that is demand-led and uses data to predict opportunities for employability. The ecosystem should include parents or guardians and understand the socio-economic challenges to create an enabling environment where individuals feel supported and safe and can thrive by accessing mentors, sponsors, and technology, including connectivity. A focused strategy should be developed by prioritizing growth sectors, creating meaningful opportunities, and ensuring that there is alignment between education and industry to produce fit-for-purpose individuals who can apply their skills, have developed personal agency, and have the right attitude.

By understanding the demand and supply needs of the labour market, the ecosystem stakeholders can influence policy and education systems reform. This would include policy reform alignment as enabling vehicles and integration across all levels of education to develop sector-relevant curricula, provide career guidance, and produce fit-for-purpose individuals with relevant skills and workplace experience. The industry should inform the curriculum and experience in education for duality, identifying the correct skill categories. Identifying the relevant skills will inform earlier engagement in

employability, where career guidance and paths are easily accessible to individuals. The relevant skills will determine whether individuals are employable, either as individuals or through the ecosystem opportunities created. Furthermore, the systemic employability framework can be responsive to learning, where relevant stakeholders are identified to form a sector-led ecosystem to develop a focused employability strategy for scalability and impact.

The Systemic Employability Framework (SEF) will assist in addressing the mismatch between stakeholders' current views and the relevance of skills in different sector contexts and, therefore, is responsive to learning.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

Table 2 summarises the link between the research objectives, findings and conclusions.

Table 2: Summary of Findings

Objectives	Key Themes	Conclusion
Objective 1: To assess stakeholders' current views of government, employers, private sector, HEIs and graduates on employability and the relevance of skills.	Theme 1: Ecosystem	Stakeholders' current views on the terms employability and employment were not commonly understood or shared, limiting the relation to the relevance of skills. Ecosystems and their importance in driving stakeholder collaboration were commonly echoed, however as a concept, not practised, given the varied views on employability and the relevance of skills, given what is the complexity and what can be influenced. A significant driver for addressing the stakeholders' current views on employability and the relevance of skills is the co-creation of sector-led ecosystems.
	Theme 2: Demand and Supply	A key factor contributing to stakeholders' current views is the ability to predict the demands of the market (demand) and provide fit-for-purpose individuals with the requisite sector-relevant skills (demand) i.e. creating an intentional balance between demand and supply and monitoring its success
	Theme 3: Employability Skills	
Objective 2: To critically analyze the key factors contributing to the mismatch between stakeholders' current views of employability and the relevance of skills.	Theme 5: Relevance of Skills	A key factor contributing to stakeholders' current views is to develop the individual holistically along their employability life cycle, with the individual in mind. A key factor contributing to stakeholders' current views is to redefine existing skills categories (soft skills) and define others (employability, digital, technical and professional skills) as they are intertwined, contributing to the mismatch between employability and the relevance of skills.
		A key factor contributing to stakeholders' current views

		is the lack of integrating the relevant employability, soft, digital, technical and professional skills into the curriculum across all education levels.
Objective 3: To evaluate the mismatch between stakeholders' current views of employability and the relevance of skills.	Theme 4: Education Systems Reform	Understanding the macroeconomic context, and its systemic impact on society, given the socio-economic factors, as a key input, plays a critical role in the development of a conceptual framework for a systemic employability design.
	Theme 8: Socio-Economic Factors	A key input into the development of a conceptual framework for a systemic employability design is the education systems reform and need for integration of all levels of education, where outcomes, curriculum and qualifications are more industry-led, technology-driven and producing a fit-for-purpose individual that is holistically developed throughout their employability life cycle.
	Theme 9: Macroeconomic Context	A key input into the development of a conceptual framework for a systemic employability design is the policy reform and alignment, led by the government, but informed by the macroeconomic context, socioeconomic factors and ecosystems to create enabling environments for the desired economic conditions and growth, supported by holistic data analytics.
Objective 4: To develop a conceptual framework of a systemic employability design that is responsive to learning and addresses the mismatch.	Theme 6: Mindset	The conceptual framework provides a systemic approach to employability, encapsulating the mismatch between stakeholders' current views of employability and relevance of skills for a systemic employability design.
	Theme 7: Focused Strategy	The conceptual framework must apply systems thinking practice in its approach for a systemic employability design, considering the context and applicability of the key factors proposed.
	Theme 10: Awareness	A fundamental attribute of the conceptual framework is that it must be responsive to learning and can be modified to develop a systemic employability design to address the mismatch, therefore the importance of awareness and ecosystems, to influence the mindsets and a sector-led focused strategy to meet labour market demands. A conceptual framework that drives awareness, through early engagement on the topic of employability systemically, translated into career paths and guidance along the individuals' employability life cycle from early childhood education, tertiary, into the workplace until retirement.

Based on the key findings, it may be concluded that stakeholders' current views on employability and employment were not commonly understood or shared, limiting the relation to the relevance of skills. In light of the above, it is recommended that a shared understanding of employability for the sector be developed; the market demand for the specific sector should be established and a focused strategy developed that includes macro, micro, and meso challenges, awareness, investment, success, and how it will be measured, evaluated, and monitored and formalized partnerships or workstreams be established, where relevant, for effective strategy implementation and scalability. There is a need to redefine existing skills categories (soft skills) and define others (employability, digital, technical and professional skills) as they are intertwined, contributing to the mismatch between employability and the relevance of skills. In light of the above, it is further recommended that new skill sets be defined, namely, digital, technical and professional skills; soft skills be redefined; relevant skills into career paths, identify foundational skills and sector-specific paths to be developed and integrated at all levels of education, including bridging into other sectors or opportunities; and career guidance be provided, including career paths that are digitized to match individuals' career preferences to where they are in their employability life cycle.

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