

# An Integrated Review of Career Resources, Problem-Based Learning, and Graduate Employability in the UAE

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJAREMS/v15-i2/28296>

Published Online: 25 May 2026

## Abstract

With the swift changes in the economy, globalization and the advancement of technology in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the issue of graduate employability has emerged as a key concern of higher education institutions, employers and policy makers. In today's increasingly competitive job market, graduates need not only academic skills, but also transferable skills, flexibility, communication and skills in the workplace. Yet, a large proportion of graduates remain to face problems in transitioning from education to work due to a gap between higher education outcomes and expectations of the labour market. The aim of this study is to identify the factors that improve the employability of graduates in UAE. The finding of the review paper discusses the importance of career resources and problem-based learning (PBL) in improving the employability of graduates in UAE. The paper highlights some main determinants of employability, such as career identity, human and social capital and personal adaptability, as well as perceived employability. Graduate confidence and employment prospects are also explored due to their relationship with labour market conditions. The results suggest that PBL has a positive impact on critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving skills which enhance graduate employment readiness. The review underscores the need to have closer alignment between higher education curricula and the expectations of the labor market to enhance employment outcomes in the UAE in the long term.

**Keywords:** Graduate Employability, Career Resources, Problem-Based Learning, Adaptability, UAE

## Introduction

It has become one of the biggest challenges for HEIs throughout the world to become more employable. Due to economic transformation, technological innovation, globalisation and digitalisation, labour market structures have been transformed and expectations of employers with regard to the skills of graduates have shifted. Employers require students to have practical skills, adaptability, communication abilities, team-work competencies, and problem-solving skills in addition to their academic qualifications, and these requirements are growing (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2018; Lee & Clarke, 2019). Despite the growth of higher education, there are still many graduates who have encountered challenges in successfully making a transition to the workplace, as many schools focus more on theory-based knowledge, and do not pay much attention to preparing students for the work place (Osmani et al., 2019). Employability is an issue of major concern for graduates in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) due to the UAE government's efforts to diversify the economy to become knowledge-based. The UAE government has made significant efforts to promote higher education and skill development to diversify the economy and move away from oil businesses. But employers remain worried about the gap between the skills of graduates and the skills needed in the job market. Some graduates have academic credentials, but not the work skills and/or workplace readiness necessary for successful transitions to employment (Hou et al., 2021). The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) noted the transition from education to employment is “neither simple nor irreversible”, as the labour market is facing increased competition and uncertainty for graduates. The rate of youth unemployment is also higher than the average in the Middle East and North Africa region, adding additional pressure on youth seeking employment (UNICEF, 2019). In the UAE, employability problems are related to labour market challenges, demographic pressures, language barriers and cultural expectations (Ashour, 2020). These challenges emphasize the importance of higher education institutions using educational strategies that further prepare students for the workplace and prepare them with self-confidence. The major challenge highlighted in this review paper has been the perennial gap between higher education attainment and the workforce requirement in UAE. While gaining academic qualifications, graduates face challenges with practical skills and lack of confidence in employability skills and professional adaptability needed by employers. The literature shows that several factors interact and affect the concept of employability, which can be separated into four categories: career identity, human capital, social capital, personal adaptability and educational approaches (problem-based learning – PBL). Thus, there is still a lack of awareness about how these factors interact to make students employable in the UAE context. Thus, the aim of this review paper is to explore the relationship between problem-based learning (PBL) and graduate employability in UAE and identify the main drivers that shape graduate employability in this context. In particular, the paper examines the relationship between career identity, human and social capital, personal adaptability and perceived employability and their role in preparing graduates for the labor market. The aim of this review paper is to identify the practical skills, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and adaptability that PBL fosters to be developed for employability. The review has a few significant contributions to the literature. First, it offers an integrated view of the employability of graduates, combining an educational and a labour market perspective. Secondly, the review helps in employability research in the UAE by exploring the challenges faced by graduates in the transition from education to employment in the UAE. Third, the paper emphasizes the importance of problem-based learning as a pedagogical tool that can be implemented to enhance workplace readiness and employability

skills. Lastly, it offers implications for higher education institutions, employers, and policy makers aiming to increase the employability of students and to ensure educational outcomes meet the demand of the labor market.

## Literature Review

### *Employability Theory*

Theory of employability has developed from focus on the employability outcomes to a more encompassing concept of the ability of graduates to enter, stay and advance in employment. Modernly, employability is defined by being adaptable, confident, learning throughout life, and managing one's career (Ybema, van Vuuren & van Dam, 2020). So employability is seen as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is related to knowledge, skills, flexibility, self-efficacy and labour market awareness. Human Capital Theory is one of the most important theories that underlie the field of employability studies. Becker (1964) suggested that education raises the productivity of people by improving their knowledge, skills and competencies. Students who possess greater educational and technical skills are thus more likely to find jobs and succeed in their careers. Human capital consists of three types: scholastic capital, social capital, cultural capital, inner-value capital, and market-value capital, all of which affect employability outcomes (Baruch, Bell, & Gray, 2005). Social Capital Theory also suggests that having successful connections and networks among professionals plays an important role in job access and career advancement opportunities. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) have suggested that social connections offer people useful resources that facilitate their career mobility and professional trajectory. Networking opportunities, internships, mentorship programs, and engagement activities with employers enhance graduates' access to labor market opportunities and professional advice. Another important area of employability research is contained in Career Construction Theory, which describes how people respond to the dynamics of the labor market. Savickas and Porfeli (2012) established the four dimensions of career adaptability: career concern, control, curiosity and confidence. These dimensions have an impact on graduates' capacity to deal with uncertainty, effectively undertake career changes, and adapt to evolving work expectations.

### *Career Identity*

Career identity is a reflection of a person's self-definition in terms of his or her professional aspirations, goals, and values (Fugate et al., 2004). It acts as a 'cognitive compass' for decisions and behaviours about career (McArdle et al., 2007). Career-identified graduates have greater confidence, motivation, and initiative in career development activities. The literature indicates that career identity plays an important role in employability as it assists graduates in the adjustment of their aspirations to the expectations from the labour market. People with mature career identities tend to have better career planning skills, engage more in career development activities, and have a better understanding of career pathways. Career Mentoring programs, career internships, experiential learning and career counseling are significant factors to reinforce career identity and career outcomes for students (McIlveen et al., 2022). Career identity is especially relevant in an unstable labor market, like the UAE, where graduates have to deal with economic change, a competitive job market, and shifting career expectations. Those students with a strong sense of their careers are more likely to feel they can pursue a job because they have more confidence in their skills, strengths, and career aspirations.

### *Human and Social Capital*

Human capital is the skills, knowledge, competencies and qualifications gained from a course of study or work experience (Becker, 1964). Higher education plays a vital role in employability by developing the technical knowledge and skills of graduates. Baruch, Bell & Gray (2005) identified several aspects to human capital: scholastic, cultural, social, inner-value, and market-value. Scholastic capital are skills acquired in school and managerial knowledge obtained from higher education. The term cultural capital refers to prestige and social recognition in institutional settings as a result of educational qualifications. Inner-value capital is characterized as confidence, self-efficacy, professional maturity, and personal development gained from educational experiences. Market-value capital is the value of graduate education in terms of financial and employment rewards. Social capital is the professional relationships, network and social interactions that enable access to jobs and career information. Social capital is enhanced at universities through alumni networks, internships, involvement in employer activities, and professional networking opportunities or events (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Persons with high social capital are likely to have high level of labour market awareness, good employability confidence, and better access to career opportunities. The literature suggests that employability is a function of the interplay between human and social capital. Students who have good grades but lack work experience might not get job offers. Likewise, students with extensive networking and weak technical skills can find it challenging to achieve long-term career success.

### *Personal Adaptability*

In today's uncertain labor market, technologically driven and with evolving career demands, personal adaptability is playing a greater role. The concept of Career Adaptability is defined as the capacity of individuals to plan, manage and react to career changes and work situations (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Career adaptability has four factors: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Career concern is thinking in the future and planning ahead for the career. Career control requires self-discipline and self-responsibility in making career choices. Career curiosity is being open to opportunities and gaining new skills. Career confidence is the belief that a person has in their skills to face career challenges and attain career success. Flexibility has been shown to predict lifelong learning, professional development, and proactive behaviors in the workplace. Employability is thus reinforced as the graduates become more flexible and are able to adjust to shifts in the labour market, technology and employer needs. Adaptability is especially crucial in the UAE given the ongoing and imminent economic diversification that is driving shifts in workforce needs and opportunities.

### *Problem-Based Learning*

Problem-based learning (PBL) has become an important pedagogical approach that could positively contribute to the graduate employability and workplace readiness. PBL is a student-centered learning method that requires students to face real-life problems with cooperation, critical thinking, self-learning, and the ability to apply knowledge to solve the problem (Dunlap, 2005; Peng et al., 2018). PBL is different from the traditional lecture method because it engages students in the learning process through experiential activities that develop work-ready skills like teamwork, communication, leadership, adaptability, and analytical skills. In PBL contexts, students tend to show an increase in self-efficacy and confidence in their employability skills due to their hands-on experience in dealing with uncertainty, in using complex problem-solving processes, and in working collaboratively with others (Bandura,

1997). Another relationship that is mentioned in the literature is the PBL-employability confidence correlation. Students gain confidence in their job-seeking and job maintenance abilities through hands-on learning experiences. PBL therefore helps to build graduates' confidence in dealing with challenges in the labor market and workplaces, in addition to skill acquisition.

### *Perceived Employability*

Perceived employability is the confidence that people have in their capacity to obtain and retain jobs in the internal and external labor markets (Forrier & Sels, 2003). The perception of employability has a significant impact on graduates' motivation, resilience and actions towards work. Graduates who view themselves as employable are more likely to be proactive in networking, internship, professional development, or job searching (Wittekind, Raeder & Grote, 2010). Factors that affect perceived employability include educational experiences, adaptability, self-efficacy, awareness of the labor market, and social support systems. Persons with favorable perceptions about the employability are more likely to be resilient in the face of labor market uncertainty and career challenges. However, those with low employability confidence could be preoccupied with anxiety and low motivation about jobs. Employability confidence is also affected by the perception of the state of the labour market. Graduates who have access to good employment opportunities tend to be more positive about their employment prospects, whereas those who are either out of work or that are saturated in the labor market, may feel less employable (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020).

### 3. Methodology

**Review** The review paper uses the narrative literature review method to analyze the linkage between career resources, problem-based learning and graduate employability in UAE. The review is based completely on secondary data gathered from peer-reviewed articles published in journals, academic books, policy reports and employability studies which are contained in the original literature review document. The selection criteria were oriented on studies relevant to graduate employability, problem based learning, career identity, human and social capital, personal adaptability and perceived employability. Studies specifically on the UAE higher education system and problems in the labor market in the UAE and in the broad Middle East region were also given special attention. The review collated theories and empirical evidence to find the factors that drive employability and explore the effect of educational approaches on graduate employment readiness.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Explore graduate employability challenges in the UAE. Discuss graduate employability challenges in the UAE. The literature shows that although UAE has several educational, economic and labour market challenges, they all affect graduate employability in the UAE. While the government has provided a great deal of funding for higher education and training, many students still find it hard to link the two. The most important finding found in the literature is that the graduate competencies are still not aligned with the employers' expectations (Osmani et al., 2019). Employers are looking increasingly for graduates with practical skills, communication skills, team working skills, adaptability and technological skills. But with many graduates lacking the necessary skills to be prepared for the workplace, as there is a higher emphasis in education on theory instead of hands-on and experiential learning. The UAE has been facing greater challenges to enhance employability in the labor market following the transformation of the labor market. Labor market transformation has made the challenges of employability more pronounced in the UAE. The demands for labor

have been affected by technological development, globalization, automation and the digitalization, and graduates must continuously adjust to the evolving professional landscape (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2018; Lee & Clarke, 2019).

Graduates who are able to think innovatively, critically and collaboratively are increasingly needed for knowledge-based industries. Therefore, the graduates who only make use of their academic qualifications have difficulty in competing in the current labor market. The other big theme that emerged from the literature is the effect of labour market uncertainty on graduate confidence and perceptions of employability. The high rates of youth unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) remain a concern about job security and future career prospects (UNICEF, 2019). Effective access to the labour market, demographic pressures, cultural norms and language barriers are other difficulties facing graduates in the UAE (Ashour, 2020). These obstacles impact graduates' self-assurance in landing a job and raise questions about professional development and career advancement. The findings also show that the pressure on higher education institutions to further align education with labour market needs is growing. Unfortunately, employers frequently cite poor practical skills and lack of work experience as a cause for dissatisfaction when it comes to graduates (Botes & Sharma, 2017). This indicates that universities need to apply teaching methods that can improve both teaching and learning as well as preparedness for work.

There is a strong body of literature emphasising the significance of developing career identity in relation to graduate employability. Graduates' career identity is related to their perception of themselves in the workplace and their level of proactive career planning and professional development activities (Fugate et al., 2004). Career-identified graduates tend to be more confident, motivated and resilient when dealing with challenges in the labour market. Career identity serves as a psychological resource that influences career-related decision making and actions. McArdle et al. (2007) referred to career identity as a "cognitive compass" that assists people to set their professional goals and match their career goals with labor market norms. Strong career identity graduates are more likely to engage in networking activities, internships, and professional development activities because they understand how these experiences are relevant to their careers. The results also show the role of career identity in the employability confidence and self-efficacy. Candidates who know their strengths, interests and career aspirations will feel more employable as they will have a better understanding of career paths and opportunities in the labour market. On the other hand, students who have low career identity often have low confidence, sense of uncertainty and problems in employment. In the UAE context, career identity is very critical as graduates are expected to adjust to the changing dynamics of the labor market, which are marked by economic transformation and growing competition. Consequently, the findings indicate that universities require to enhance mentoring, internship programs, experiential learning programs, and career counselling programs to promote a better professional identity in students.

One of the most significant factors on employability of graduates was found to be human capital. Becker (1964) asserted that education increases an individual's employability by improving their knowledge, skills, and work skills. The academic literature proves that academic knowledge and technical skills of the graduates have a positive influence on employment and job promotion. The results suggest that graduate education is linked to

various aspects of human capital, such as scholastic capital, cultural capital, inner-value capital, and market-value capital (Baruch, Bell, & Gray, 2005). Theoretical capital enables learners to transfer theory into practice to the workplace, cultural capital improves learners' professional standing and competitiveness in the labour market. Inner-value capital affects self-confidence, professional maturity, and self-efficacy, which has an impact on workplace competences and employability self-confidence.

The results also suggest however that academic qualifications are not enough to ensure success in the workplace. Employability, practical skills, readiness for the workplace, communication skills and adaptability are becoming important. Even with extensive technical knowledge, graduates with limited hands-on experience might find it difficult to come up with employment opportunities. Learning approaches that can enhance technical skills and practical employability skills, therefore, are emphasized in the discussion, and an educational system that is no longer dependent on the transmission of knowledge must be developed. Human capital, and employability readiness of graduates can also be very much improved with experiential learning, workplace projects, internships and simulations within curricula. Social capital and professional networking skills are developed. Research in the field has revealed that social capital has significant impacts on the employability of graduates, as evidenced by the literature, because employment opportunities, mentorship and labor market information are some of the resources available from professional networks and social relationships (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Students with high social capital tend to have greater access to internships, jobs, and career development assistance when switching careers.

The results indicate that networking activities in HE can be a vital part of enhancing employability. Social capital is developed through alumni associations, employer engagement activities, professional networking events, and internships, which bring students into contact with industry contacts and work opportunities. Actively engaged graduates are more likely to be confident in their employability and less likely to lack awareness of professional pathways and expectations from the labor market. In the context of the UAE labour market, social capital is especially significant as access to employment opportunities is often related to professional relationships and networking opportunities. Students with limited professional networks might find it challenging to get a job even with good grades. There is also a literature base that indicates mentorship is a key element to employability development. Faculty or employers or industry professionals can help students become more confident, aware of the workplace and career ready. Therefore, it is important that universities invest in mentorship schemes and engagement with employers to bolster the professional networks and employability of graduates.

Another big factor that determined the employability of graduates in the current labour market was personal adaptability. The results show that flexible graduates better equipped to deal effectively with technological change, job insecurity, and shifting trends in the workplace (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Career adaptability consists of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Students who show career concern are actively planning for future career development and know how their actions in the present will impact future career objectives. Career control is a measure of responsibility for career decision making and career practices. Career curiosity is related to willingness to learn and explore opportunities and

Career confidence is related to positive attitude and belief in oneself to overcome challenges. Research in the literature shows that flexible graduates will be more likely to pursue lifelong learning, career development and proactive career behaviors. Adaptability thus supports employability as it allows graduates to deal with the unpredictable nature of the labour market and remain successful in the long-term. The UAE context is also unique in terms of the importance of adaptability, as employment opportunities are continually changing due to the rapid economic diversification and technological changes. The graduates who have acquired the ability to adapt are thus better prepared to move across sectors, adjust to changes in the workplace and engage in ongoing learning.

The robust link between problem-based learning and graduate employability is one of the most significant findings in the literature. The effectiveness of PBL as an education method has been shown due to its potential to develop learning experiences, critical thinking, communication skills, collaborative skills, and problem solving skills (Peng et al., 2018). The results indicate that PBL has a positive impact on employability as it offers learning spaces that resemble real work issues in the workplace. Students are taught to use theory in practice to solve problems in the workplace. PBL has been designed to be an active learning environment that promotes collaboration, independent learning, decision making and increased participation in learning, which are all traits that support workplace readiness, as opposed to traditional lecture-based instruction. There is also literature that shows the connection between PBL and self-efficacy. Students that engage in PBL activities tend to be more confident, since they have had experiences resolving problems, coping with uncertainty, and working well with others (Bandura, 1997). This boost in confidence plays a direct link with perceived employability, in that people who have left school perceive themselves to be able to work successfully in the job environment. Additionally, it was found that PBL develops communication and collaborative skills which are highly sought after by employers. Graduates are expected to be able to work effectively in multicultural, interdisciplinary teams in modern workplaces. PBL activities foster communication, negotiation, and collaborative learning processes, helping students to build their interpersonal skills and prepare them for the workplace. The results accordingly indicate that higher education institutions in UAE should have a deeper incorporation of PBL in the curricula to enhance the graduates' practical skills and workplace readiness. The schools that focus mainly on theoretical teaching might not prepare their students with skills for the employment markets and careers.

It has been shown in the literature that graduates' confidence, motivation and career behaviors are greatly affected by perceived employability (Forrier & Sels, 2003). Graduates who feel they may be a good fit for the labor market are more likely to be proactive in networking, internships, professional development, and job search behaviors. The results indicate that educational experiences, adaptability, self-efficacy, labor market sensitivity, and social support affect perceived employability. Active involvement in work experience and professional connections can instill increased confidence in students' employability skills, as they feel better equipped to handle workplace challenges. But so do the state of the labour market, as perceived. Students entering the competitive or uncertain job market may have concerns about finding a job and continued career success (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). In the UAE and the wider Middle East, talented young people face challenges to the employability and success of their educational outcomes due to the competitive nature of the labor market and unemployment rates. The results accordingly indicate that universities need

to enhance career guidance and labour market awareness programs to boost employment confidence and awareness of graduates. Realistic labour market information, employer engagement and career support can boost the perceived likelihood of employability and minimise career uncertainty for students. The number of theoretical and practical contributions.

### **Theoretical and Practical Contributions**

Theoretically, this review adds to the field by incorporating the educational, psychological and social viewpoints in the discussion of graduate employability in the UAE. The paper's contribution to the existing body of knowledge regarding employability encompasses the fact that employability is not just a product of academic success but also a function of one's adaptability, confidence, professional networking, career identity and practical learning experiences. In practice, the review has significant implications for higher education institutions, employers and the policy makers. Employers and universities should further enhance collaboration, and make problem-based learning, networking, internships, career counseling, and experiential learning an inherent part of the university curriculum. Employers and universities need to work more closely together and share information about the expectations for the labor market and about learning opportunities in the workplace. Workforce development programs to address the mismatch between education and the labor market need to continue to be supported by policymakers.

### **Conclusion**

In the UAE, with the rapid economic changes, technological development and evolving labor market requirements, all higher education institutions, employers and policy makers have had their focus shifted to graduate employability as one of the most significant concerns. This review finds that employability is a complex phenomenon that is shaped by education, psychological, social and labor market factors. Employers today are increasingly seeking graduates who have the academic skills and ability to apply them to the workplace, as well as the transferable skills, adaptability, communication skills, teamwork skills, and practical readiness. The review highlighted the following factors as key drivers affecting graduate employability in UAE: career identity, human and social capital, personal adaptability, perceived employability and problem-based learning. Graduates' confidence, professional direction and motivation to participate actively in career development activities are highly related to career identity. Human capital enhances graduates' academic and technical skills and social capital enhances access to professional networks, mentorship and employment. Another key theme of the review was the significance of flexibility in the context of today's uncertain and technologically changing job markets. Flexible graduates are more likely to be able to meet evolving workplace expectations; to be able to learn throughout their lives; and to successfully navigate career transitions. The most important result is that problem-based learning contributes to improving the employability of graduates. PBL is an important factor in workplace readiness in the development of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, experiential learning, and problem-solving skills. Students who engage in PBL settings build self-efficacy and self-confidence because of hands-on experiences in solving real-life problems and uncertainty in the workplace. The review also highlighted the influence of perceived employability on graduates' motivation, self-confidence and career-related activities. A graduate who feels like they are employable is more likely to be actively involved in networking activities, internships, professional development and job searching. This review

is theoretically significant as it incorporates educational, psychological, and social viewpoints when discussing the concept of graduate employability in UAE. The study shows that factors beyond academic qualifications, such as experiences gained from learning and work, adaptability, confidence, professional networking, and awareness of the labor market play a role in employability.

### Practical Contribution

In the practical context, the review offers valuable lessons for higher education institutions, employers and the policy makers. Employers should increase their collaboration with universities and incorporate experiential learning, internships, career advising, networking and problem-based learning into the university curriculum. Employers should engage more closely with the universities to discuss expectations of the labour market and ensure that opportunities for students to learn through work are ramped up. Policymakers should continue to invest in the educational reform and the development of the workforce to improve the employability of graduates and the gap between the education graduates receive and the skills demanded by the labor market. Although it has offered some value, this review has a number of limitations. The study is based on secondary literature only which pertains to graduate employability and higher education in the UAE and Middle East in general. Future research should, therefore, involve empirical studies with graduates, employers, educators and policymakers to explore employability issues more fully. In summary, the review highlights that improving the employability of UAE graduates is a multi-stakeholder and multi-dimensional challenge that requires a collaborative effort between universities, the private sector, government, and students. Problem-based learning and other practical learning strategies can be an effective way to prepare students for the labor market, boost their confidence in their employability, and positively impact their future career prospects.

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