

Reconceptualising Employability in the Post-Digital Era: Towards A Theory of Employability Trust

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ABSTRACT

Employability has become a central concern in higher education policy and practice, yet dominant approaches continue to treat it as a matter of individual skills, institutional initiatives or labour-market alignment. This paper argues that such perspectives overlook a critical dimension: the role of trust in shaping how students, institutions and employers interpret, enact and sustain employability, particularly in a period marked by the emergence and disruptive influence of artificial intelligence, where trust has become increasingly volatile. Drawing on literatures on employability, trust and graduate transitions, the paper develops the concept of employability trust and introduces the Employability Trust Ecology, a four-dimensional model that conceptualises employability as a relational system.

The ecology comprises Student-to-Self Employability Trust, Student-to-Institution Employability Trust, Employer-to-Institution Employability Trust and Employer-to-Graduate Employability Trust. Each dimension captures a distinct set of expectations and judgements about capability, credibility and readiness for work. Together, they reveal how employability is constructed through multidirectional relationships rather than through isolated interventions. The paper elaborates the antecedents and dynamics of each trust dimension and shows how breakdowns in one part of the ecology can cascade across others, destabilising the pathway from education to work.

Building on this conceptual model, the paper proposes a set of analytically derived propositions to guide future empirical research on employability trust. These propositions invite investigation of how trust develops over time, how it varies across disciplines and institutional contexts, and how it shapes educational engagement and labour-market outcomes. The paper concludes by outlining implications for higher education institutions, employers and policymakers, arguing that strengthening employability requires attention to the relational conditions that make trust possible. By foregrounding trust, the Employability Trust Ecology offers a new lens for understanding and reconfiguring the education-to-work landscape.

Keywords: employability; trust; higher education; graduate transitions; artificial intelligence disruption.

INTRODUCTION

Concerns about graduates' transitions into work are a central focus of contemporary higher education policy and practice. Due to rising tuition fees and increased scrutiny of graduate outcomes, employability has moved from a peripheral concern to a key performance indicator influencing funding, rankings, curriculum design and institutional accountability. Existing literature typically frames employability as a problem of skills, attributes, dispositions or capitals that students must acquire to succeed in increasingly competitive labour markets (Yorke, 2006; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2017; Jackson, 2016). Although these approaches have generated valuable insights, they rest on an under-examined assumption: that the relationships between students, institutions and employers are stable and trustworthy. The role of trust in shaping employability outcomes is rarely examined directly.

Trust has long been recognised in sociology and organisational studies as a fundamental condition for coordinated action, institutional legitimacy and credible signalling (Luhmann, 1979; Barber, 1983; Mayer, Davis

and Schoorman, 1995). Parallel bodies of work have explored trust in institutions, information systems, automation and artificial intelligence (Lee and See, 2004; Shneiderman, 2020; Glikson and Woolley, 2020). These debates highlight how digital technologies reshape perceptions of competence, reliability and integrity across various domains. However, employability has not yet been systematically examined as a domain in which trust is actively negotiated. This paper addresses this gap by conceptualising employability as a relational process rather than an innate, individualised capability.

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has intensified these blind spots. Studies of labour market change suggest that AI is transforming occupational structures and altering the skills required for work (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Frey and Osborne, 2017). In higher education, AI has raised concerns about academic integrity, assessment authenticity and the credibility of student work (Cotton et al., 2023). These developments create new uncertainties for students, who must navigate shifting expectations, and for employers, who must judge the reliability of credentials and the competence of graduates. The conditions under which employability is pursued are therefore increasingly shaped by questions of trust, yet the concept itself remains absent from employability theory.

This paper argues that employability should be understood as a trust-mediated relational process. It introduces the concept of employability trust, a relational expectation that the processes connecting higher education participation, the demonstration and certification of capability, and labour-market recognition will operate with sufficient competence, integrity and transparency to support credible transitions into work and proposes a relational model that captures the multidirectional trust dynamics linking students, institutions and employers in the post-digital era. The aim is not to provide empirical evidence, which is currently limited, but to develop a conceptual foundation that can guide future research. By bringing employability studies into conversation with trust scholarship and contemporary debates on AI, the paper offers a new lens for understanding how employability is constructed and contested in a period of rapid technological change.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews employability and trust literatures and identifies the conceptual gap at their intersection. Section 3 defines employability trust and explains why it is foundational yet fragile in the AI era. Section 4 introduces the Employability Trust Ecology and elaborates its four dimensions. Section 5 derives fifteen propositions to guide future empirical research. Section 6 discusses implications for higher education institutions, employers and policymakers. Section 7 concludes.

BACKGROUND

Employability Research: A Skills-Centric Paradigm

Research on graduate employability has traditionally been dominated by frameworks that conceptualise employability as a set of skills, attributes, dispositions or forms of capital that individuals must accumulate to succeed in the labour market. Early work positioned employability as the possession of transferable skills that could be applied across contexts, a view that shaped policy discourse throughout the early 2000s (Yorke, 2006). Subsequent scholarship expanded this perspective by incorporating behavioural and attitudinal dimensions, including self-management, adaptability and reflective capacity (Knight and Yorke, 2004). Although these models broadened the scope of employability, they continued to treat it primarily as an individualised capability rather than a relational process.

More recent approaches have attempted to address the limitations of skills-based models by introducing sociological perspectives. Tomlinson's (2017) graduate capital framework, for example, conceptualises employability as the accumulation and mobilisation of five interrelated forms of capital: human, social, cultural, psychological and identity capital. These capitals are understood as key resources that confer benefits and advantages onto graduates in their transitions to the labour market (Tomlinson, 2017). Subsequent empirical work has validated the graduate capital model and demonstrated its utility for understanding how students' self-assess their readiness for graduate employment (e.g., validation of the Graduate Capital Scale; see also recent applications in initial employability development research). This work has been influential in shifting attention towards the structural and relational factors that shape graduate outcomes. However, even within this expanded paradigm, trust remains largely implicit. The framework assumes that employers will recognise and

value the capitals that graduates present, and that students will trust that their educational experiences will translate into labour-market advantage. These assumptions are rarely interrogated directly.

More recent scholarship has built on the graduate capital model by integrating signalling and socio-cultural approaches to explain how capitals operate as signals that inform employer conceptions of which graduates are perceived to be most hireable (e.g., Port of Portsmouth research on employers and graduates; initial employability development research integrating signalling and social exchange mechanisms). This work emphasises that employers interpret both tangible signals (qualifications, reported skills, work experience) and less tangible signals (behavioural qualities, work ethic, organisational fit) when making hiring decisions (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). Employability trust extends this logic by asking not only what signals graduates send, but how much students, institutions and employers trust the processes that produce and certify those signals.

Critical scholars have raised concerns about the normative and ideological underpinnings of employability discourse. Morley (2001) argues that employability functions as a performative narrative that places responsibility for labour-market success on individuals while obscuring structural inequalities. Boden and Nedeva (2010) similarly contend that employability has become a policy instrument that reinforces market logics within higher education. These critiques highlight the political and social dimensions of employability, yet they do not examine how trust shapes students' expectations, institutional practices or employer judgements.

A further strand of research has focused on employer perceptions of graduate readiness. Studies consistently report gaps between the skills employers expect and those they perceive graduates to possess (Jackson, 2016; Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2016). This literature provides valuable insights into employer expectations, but it tends to frame the issue as a mismatch between supply and demand. The relational dynamics that underpin employer confidence in higher education institutions, or in the authenticity of graduates' capabilities, are seldom explored.

Across these bodies of work, employability is conceptualised as a problem of capability, identity or alignment with labour-market needs. What is missing is a sustained examination of the role of trust in shaping employability outcomes. The literature often assumes that students trust their programmes to deliver value, that institutions trust students to demonstrate genuine competence, and that employers trust both the credential and the graduate. These assumptions are increasingly difficult to sustain in a context of rapid technological change, as the next section shows.

Trust Research: Institutional, Epistemic, Digital, but Not Employability

Trust has been examined extensively across sociology, organisational studies, psychology and information systems research. Foundational theorists such as Luhmann (1979) and Barber (1983) conceptualise trust as a mechanism for reducing social complexity and enabling coordinated action. Their work highlights that trust is not simply an interpersonal sentiment but a structural condition that underpins institutional legitimacy and social order. Later organisational scholarship, particularly the influential Integrative Model of Organizational Trust developed by Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995), conceptualises trust as the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party. Trustworthiness, in this model, is a function of the trustor's perceptions of the trustee's ability, benevolence and integrity (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). Ability refers to the skills, competencies and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain; benevolence to the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good for the trustor; and integrity to the trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable (Mayer et al., 1995, pp. 717–720). Meta-analytic evidence confirms that these three dimensions of trustworthiness positively and significantly predict trust across organisational contexts (Colquitt, Scott & LePine, 2007).

This framework has shaped decades of research on trust within organisations, leadership and institutional governance. However, despite its breadth, this body of work does not consider employability as a domain in which trust is produced or contested.

A parallel strand of research focuses on epistemic trust, which concerns the credibility of knowledge sources and the conditions under which individuals accept information as reliable. This literature has grown in response to concerns about misinformation, expertise and public confidence in scientific institutions. Although epistemic trust is relevant to higher education, particularly in relation to curriculum credibility and disciplinary authority, it has not been connected to students' expectations of labour-market outcomes or employers' interpretations of academic credentials. The absence of this connection limits the field's ability to understand how trust shapes the perceived value of higher education in contexts of uncertainty.

Digital transformation has generated a further expansion of trust research. Scholars have examined trust in automation, trust in algorithms and trust in artificial intelligence, often focusing on how users assess the reliability, transparency, predictability and competence of technological systems (Lee & See, 2004; Glikson & Woolley, 2020). Lee and See's (2004) framework emphasises that appropriate reliance on automation depends on users' calibration of trust to system capabilities, while Glikson and Woolley's (2020) review demonstrates that human trust in AI is shaped by perceptions of system competence, transparency and predictability. These debates are directly relevant to higher education, where AI is increasingly embedded in assessment, feedback and administrative processes, yet the implications of AI for employability have not been examined through a trust-based lens. This work highlights that trust in digital systems is shaped by perceptions of competence and integrity, which are also central to organisational trust. More recent contributions emphasise the need for "human-centred AI" that supports user confidence and mitigates risks associated with opaque or autonomous systems (Shneiderman, 2020). These debates are directly relevant to higher education, where AI is increasingly embedded in assessment, feedback and administrative processes. Yet the implications of AI for employability have not been examined through a trust-based lens.

Research on digital trust in workplaces provides additional insights. Studies show that employees' trust in digital systems influences their willingness to adopt new technologies, their perceptions of job security and their sense of professional identity. However, this literature focuses on organisational contexts rather than educational ones, and it does not address how employers evaluate the credibility of academic credentials or the authenticity of graduates' capabilities in an AI-mediated environment. The question of whether AI erodes employer trust in higher education institutions or in the graduates they produce remains largely unexamined.

Across these strands of scholarship, trust is conceptualised as institutional, interpersonal, epistemic or technological. What is missing is an account of trust as a condition that shapes employability. Existing research does not consider whether students trust that their education will lead to meaningful work, whether institutions trust students to demonstrate genuine competence, or whether employers trust the integrity of academic assessment in an era of AI-generated content. This absence represents a significant conceptual gap. Without integrating trust into employability theory, it becomes difficult to explain how digital transformation reshapes the relationships that connect higher education to the labour market. The lack of engagement with employability in trust scholarship therefore mirrors the absence of trust in employability research, a gap examined in Section 2.3.

Why the Post-Digital Era Forces These Debates Together

The rapid acceleration of artificial intelligence and digital technologies has created conditions in which employability and trust can no longer be treated as separate domains of inquiry. Labour market research shows that AI is reshaping occupational structures, altering skill demands and introducing new forms of uncertainty for workers and graduates. Studies by Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) and Frey and Osborne (2017) demonstrate that automation is transforming both high-skilled and routine professional work, with implications for how individuals understand their future prospects. These developments have intensified anxieties about job security and the long-term value of educational credentials. Students are increasingly required to navigate labour markets in which the boundaries between human and machine competence are shifting, yet employability theory has not fully accounted for how these uncertainties influence students' expectations or their trust in higher education.

Within higher education, AI has raised significant concerns about assessment integrity and the authenticity of student work. Cotton et al. (2023) report that generative AI tools have disrupted established assessment practices and created new challenges for verifying student competence. Recent experimental work provides concrete

evidence of this challenge: in a study across two UK universities, experienced markers were generally unable to distinguish assessments that had generative AI input from those that did not, even when assessments were designed to be ‘authentic’ (Kofinas et al., 2025). Independent evaluations of AI writing detection tools similarly report high false-positive rates and limited reliability, with some tools flagging 15% of human-written abstracts as AI-generated and failing to detect over 40% of AI-generated abstracts after light editing (Baobab Tech, 2025; Kofinas et al., 2025). These findings suggest that traditional output-based assessments no longer provide a stable basis for certifying individual capability, thereby undermining a key signalling mechanism between students, institutions and employers. These concerns extend beyond academic misconduct. They raise broader questions about whether traditional forms of assessment can continue to function as credible signals of graduate capability. If employers doubt the authenticity of assessed work, the credibility of the credential itself may be weakened. This possibility has not been addressed within existing employability frameworks, which assume that the relationship between assessment, competence and employer judgement remains stable.

At the same time, research on trust in digital systems highlights how technological opacity and automation can undermine confidence in institutional processes. Studies of algorithmic decision-making show that users often struggle to evaluate the reliability and fairness of AI-driven systems, which can erode institutional trust (Glikson and Woolley, 2020). In higher education, the increasing use of AI in assessment, feedback and administrative processes raises similar concerns. Students may question whether AI-mediated learning environments support their development, while employers may question whether AI-mediated assessments accurately reflect students’ abilities. These dynamics suggest that trust is becoming a central organising principle in the relationship between higher education and the labour market.

Despite these developments, the employability literature has not engaged with the implications of digital transformation for trust, and the trust literature has not considered employability as a site of relational uncertainty. The two fields have evolved in parallel, each addressing different aspects of the challenges introduced by AI, but without recognising their interdependence. The result is a conceptual blind spot. Employability research lacks a framework for understanding how trust shapes students’ expectations and employers’ judgements, while trust research lacks a framework for understanding how digital transformation affects the credibility of educational credentials and the perceived value of higher education.

The post-digital era therefore forces these debates together. The uncertainties introduced by AI make it increasingly difficult to sustain the implicit assumptions that underpin existing employability models. Students must trust that their education will prepare them for a labour market in flux. Institutions must trust that students can demonstrate genuine competence in environments where AI can generate sophisticated outputs. Employers must trust that credentials remain credible indicators of ability. Without a conceptual framework that integrates employability and trust, it becomes difficult to explain how these relationships are negotiated or how they are affected by digital transformation. This paper addresses this gap by proposing a relational model of employability trust that captures the multidirectional trust dynamics shaping higher education in the post-digital era.

Conceptualising Employability Trust

The preceding sections highlight a clear conceptual gap. Employability research has developed without an explicit account of trust, while trust research has not considered employability as a domain in which trust is produced, negotiated or lost. In order to address this gap, it is necessary to articulate what employability trust means, how it differs from adjacent constructs, and why it has become increasingly important in the post-digital era.

Defining Employability Trust

Trust is commonly understood as a psychological state involving a willingness to be vulnerable based on positive expectations of another party’s intentions or competence (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995). In sociological terms, trust functions as a mechanism for reducing uncertainty in complex environments (Luhmann, 1979). Drawing on these traditions, employability trust can be defined as a relational expectation that the processes connecting higher education participation, the demonstration and certification of capability, and labour-market recognition will operate with sufficient competence, integrity and transparency to support credible transitions

into work. This definition positions trust not as an individual trait but as a relational condition that shapes how students, institutions and employers interpret, rely upon and are vulnerable to the education-to-work pathway.

Employability trust differs from related constructs. Self-efficacy refers to beliefs about one's ability to perform specific tasks (Bandura, 1997). Confidence is a more general sense of personal capability. Institutional reputation concerns external perceptions of quality or prestige. Employability trust, by contrast, concerns the perceived reliability of the processes that connect higher education to work. It encompasses students' trust in their own developmental trajectory, their trust in the institution's capacity to prepare them for employment, employers' trust in the institution's assessment practices, and employers' trust in the authenticity of graduates' capabilities. It is therefore a multidirectional, relational construct that operates across the higher education-labour-market interface rather than an individual psychological trait or an institutional attribute.

This conceptualisation aligns with signalling theory, which posits that educational credentials function as signals of underlying ability or productivity (Spence, 1973). For signals to be effective, employers must trust that credentials reliably reflect competence. Employability trust extends this logic by recognising that signalling depends not only on the credential itself but on the broader network of trust relationships that sustain its interpretability and value.

Why Trust is Foundational to Employability

Although trust has not been explicitly theorised within employability research, it underpins several of the field's core assumptions. According to Becker (1993), human capital theory assumes that investments in education increase individuals' productivity and earnings potential (Becker, 1993). This assumption depends on students trusting that their educational investments will be recognised by employers as signals of enhanced productivity. Signalling theory similarly assumes that employers rely on educational credentials as proxies for underlying ability or productivity (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011). For these signals to be effective, employers must trust that credentials reliably reflect competence and that assessment processes are rigorous and meaningful. However, these assumptions have typically been expressed in terms of confidence, expectations or reputation rather than as explicit trust relationships concerning the credibility of education-to-work processes.

According to Spence (1973), signalling theory, for example, suggests that educational credentials function as signals of underlying ability or productivity. For signals to be effective, employers must trust that credentials reliably reflect competence. Human capital theory similarly assumes that investments in education will yield returns in the labour market (Becker, 1993). This assumption depends on students trusting that their educational experiences will be recognised and valued by employers. Identity-based approaches to employability emphasise the role of narrative, self-presentation and professional identity formation (Tomlinson, 2017). These processes rely on students trusting that their identities will be interpreted as credible and legitimate within professional contexts.

Trust also shapes institutional practices. Assessment is often described as the mechanism through which competence is verified and communicated to external audiences. For assessment to function as a credible indicator of ability, institutions must trust that students' work is authentic, and employers must trust that assessment processes are rigorous and meaningful. Without trust, the relationship between assessment, competence and employability becomes unstable. This suggests that trust is not an optional or peripheral element of employability. It is a foundational condition that enables the entire system to function.

Research on organisational trust further supports this view. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman's (1995) integrative model identifies ability, benevolence and integrity as the core dimensions of trustworthiness. Applied to employability, these dimensions suggest that students must perceive institutions as competent (able to deliver valuable learning), benevolent (acting in students' best interests) and integer (upholding fair and transparent assessment standards). Similarly, employers must perceive graduates and institutions as able (possessing relevant capabilities), benevolent (acting honestly in representing competence) and integer (adhering to ethical and professional standards). This alignment between organisational trust theory and employability processes reinforces the argument that trust is foundational rather than incidental.

Why Trust is Fragile in the AI Era

The post-digital era has introduced new uncertainties that place pressure on the trust relationships underpinning employability. Signalling theory suggests that when the informational value of traditional signals becomes ambiguous, actors must rely on additional cues to assess trustworthiness (Connelly et al., 2011). AI introduces such ambiguity by blurring the boundaries between human and machine-generated performance, thereby complicating employers' interpretations of graduate capability and institutional certification. AI has altered the nature of work, reshaped skill demands and created new forms of labour-market volatility (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Frey and Osborne, 2017). These developments challenge students' trust that their education will prepare them for future employment. They also challenge institutions' trust that traditional pedagogical and assessment practices remain fit for purpose.

Concerns about academic integrity have intensified with the emergence of generative AI tools capable of producing sophisticated written and technical outputs. Cotton et al. (2023) argue that these tools disrupt established assessment practices and raise questions about the authenticity of student work. If institutions cannot reliably verify competence, employers may begin to question the credibility of credentials. This creates a risk that employer trust in higher education could erode, particularly in fields where AI can replicate or simulate graduate-level outputs.

AI also complicates employers' judgements of graduate capability and the extent to which assessed work can be trusted as evidence of unaided human competence. Employers must now distinguish between skills that reflect genuine human competence and outputs that may have been produced or enhanced by AI. This introduces new uncertainties into recruitment and selection processes. Without a framework for understanding how trust operates in these contexts, it becomes difficult to explain how employers interpret credentials or evaluate graduate readiness.

Research on trust in AI systems provides additional insight into these dynamics. Glikson and Woolley (2020) show that human trust in AI is shaped by perceptions of system competence, transparency and predictability. When AI systems are opaque or produce inconsistent outputs, user trust declines. In higher education, the increasing use of AI in assessment, feedback and administrative processes raises similar concerns. Students may question whether AI-mediated learning environments support their development, while employers may question whether AI-mediated assessments accurately reflect students' abilities. These dynamics suggest that trust is becoming a central organising principle in the relationship between higher education and the labour market.

Taken together, these developments suggest that trust is becoming increasingly fragile across the higher education–labour-market pipeline. The uncertainties introduced by AI make it necessary to conceptualise employability not only as a matter of skills or identity but as a relational process shaped by trust. The next section introduces a model that captures these dynamics by articulating the multidirectional trust relationships that constitute the employability trust ecology.

The Employability Trust Ecology: A Multidirectional Model

The preceding sections establish that employability is shaped by a set of process-focused trust expectations that have not been theorised within existing literature. Drawing on the Integrative Model of Organizational Trust (Mayer et al., 1995), signalling theory (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011), graduate capital theory (Tomlinson, 2017) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), the paper proposes the Employability Trust Ecology. To address this gap, the paper proposes the Employability Trust Ecology, a conceptual model that captures the multidirectional trust relationships linking students, institutions and employers. The model is described as an ecology because trust is not held by a single actor, nor does it flow in a single direction. Instead, it is produced and negotiated through interactions among multiple stakeholders who depend on one another for the credibility, value and interpretation of educational outcomes.

The model comprises four interlocking dimensions: Student-to-Self Employability Trust, Student-to-Institution Employability Trust, Employer-to-Institution Employability Trust and Employer-to-Graduate Employability Trust. Each dimension reflects a distinct relational pathway through which trust influences employability.

Although analytically separable, these dimensions are interdependent. A breakdown in one area can have cascading effects across the ecology. For example, if employers question the authenticity of assessed work, this may weaken their trust in the institution, which in turn may influence students' trust in the value of their degree. Similarly, if students lack trust in their own capability, they may disengage from learning opportunities that are essential for developing credible competence.

The following subsections outline each dimension in turn.

Student-to-Self Employability Trust

Student-to-Self Employability Trust (SSET) refers to the degree to which learners trust in their own capacity to develop, evidence and adapt their capabilities under uncertain labour-market conditions, and to rely on education-to-work processes to recognise and reward that capability. It is related to, but distinct from, self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as the belief in one's ability to perform specific tasks. SSET extends beyond task performance to encompass students' expectations about their future employability, their confidence in navigating labour-market uncertainty and their belief that their educational experiences will enable them to present themselves as credible candidates. It is therefore a forward-looking form of trust that links personal capability with anticipated labour-market outcomes.

Conceptually, SSET aligns with psychological capital within the graduate capital model, while extending it to include trust in the broader education-to-work exchange process (Tomlinson, 2017; Blau, 1964).

Several factors shape the development of SSET. Prior educational experiences play a significant role. Students who have experienced academic success, constructive feedback and supportive learning environments are more likely to trust in their ability to develop employability-related capabilities. Conversely, students with histories of educational marginalisation or disrupted learning may enter higher education with fragile or conditional trust in their own potential.

Identity-based factors also influence SSET. Research on graduate identity formation suggests that students' sense of professional legitimacy is shaped by social background, cultural capital and access to networks (Tomlinson, 2017). Students from underrepresented or non-traditional backgrounds may face additional barriers to developing trust in their employability, particularly in competitive or elite labour markets.

Pedagogical practices are another important antecedent. Learning environments that provide opportunities for applied practice, constructive feedback and reflective engagement can strengthen students' trust in their own development. In contrast, environments that rely heavily on abstract or decontextualised assessment may make it more difficult for students to see how their learning translates into employability. Research on student engagement indicates that active, feedback-rich learning experiences are associated with higher levels of confidence and self-perceived learning gain (Kuh, 2001).

SSET AI-Era Vulnerabilities

The rise of artificial intelligence creates distinct challenges for students' trust in their own capabilities (SSET). Beyond simple job market shifts, these tools alter how learners evaluate their own worth and readiness for the future.

Shifting Job Markets and Career Anxiety: AI is rapidly restructuring professional roles and redefining essential workplace skills (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Frey and Osborne, 2017). This rapid transition leaves many students questioning whether their hard-earned skills will stay relevant or if automated systems will simply outpace them in core technical tasks. Widespread public conversation reinforces these worries; OECD data shows that a substantial portion of the workforce fears automation-driven displacement, with younger adults feeling particularly anxious about their long-term prospects (Nedelkoska and Quintini, 2018).

Distorted Perceptions of Personal Capability: Generative tools make it easy to produce polished, high-level work instantly, which can inadvertently blur a student's sense of personal achievement. When outputs look flawless,



learners often struggle to separate their own true skill from machine assistance. Crediting a tool rather than their own intellect erodes SSET, leaving students uncertain about what genuine competence actually looks like.

Integrity Concerns and Impostor Syndrome: Heavy reliance on automated assistance during coursework directly threatens deep learning. When students use these tools as a shortcut to complete assignments, they frequently miss out on mastering foundational concepts. This gap between superficial submission quality and actual comprehension fosters feelings of fragility and impostor syndrome, quietly undermining their confidence as they prepare to transition into professional life.

Student-to-Institution Employability Trust

Student-to-Institution Employability Trust (SIET) refers to the degree to which learners believe that their higher education institution is capable of providing the learning experiences, assessment practices and developmental opportunities required to support meaningful labour-market outcomes. It reflects students' confidence in the institution's curriculum relevance, pedagogical quality, industry alignment and overall credibility as a pathway to employment. SIET is relational rather than transactional. It concerns students' expectations about the institution's reliability and competence in preparing them for work, and their belief that the institution's practices will be recognised and valued by employers.

SIET reflects students' perceptions of institutional trustworthiness along the dimensions of ability, benevolence and integrity, as articulated in Mayer et al.'s (1995) model, applied here to the higher education-labour-market interface.

Several factors shape the development of SIET. Institutional reputation plays a significant role. Research shows that students' perceptions of institutional prestige and programme quality influence their expectations of employability outcomes (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2016). However, reputation alone does not guarantee trust. Students' day-to-day experiences with teaching, assessment and support services are equally important. Studies of student engagement indicate that perceptions of pedagogical quality, curriculum coherence and staff expertise contribute to students' trust in their institution's ability to prepare them for employment (Kuh, 2001).

Curriculum relevance is another key antecedent. When students perceive that their programmes are aligned with contemporary labour-market needs, they are more likely to trust that their institution is equipping them for future work. Conversely, when curricula appear outdated or disconnected from industry practice, SIET may weaken. This is particularly salient in rapidly evolving fields such as computing, business and the creative industries, where students often rely on institutions to mediate access to current knowledge and professional norms.

Institutional transparency also shapes SIET. Research on higher education governance suggests that students are more likely to trust institutions that communicate clearly about programme expectations, assessment standards and employability support (Mishra, 1996). When institutional processes appear opaque or inconsistent, students may question whether the institution is acting in their best interests. Unlike general student satisfaction or perceived institutional quality, SIET is specifically concerned with trust in the institution's role as a certifier of employability-relevant capability.

SIET AI-Era Vulnerabilities

The rapid adoption of artificial intelligence places unprecedented strain on students' trust in their institutions (SIET). As technological shifts accelerate, learners increasingly question whether universities can adapt fast enough to remain credible bridges to the workforce. A primary pressure point stems from rapid curriculum obsolescence. In fields where generative AI is changing core tasks, such as software development, marketing, content creation and data analysis, course content can quickly feel outdated, leading students to suspect a growing divide between what they are taught and what employers actually require. Employer surveys now rank AI literacy and the ability to work with AI tools among the most important skills for new graduates, with many reporting that today's graduates are only 'somewhat prepared' to use AI in organisational settings (GMAC, 2025; AAC&U, 2025). When degree content fails to reflect modern workplace realities, confidence in the institution's capacity to prepare them for employment naturally drops. Beyond what is taught, AI fundamentally disrupts

how learning is evaluated. Generative tools make authenticating student work increasingly difficult, casting doubt on traditional assessment methods (Cotton et al., 2023). If students begin to view grading as unreliable or easily gamed, they lose faith in the university's authority to certify genuine competence.

Also, trust is further strained when universities integrate automated systems into teaching, feedback, or administrative support. Algorithmic decision-making often lacks transparency, making it hard for users to trust automated outcomes without clear human oversight (Glikson and Woolley, 2020). When AI handles grading or student services, learners may worry that institutional processes are becoming impersonal, unpredictable, or inequitable. Widespread public anxiety surrounding job displacement also places higher demands on institutional responsiveness. Students facing an uncertain job market expect proactive support, including modernized curricula, redesigned assessments, and embedded AI literacy. When institutions appear hesitant or slow to adapt to these shifts, student confidence in the long-term value of their education inevitably wanes.

Employer-to-Institution Employability Trust

Employer-to-Institution Employability Trust (EIET) refers to the degree to which employers believe that a higher education institution reliably produces graduates with authentic, credible and work-ready capabilities. It reflects employers' confidence in the institution's curriculum quality, assessment integrity, pedagogical standards and alignment with industry expectations. EIET is not simply a matter of institutional reputation. It concerns employers' trust in the processes through which institutions certify competence, and their belief that these processes generate graduates who can perform effectively in professional contexts.

EIET can be understood as employers' evaluation of institutional trustworthiness, where ability concerns curriculum relevance and pedagogical quality, benevolence concerns the institution's commitment to producing work-ready graduates, and integrity concerns adherence to transparent and rigorous assessment standards (Mayer et al., 1995; Colquitt et al., 2007).

Several factors shape the development of EIET. Institutional reputation and historical standing play an important role. Research shows that employers often rely on institutional prestige as a heuristic for judging graduate quality, particularly in competitive labour markets (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2016). However, reputation alone is insufficient. Employers' direct experiences with graduates strongly influence their trust in the institution. Positive experiences can reinforce EIET, while repeated concerns about graduate preparedness can weaken it.

Curriculum relevance is another key antecedent. Employers are more likely to trust institutions that demonstrate alignment with contemporary industry needs. Studies of employer engagement highlight the importance of industry-informed curriculum design, work-integrated learning and opportunities for applied practice (Jackson, 2016). When institutions collaborate with employers to shape learning experiences, EIET tends to strengthen.

Assessment integrity is also central. Employers must trust that the grades, classifications and credentials awarded by institutions accurately reflect students' capabilities. Research on credentialism and signalling theory suggests that employers rely on educational credentials as proxies for underlying competence (Spence, 1973). This reliance depends on trust in the institution's assessment processes. If employers believe that assessment standards are inconsistent or insufficiently rigorous, EIET may weaken.

Finally, institutional communication and transparency influence EIET. Employers are more likely to trust institutions that clearly articulate their pedagogical approaches, assessment standards and graduate attributes. When institutions provide opaque or generic descriptions of their programmes, employers may struggle to interpret the meaning of credentials.

EIET AI-Era Vulnerabilities

The emergence of AI has introduced new vulnerabilities that place pressure on EIET. First, AI has disrupted assessment authenticity. Cotton et al. (2023) argue that generative AI tools challenge the validity of traditional assessment methods by enabling students to produce sophisticated outputs with minimal human input. If



employers believe that assessed work may not reflect genuine student capability, they may begin to question the credibility of institutional credentials. This poses a direct threat to EIET.

Second, AI has intensified concerns about skill relevance. Labour market research indicates that AI is reshaping professional roles and altering the competencies required for effective performance (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Frey and Osborne, 2017). Employers may question whether institutions are adapting quickly enough to these changes. If curricula appear outdated or insufficiently responsive to technological developments, EIET may decline.

Third, AI has increased the visibility of performance gaps between graduates and AI-enabled tools. Studies of creative and digital industries show that AI systems can now perform tasks traditionally associated with graduate-level roles, including design, content creation and data analysis (Bojinov et al., 2026; Manno, 2025). When AI tools outperform entry-level graduates in speed or cost, employers may question whether institutions are equipping students with distinctive human capabilities that remain valuable in AI-mediated workplaces.

Fourth, the integration of AI into institutional processes can raise concerns about fairness and transparency. If employers perceive that AI-mediated assessment or feedback systems lack clarity or reliability, they may question whether institutional standards remain robust. This can weaken EIET by undermining confidence in the institution's quality assurance mechanisms.

Institutional Levers

To earn and maintain employer trust (EIET), universities must consistently demonstrate academic rigor, real-world relevance, and proactive adaptation to technological change. Several core strategies can help institutions strengthen these industry connections.

To begin with, universities must ensure that testing methods remain authentic and meaningful in an age dominated by generative AI. Shift evaluation toward hands-on application, critical analysis, and nuanced human reasoning; skills that automated tools cannot easily replicate. Openly sharing the steps taken to uphold academic standards reassures employers that grades and credentials still signify true capability.

Subsequently, directly involving employers, industry leaders, and professional bodies in course reviews keeps degree content tightly aligned with workplace demands. When organizations see their feedback actively shaping what students learn, the practical credibility of the entire program increases (Jackson, 2016).

Thereafter, Trust builds when an institution can clearly articulate the distinct value its graduates offer. Beyond subject-specific knowledge, frameworks should highlight AI-resilient capabilities—such as ethical judgment, complex problem-solving, collaboration, and creative thinking. Employers gain far more confidence when universities clearly explain what their graduates are equipped to achieve.

Also, hiding or banning technology is far less effective than demonstrating how it is used responsibly in the classroom. When universities show how AI tools are thoughtfully integrated to enhance learning, they signal to employers that students are being trained for a modern, tech-driven workplace without compromising standards (Luckin et al., 2016).

Ultimately, long-term trust relies on open communication. Maintaining active advisory boards, structured work placements, and strong alumni networks gives employers a clear view into university practices and student performance, building lasting confidence over time.

Employer-to-Graduate Employability Trust

Employer-to-Graduate Employability Trust (EGET) refers to the degree to which employers believe that individual graduates possess the authentic, reliable and contextually relevant capabilities required for effective performance in professional roles. It reflects employers' confidence in graduates' technical competence, transferable skills, ethical judgement and capacity to adapt to workplace demands. EGET is distinct from Employer-to-Institution Employability Trust. While EIET concerns trust in the institution's processes and

standards, EGET concerns trust in the graduate as a person. It is shaped by employers' direct interactions with graduates, their interpretations of graduates' behaviours and performance, and their perceptions of how well graduates can translate educational experiences into workplace competence.

Several factors influence the development of EGET. Employers' prior experiences with graduates from similar programmes or institutions play a significant role. Positive experiences can strengthen trust in new graduates, while negative experiences can create scepticism or caution. Research on graduate transitions shows that employers often rely on behavioural cues, communication skills and evidence of workplace readiness when forming judgements about graduate capability (Jackson, 2016).

Work-integrated learning experiences also shape EGET. Internships, placements and project-based collaborations provide employers with opportunities to observe graduates' performance in authentic contexts. Studies consistently show that such experiences enhance employers' trust in graduates by providing concrete evidence of competence, professionalism and adaptability (Smith, Ferns and Russell, 2014).

Employers' interpretations of graduates' self-presentation and identity also matter. Tomlinson (2017) argues that employability involves narrative and identity work, through which graduates articulate their value and professional legitimacy. Employers often assess not only what graduates know, but how convincingly they communicate their capabilities. Graduates who can articulate their skills, reflect on their learning and demonstrate professional confidence are more likely to be trusted.

Finally, labour market conditions influence EGET. In tight labour markets, employers may be more willing to trust graduates and invest in their development. In competitive or uncertain markets, employers may adopt more cautious or risk-averse approaches, placing greater emphasis on demonstrable competence.

EGET AI-Era Vulnerabilities

The emergence of AI has introduced new vulnerabilities that complicate employers' trust in graduates. First, AI has blurred the boundaries between human and machine competence. Generative AI tools can produce outputs that resemble or surpass graduate-level work in areas such as writing, design, coding and data analysis. Studies of creative and digital industries show that AI systems are already competing with human labour in tasks traditionally associated with entry-level roles (Zulu, Åkesson and Thomsen, 2026; Westby, Modestino and Cheng, 2026). This raises questions about whether graduates' outputs reflect genuine human capability or AI-mediated assistance.

Second, employers may struggle to assess the authenticity of graduates' skills. Cotton et al. (2023) argue that AI challenges the validity of traditional assessment, which has historically served as a proxy for competence. If employers believe that graduates' assessed work may have been produced or enhanced by AI, they may question whether graduates possess the underlying skills required for professional practice. This uncertainty can weaken EGET by undermining confidence in graduates' readiness.

Third, AI has increased expectations for hybrid human-AI competence. Employers increasingly expect graduates to demonstrate not only disciplinary knowledge but also the ability to work effectively with AI tools. Research on digital transformation in workplaces shows that employees are now required to integrate AI into their workflows, exercise judgement about when to rely on automation and identify errors or biases in AI outputs (Glikson and Woolley, 2020). Graduates who lack AI literacy may be perceived as less competitive, which can weaken EGET.

Fourth, public discourse about AI-driven job displacement can influence employers' perceptions of graduate value. If employers believe that AI can perform certain tasks more efficiently or cheaply than human graduates, they may question the necessity of hiring entry-level staff. This dynamic is particularly visible in sectors such as design, marketing and content production, where AI tools have already begun to replace or reduce demand for junior roles (Manno, 2025).



Boundary conditions of the ecology

The Employability Trust Ecology shares a systems orientation with recent applications of ecological systems theory to stakeholder views of employability (e.g., analyses that locate learner, teacher and careers-practitioner perspectives within nested environments). It differs, however, in its explicit focus on multidirectional trust as the core relational mechanism linking students, institutions and employers, and in its attention to the distinctive vulnerabilities introduced by generative AI. Whereas broader ecological accounts map multiple environmental influences, the present model isolates the trust relationships most directly implicated in the conversion of educational participation into perceived labour-market value.

The Employability Trust Ecology presented in this paper focuses on four trust dimensions because this captures the principal relational pathways most directly connected to the education-to-work transition. The model centres on three core actors; students, higher education institutions and employers; and on the trust relationships that most strongly shape how educational capability is interpreted, certified and mobilised in labour markets.

Other trust relationships undoubtedly exist. Institutions trust students to engage authentically with learning; graduates trust employers to provide fair recruitment processes; professional bodies trust institutions to meet accreditation standards. However, these relationships are secondary to the central question addressed in this paper: how trust mediates the conversion of educational participation into perceived labour-market value. The four dimensions were selected because they (a) represent the primary directional flows of trust that underpin credential credibility and graduate readiness, and (b) align with the dominant structure of employability discourse, which positions students as learners, institutions as certifiers and employers as validators of capability.

This boundary does not imply that other trust relationships are unimportant. Rather, it reflects a deliberate analytical choice to focus on the trust dynamics most consequential for employability outcomes. Future research may extend the ecology to incorporate additional actors and relationships, such as trust between institutions and professional regulators, or trust among peers and professional networks.

Interdependence of the Four Dimensions of Employability Trust

The four dimensions of the Employability Trust Ecology are analytically distinct, yet in practice they operate as an interconnected system. Trust in one part of the ecology shapes, reinforces or destabilises trust in the others. This interdependence reflects the relational nature of employability, where students, institutions and employers rely on one another to interpret competence, certify capability and translate educational experiences into labour-market value.

A breakdown in Student-to-Self Employability Trust can influence how students engage with institutional learning opportunities. Existing research on student engagement shows that learners who lack confidence in their own development are less likely to participate actively in learning, seek feedback or pursue work-integrated experiences (Kuh, 2001). This can weaken Student-to-Institution Employability Trust, as students may interpret their own struggles as evidence that the institution is not adequately supporting their development. Over time, this dynamic can produce a cycle in which low SSET contributes to declining SIET, which in turn further undermines students' confidence in their employability.

Similarly, the relationship between institutions and employers is shaped by reciprocal expectations. If employers question the credibility of assessment or the relevance of curricula, Employer-to-Institution Employability Trust may weaken. This can have downstream effects on students, who may become aware of employer scepticism through placement experiences, recruitment interactions or public discourse. When students perceive that employers doubt the value of their degree, SIET may decline, and SSET may be affected as students question whether their educational efforts will translate into meaningful opportunities.

Employer-to-Graduate Employability Trust is also influenced by the other dimensions. Employers' trust in individual graduates is shaped not only by graduates' performance but also by their perceptions of institutional standards and the broader labour-market context. If employers believe that institutions have not adapted to the challenges introduced by AI, they may approach graduates with greater caution. This can weaken EGET even

when graduates possess strong capabilities. Conversely, when institutions demonstrate rigorous assessment, industry alignment and transparent use of AI, EIET strengthens, which can positively influence employers' trust in graduates.

The interdependence of the four dimensions becomes particularly visible in the AI era. Concerns about assessment authenticity can weaken EIET, which may reduce EGET by creating uncertainty about whether graduates' outputs reflect genuine competence. This, in turn, can influence SIET and SSET, as students may internalise employer scepticism and question the value of their educational experiences. The result is a cascading effect in which trust erodes across the ecology, undermining the conditions that support employability.

Understanding employability as a trust ecology therefore highlights the need for coordinated action across students, institutions and employers. Strengthening one dimension of trust requires attention to the others. Pedagogical innovation, curriculum relevance, assessment integrity, AI literacy and employer engagement must be aligned to support a coherent and credible pathway from education to work. Without such alignment, trust may fracture at multiple points, limiting the effectiveness of employability initiatives and weakening the perceived value of higher education in a rapidly changing labour market.

In summary, the four dimensions of the Employability Trust Ecology show that employability is sustained not by isolated skills or institutional practices, but by a network of relational expectations that connect students, institutions and employers. Trust operates as the underlying condition that enables these relationships to function, and its absence can destabilise the entire pathway from education to work. By conceptualising employability as a multidirectional ecology of trust, the model provides a foundation for reinterpreting how competence is understood, how assessment is valued and how graduate readiness is judged. This conceptualisation also opens new avenues for empirical and theoretical inquiry. The next section develops propositions for future research that emerge from the ecology and outlines how scholars can investigate the dynamics, antecedents and consequences of employability trust across different educational and labour-market contexts.

Propositions for Future Research

The Employability Trust Ecology offers a new way of thinking about how employability is formed and sustained. Rather than treating employability as a set of individual attributes or institutional interventions, the model foregrounds the relational conditions that make employability possible. Trust becomes the connective tissue linking students, institutions and employers. To advance this conceptual agenda, future research needs to explore how these trust relationships emerge, how they interact and how they shape educational and labour-market outcomes. The propositions below are intended as starting points for inquiry rather than a definitive list. They invite researchers to examine employability trust through diverse methodological and disciplinary lenses.

Student-to-Self Employability Trust

Students' trust in their own employability, understood here as SSET, is not simply a matter of confidence or self-efficacy, but a relational expectation about their capacity to develop and evidence capability within credible education-to-work processes. It is shaped by their histories, identities and the kinds of learning environments they encounter. Bandura's work on self-efficacy (1997) highlights the importance of mastery experiences, but research on student engagement (Kuh, 2001) and graduate identity formation (Tomlinson, 2017) suggests that students' sense of professional legitimacy is also influenced by feedback, belonging and opportunities to test themselves in authentic contexts. SSET therefore sits at the intersection of personal capability and social interpretation.

Recent evidence on early-career labour markets underscores the relevance of SSET in the AI era. Studies indicate that entry-level vacancies in AI-exposed occupations have declined relative to senior roles, with effects concentrated among junior positions (Westby, Modestino and Cheng, 2026; ILO, 2026). These developments may heighten students' anxieties about their future employability and weaken their trust in their own capacity to secure meaningful work.



Future research might explore how SSET develops over time, how it varies across disciplines and how it interacts with students' willingness to engage in employability-enhancing activities. For example, students who trust in their own potential may be more inclined to pursue placements, internships or extracurricular opportunities that reinforce employability. Conversely, fragile SSET may lead students to withdraw from precisely the experiences that could strengthen their employability.

Proposition 1: Students who participate in applied, feedback-rich learning experiences will report higher levels of Student-to-Self Employability Trust than comparable students in predominantly decontextualised programmes, controlling for prior academic self-efficacy.

Proposition 2: Students from underrepresented or non-traditional backgrounds will report lower initial levels of Student-to-Self Employability Trust, but this gap will narrow in programmes that provide targeted identity-affirming pedagogy and mentoring.

Proposition 3: Higher levels of Student-to-Self Employability Trust at programme entry will predict greater engagement with employability opportunities (e.g., placements, internships, career-related extracurricular activities) over time, mediated by reduced avoidance of career uncertainty.

Student-to-Institution Employability Trust

Students' trust in their institution is a more complex construct than satisfaction or perceived quality. It concerns whether students believe their institution is capable of preparing them for meaningful work. Research on institutional trust (Mishra, 1996) suggests that reliability, competence and openness are central to trust formation. In the employability context, these qualities manifest through curriculum relevance, pedagogical coherence and transparent assessment practices.

Students often make judgements about institutional credibility based on how well programmes reflect contemporary labour-market realities. Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2016) show that students' perceptions of institutional prestige and programme quality shape their expectations of employment outcomes. Yet prestige alone is insufficient. Students also attend to the everyday signals of institutional competence: clarity of assessment criteria, consistency of feedback and the perceived expertise of teaching staff.

The AI era introduces additional pressures on SIET. Evidence that entry-level roles in software development and content creation have declined following the diffusion of generative AI may lead students to question whether their programmes are adequately preparing them for a changing labour market (Westby, Modestino and Cheng, 2026; ILO, 2026). When institutions appear slow to adapt curricula or assessment practices, SIET may weaken.

Future research could examine how SIET varies across institutions, how it is influenced by disciplinary cultures and how it shapes students' interpretations of employability initiatives.

Proposition 4: Perceived curriculum relevance will positively predict Student-to-Institution Employability Trust, with stronger effects in disciplines undergoing rapid technological change.

Proposition 5: Students who perceive assessment practices as transparent and fair will report higher levels of Student-to-Institution Employability Trust, independent of overall satisfaction with the institution.

Proposition 6: Higher levels of Student-to-Institution Employability Trust will predict more positive evaluations of institutional employability initiatives (e.g., career services, workshops, employer events), mediated by greater perceived credibility of the institution.

Employer-to-Institution Employability Trust

Employers' trust in institutions is shaped by a mixture of historical reputation, direct experience and perceived alignment with industry needs. Signalling theory (Spence, 1973) suggests that employers rely on educational credentials as proxies for underlying capability, but this reliance depends on trust in the institution's assessment standards and curriculum quality. Jackson's research on employer engagement (2016) shows that employers

value institutions that provide applied learning opportunities and produce graduates who can transition smoothly into professional roles.

EIET is therefore relational and cumulative. Employers form judgements based on repeated interactions with graduates, participation in advisory boards and exposure to institutional practices. When employers perceive strong alignment between curricula and industry expectations, trust tends to strengthen. When they encounter graduates who appear underprepared, trust can erode quickly.

Recent labour-market evidence suggests that employers are becoming more selective in their hiring of early-career workers, particularly in AI-exposed occupations (Westby, Modestino and Cheng, 2026; ILO, 2026). This selectivity may reflect declining EIET if employers perceive that institutions have not adapted quickly enough to technological change. Conversely, institutions that demonstrate rigorous assessment, industry alignment and transparent use of AI may strengthen EIET.

Future research could explore how EIET differs across sectors, how employers interpret institutional signals and how trust influences partnership formation.

Proposition 7: Employers who perceive clear alignment between institutional curricula and industry needs will report higher levels of Employer-to-Institution Employability Trust, controlling for institutional reputation.

Proposition 8: Positive experiences with graduates from a given institution will reinforce Employer-to-Institution Employability Trust over time, while repeated concerns about graduate readiness will weaken it.

Proposition 9: Higher levels of Employer-to-Institution Employability Trust will predict greater employer willingness to engage in partnerships, placements and work-integrated learning activities with the institution.

Employer-to-Graduate Employability Trust

Employers' trust in graduates is shaped by more than technical skill. It involves judgements about professionalism, communication, adaptability and the ability to navigate workplace expectations. Research on graduate transitions (Jackson, 2016) shows that employers often rely on behavioural cues and narrative competence when assessing graduate readiness. Tomlinson (2017) argues that employability involves identity work, through which graduates articulate their value and legitimacy.

EGET is therefore a relational judgement formed through interaction. Employers assess not only what graduates can do, but how they present themselves, how they respond to feedback and how they make sense of their learning. Work-integrated learning experiences provide employers with opportunities to observe these qualities directly, which can strengthen trust. Research on work-integrated learning indicates that placements and applied projects enhance employers' perceptions of graduate work-readiness by providing concrete evidence of competence (Smith, Ferns and Russell, 2014).

The AI era introduces new complexities for EGET. Generative AI tools can produce outputs that resemble or surpass graduate-level work in areas such as writing, design, coding and data analysis (Zulu, Åkesson and Thomsen, 2026; Westby, Modestino and Cheng, 2026). Employers may therefore struggle to distinguish between genuine human capability and AI-mediated assistance. This uncertainty can weaken EGET, particularly when assessed work provides limited evidence of unaided or independently demonstrated capability.

Future research could examine how EGET varies across sectors, how employers interpret graduates' self-presentation and how trust influences recruitment and early-career outcomes.

Proposition 10: Graduates who can articulate coherent professional identities and reflect meaningfully on their learning will elicit higher levels of Employer-to-Graduate Employability Trust, independent of degree classification.



Proposition 11: *Graduates who complete work-integrated learning placements will elicit higher levels of Employer-to-Graduate Employability Trust than comparable graduates without placement experience, mediated by employer perceptions of demonstrated competence.*

Proposition 12: *Higher levels of Employer-to-Graduate Employability Trust will predict more favourable early-career outcomes (e.g., job offers, faster time to employment, perceived role fit), controlling for credential level and discipline.*

Interdependence Across the Ecology

The ecology model emphasises that trust is not linear. It circulates. A shift in one dimension can reverberate across others. For example, fragile SSET may reduce students' engagement with learning opportunities, which can influence SIET. Weak SIET may shape how students interpret institutional support, which can affect how they present themselves to employers. Employers' experiences with graduates feed back into EIET, influencing how institutions design curricula and assessment. These dynamics suggest that employability trust is best understood as a system rather than a set of discrete relationships.

Recent evidence on early-career labour markets illustrates this interdependence. Declines in entry-level vacancies in AI-exposed occupations may weaken SSET and SIET among students, while simultaneously prompting employers to question institutional responsiveness (EIET) and graduate readiness (EGET) (Westby, Modestino and Cheng, 2026; ILO, 2026). These cascading effects highlight the need for coordinated action across students, institutions and employers.

Future research could explore these interdependencies using longitudinal designs, network analysis or comparative institutional studies.

Proposition 13: *Changes in one dimension of employability trust (e.g., Student-to-Self) will predict subsequent changes in other dimensions (e.g., Student-to-Institution, Employer-to-Graduate) over time, indicating reciprocal relationships across the ecology.*

Proposition 14: *Institutional interventions that explicitly target one dimension of employability trust (e.g., transparent assessment to strengthen SIET) will produce positive spillover effects on at least one other dimension (e.g., SSET or EIET) within the same institutional context.*

Proposition 15: *Employability outcomes (e.g., employment rates, perceived job fit, early-career progression) will be strongest in institutional contexts where all four dimensions of employability trust are simultaneously high, indicating a coherent and stable trust ecology.*

Implications

The Employability Trust Ecology reframes employability as a relational achievement rather than an individual or institutional output. In doing so, it integrates insights from organisational trust theory, signalling theory, graduate capital theory and social exchange theory to explain how relational, process-focused trust conditions make the education-to-work pathway credible. This shift has significant implications for how higher education designs learning, how employers interpret graduate capability and how policymakers understand the relationship between education and labour markets. The model suggests that strengthening employability requires attention not only to skills and curriculum, but also to the trust conditions that enable students, institutions and employers to work together in meaningful ways.

Implications for Higher Education Institutions

For universities, the ecology highlights the importance of cultivating trust at multiple levels. Institutions often invest heavily in employability initiatives, yet these efforts may have limited impact if students do not trust the institution's capacity to prepare them for work. Strengthening Student-to-Institution Employability Trust requires more than adding new modules or workshops. It calls for coherence across curriculum design, assessment practices and the everyday signals that communicate institutional reliability.

One implication is the need for clearer articulation of programme relevance. Students form judgements about institutional credibility based on whether curricula reflect contemporary professional realities. This does not mean chasing every labour-market trend, but it does require visible alignment between learning outcomes and the kinds of capabilities employers value. Transparent assessment practices are equally important. When students understand how their work is judged and why certain standards matter, Student-to-Institution Employability Trust is more likely to develop.

A second implication concerns the role of feedback. Feedback is not only a pedagogical tool; it is a trust-building mechanism. Constructive, timely and dialogic feedback helps students see their own progress and reinforces the institution's commitment to their development. This, in turn, strengthens Student-to-Self Employability Trust and supports deeper engagement with learning.

Finally, institutions need to recognise that employer trust is shaped by cumulative experience. Partnerships, placements and advisory boards are not peripheral activities. They are central to maintaining Employer-to-Institution Employability Trust. Institutions that cultivate long-term relationships with employers are better positioned to understand industry expectations and to demonstrate the credibility of their programmes.

Implications for Employers

Employers play a more active role in the ecology than traditional employability models acknowledge. Their trust in institutions and graduates shapes recruitment practices, partnership decisions and the kinds of opportunities made available to students. The ecology suggests that employers benefit from engaging more deliberately with higher education, not only to influence curriculum design but also to understand how graduates develop their capabilities.

One implication is that employers should articulate their expectations more clearly. Institutions often rely on employer feedback to shape programmes, yet this feedback can be inconsistent or overly general. More precise communication about the capabilities required for early-career success can strengthen Employer-to-Institution Employability Trust and support curriculum relevance.

A second implication concerns recruitment practices. Employers who rely solely on credentials or institutional reputation may overlook graduates who possess strong employability trust but come from less prestigious institutions. The ecology suggests that employers should attend to graduates' identity work, reflective capacity and adaptability, qualities that are often better indicators of long-term potential than technical proficiency alone.

Finally, employers can strengthen Employer-to-Graduate Employability Trust by providing structured opportunities for students to demonstrate competence. Placements, project collaborations and mentoring schemes allow employers to observe graduates in authentic contexts, which can build trust more effectively than traditional recruitment processes.

Implications for Policy and Sector-Level Strategy

At the policy level, the ecology challenges narrow interpretations of employability that focus on skills lists, graduate outcomes metrics or institutional rankings. These approaches assume linear relationships between learning inputs and labour-market outputs. The ecology shows that employability is relational and contingent. It depends on trust, alignment and shared expectations across multiple actors.

One implication is that policy frameworks should recognise the relational dimensions of employability. Metrics that capture only employment rates or salary outcomes overlook the processes through which employability is formed. Policymakers could support institutions by encouraging deeper employer engagement, incentivising work-integrated learning and recognising the importance of assessment integrity and curriculum relevance.

A second implication concerns equity. The ecology highlights that trust is unevenly distributed. Students from underrepresented backgrounds may enter higher education with fragile Student-to-Self Employability Trust or conditional Student-to-Institution Employability Trust. Policies that focus solely on skills acquisition risk



overlooking these relational barriers. More targeted support for identity-affirming pedagogy, mentoring and belonging initiatives could help address these disparities.

Finally, the ecology suggests that employability should be understood as a shared responsibility. Institutions, employers and policymakers each contribute to the conditions under which trust is built or eroded. Effective employability strategies therefore require coordinated action rather than isolated interventions.

Limitations

As a conceptual contribution, this paper does not present empirical data. The Employability Trust Ecology is derived from existing theory and contemporary observations of AI-related disruption rather than from primary research. The model is currently framed primarily around higher education systems in which credentials function as key labour-market signals; its applicability to vocational, apprenticeship-based or non-formal education pathways requires further examination. In addition, the propositions assume a degree of institutional agency and employer engagement that may vary markedly across national and sectoral contexts. These limitations point to the need for multi-stakeholder, longitudinal and comparative empirical work capable of testing, refining and extending the ecology.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that employability cannot be understood solely through skills, curriculum design or labour-market alignment. These elements matter, but they do not explain why some students engage deeply with learning while others hold back, why some institutions are trusted by employers and others are not, or why graduates with similar qualifications experience different transitions into work. The Employability Trust Ecology offers a way of making sense of these variations by foregrounding trust as the relational condition that underpins employability.

By articulating four interconnected dimensions, Student-to-Self, Student-to-Institution, Employer-to-Institution and Employer-to-Graduate Employability Trust, the model reframes employability as a multidirectional system. Each dimension captures a distinct set of expectations, interpretations and judgements. Together, they reveal how employability emerges through relationships rather than through isolated interventions. The ecology also highlights that trust is unevenly distributed. It can be strengthened, eroded or repaired, and these shifts have consequences for how students learn, how institutions design programmes and how employers interpret graduate capability.

The fifteen propositions developed in this paper provide a foundation for future empirical work. They invite researchers to examine how trust develops over time, how it varies across disciplines and institutional contexts, and how it shapes educational and labour-market outcomes. They also open space for methodological innovation. Longitudinal studies, comparative institutional analyses and employer-focused research could all deepen our understanding of how trust circulates within the ecology.

Ultimately, the contribution of this paper is conceptual rather than prescriptive. It does not claim to solve employability challenges, nor does it offer a checklist of interventions. Instead, it provides a lens through which employability can be reinterpreted. By recognising trust as central to the education-to-work pathway, the ecology encourages institutions, employers and policymakers to attend to the relational dynamics that make employability possible. Strengthening these dynamics will require coordinated effort, but doing so offers the possibility of a more coherent, equitable and credible employability landscape.

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