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**DEFINING AND MEASURING EMPLOYABILITY: SELF-PERCEIVED-EMPLOYABILITY (SPE)  
APPROACH**

**ABSTRACT**

Despite the attention given to graduate employability, it remains to be poorly defined and operationalized. Each new study appears to complicate things further with new employability definitions. The concept appears to be theoretical in nature with limited research support. The increasing politicization of the concept, where different stakeholders attempt to define employability according to their own perspectives is a main reason for this situation. Employability literature reveals the differences of perceptions among the employees, employers, and university faculty. The perception that employees have towards their own employability appears to influence the ultimate work, and self-perceived-employability (SPE) has evolved as an alternative approach to conceptualize and operationalize employability. SPE has strong theoretical support and is ready for operationalization with clearly defined underlying factors which has been proven and tested through multiple studies. Current paper critically evaluates the concept of SPE and makes recommendations for future researchers based on review of existing literature.

**Keywords:** Employability, Self-Perceived-Employability,  
Employability Skills, Employers, Employees

**İSTİHDAM EDİLEBİLİRLİĞİN TANIMLANMASI VE ÖLÇÜMÜ: İSTİHDAM EDİLEBİLİRLİK  
ALGISI (SPE) YAKLAŞIMI**

**ÖZ**

Mezun istihdam edilebilirliğine ilgi gösterilmesine rağmen, hala tam olarak tanımlanmamış ve işlevselleştirilememiştir. Her yeni çalışmanın istihdam edilebilirliği yeniden tanımlaması ile işleri daha da karmaşıklaştırdığı görülmektedir. Kavram sınırlı araştırma desteği ile teorik bir doğada kalmaktadır. Farklı paydaşların kendi perspektiflerine göre istihdam edilebilirliği tanımlama girişiminde bulunmaları nedeniyle kavramın giderek politize edilmesi bu durumun başlıca nedenidir. İstihdam edilebilirlik yazını işveren, çalışan ve üniversite fakülteleri arasındaki bakış açılarının farklılığını ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışanların kendi istihdam edilebilirliklerine yönelik algıları onların nihai işlerini etkilemektedir ve istihdam edilebilirlik algıları (SPE) istihdam edilebilirliğin kavramlaştırılması ve işlevselleştirilmesine alternatif bir yaklaşıma doğru evrilmektedir. İstihdam edilebilirlik algısı güçlü bir teorik altyapı ile desteklenmektedir ve istihdam edilebilirliğin altında yatan faktörlerin açıkça çoklu çalışmalar yoluyla test edilip kanıtlanmasıyla birlikte işlevselleştirilmeye hazırdır. Bu çalışma eleştirel olarak istihdam edilebilirlik algısı (SPE) kavramını değerlendirmekte ve var olan yazın gözden geçirilerek gelecek çalışmalara öneriler getirmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İstihdam, Öz-Algılanan-İstihdam,  
İstihdam Becerileri, İşverenler, Çalışanlar



## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Employability of university graduates is a widely debated yet not properly understood concept despite its high impact on economic and social development of a country (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2014). More than five decades of research on employability is yet to reach consensus about the definitions, theoretical framework, underlying definitions, which limits the practical application and widespread adoption of the concept (Smith, et al., 2014). Studies have explored the views of multiple stakeholders including university faculty, employers and university recruiters have been studied (Finch, et al., 2013) while others studies have compared the differences of perceptions towards employability among multiple stakeholder groups (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010) which appear to show clear differences. To complicate the matters further multiple studies have indicated that employability is influenced by factors such as age, experience, and university reputation and brand value (Finch, et al., 2013).

Since most studies on employability are theoretical in nature they lack generalizability, the main advantage of quantitative research (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2014). Many studies appear to be prescriptive in nature and provide only policy recommendations while there is no agreement about the skill gap of different countries, industries, and universities. The situation is further complicated by the lack of agreement about the exact meaning of employability concept, which broad range of definitions from very simple definitions of "getting a job" more recent and comprehensive definitions such as "having skills, knowledge, understandings and attributes that ensure an individual more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they are successful and satisfied" (Pool & Sewell, 2007).

There are many theoretical models that attempts to explain the underlying concepts of employability and their relationships (Finch, et al., 2013). There are simple employability skills based models (Cotton, 1993), Skills plus models such as USEM model (Knight & Yorke, 2002), Snapshot models on employability such as CareerEDGE model (Pool & Sewell, 2007), employability developments models (Harvey, 2010) and even more simpler models such as RAW (Study & Kottke, 2014). However the absence of a clear and university agreeable theoretical model has clearly reduced the effectiveness of employability concept (Smith, et al., 2014). In such a context, Self-Perceived-Employability (SPE) which describes the current assessment of one's own capability to navigate and explore future work (Rothwell and Arnold, 2005) has gained much attention recently among researchers as an alternative approach towards conceptualizing and operationalizing employability.

## **2. RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE**

The study was conducted with the goal of identifying a clear definition and measurement for employability concept, an important yet poorly understood concept among researchers and stakeholders alike (Smith, et al., 2014). The study is important due to several reasons. First, since majority of the employability studies are theoretical in nature with case study approach which limits generalizability (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2014 research clarity is required through quantitative treatment of data. Second, since employability concept is plagued with different perceptions of stakeholders who define and measure the concept in a manner that suits their interest (Smith, et al., 2014).



Third, despite the increasing focus towards employability, the perceptions of employees towards employability which is different from other stakeholders perceptions (Rosenberg, et al., 2012) appear to have received the least attention (Tymon, 2013). Finally, the concept of Self-Perceived-Employability (SPE) has received the attention of researchers since it clearly measures the employee perceptions towards their own employability, which appears to affect their performance (Rothwell & Arnold, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to define and measure the concept of employability using SPE which appear to a much more simple and clear concept. The study findings clearly demonstrate that SPE as an alternative approach to define and measure employability with more clarity and is suitable for quantitative methodologies.

### **3. EMPIRICAL VIEWS ON GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY**

Employability of graduates clearly appears to influence both individuals and society at large (Smith, et al., 2014; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). Employability stakeholders include faculty, graduates, parents, employers and governments and their views appear to be different (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). Employability remains to be a complicated and problematic area without complete direction or much clarity (Rae, 2007).

Early works on employability including "Robbins report" considers employability as a main outcomes of higher education (Robbins, 1963) while "Dearing report" highlights the value of alignment of higher education towards employability, and importance of key skills and work experience in graduate employability (NCIHE, 1997). "Skills plus framework" is considered to demonstrate that employability is more than just having key skills and explains employability as a result of multiple factors such as subject understanding, efficacy beliefs, metacognition and key skills which can be embedded in syllabuses without influencing academic freedom and values. CareerEDGE framework was introduced as a simple and practical model of employability (Pool & Sewell, 2007) as opposed to previous models such as "Skills plus framework" which limited the employability towards researchers and did not help explain the concept to other stakeholders (Pool & Sewell, 2007). CareerEDGE model of employability introduced five underlying skill antecedents namely; career development learning, experience, subject skills and knowledge, generic skills, and emotional intelligence. Despite the criticism as merely a snapshot approach towards employability (Smith, et al., 2014) CareerEDGE model has performed a commendable role by showing how the underlying employability skills lead to reflection and evaluation, mediated by self-factors leading to ultimate employability. CareerEDGE model introduces three (03) psycho-social constructs that impact employability, which includes self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Contrasting ideas on employability have challenged the existing notions, which are either based on individual or organizational perspectives and introduce employability as a complex construct that is based on the organizational contexts, level of seniority of the employee, and many other factors (Clarke, 2008) which reaffirms that employability is a concept that is not ready for direct operationalization. Outcome based approach towards employability is criticized since many researchers consider employability as an institutional achievement and not the ability of the graduates to obtain employment (Harvey, 2010). In real-



life situations, employability becomes more complicated where complex interactions between graduates, recruiters also impact final outcome.

The comparative study on the perceptions towards employability skills by university faculty, university graduates who are employed now, and their supervisors revealed significant differences in perceptions towards employability (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010) which clearly highlights the importance of understanding perceived employability concept. The findings are supported since the attitudes of university faculty, graduates and human resource managers towards employability was shown to be different (Rosenberg, et al., 2011). While the perceptions of different stakeholders towards employability has been considered in multiple studies, the perceptions of graduates towards their employability appear to under-represented in employability literature (Tyman, 2013) despite the growing importance of perceived employability.

#### **4. SELF-PERCEIVED-EMPLOYABILITY (SPE) TO CONCEPTUALIZE AND OPERATIONALIZE EMPLOYABILITY**

Clearly the need to study perceived-employability arises due to complex situation in employability literature (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010) and this is even more important in modern employability concept which does not consider long-term employment as a requirement in many professional and higher level positions (Rothwell & Arnold, 2005). The Self-Perceived Employability concept is based on an individual's focus on their own employment options, which is clearly different from a governments' and organizational focus towards employment, and is considered as a current assessment of one's capacity to navigate and explore the future work (Rothwell & Arnold, 2005).

SPE defined as is the "self-assessment about an employee's ability to navigate the job market within a short-time period" (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). The SPE scale was developed using four quadrants that are useful in measuring different aspects of employability, based on internal job market vs external job market dimensions and where personal vs occupational attributes are considered as the other dimension based on previous studies on employability (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). There is an interactive relationship between self-concepts and voluntary learning behavior in developing human capital in organizations (Kim, et al., 2015). The model of perceived-employability proposed by Kim, et al., (2015) clearly highlights the influence of human capital theory (Becker, 1976) and self-concepts theories in explaining SPE (Kim, et al., 2015) The self-concepts which guides the information processing on self-related matters and focuses on cognitive schemas that help organize self-based memories that enable self-based information processing and decision making (Markus, 1977).

Evaluation of employability in external employment markets though are unclear and ambiguous, but these schemas are helpful in evaluating one's subjective employability (Kim, et al., 2015). There are two main antecedents for SPE based on the most influential self-concepts that are found to impact self-perceived employability, namely; self-esteem and self-efficacy (Chen, et al., 2004). Researchers such as Pool & Sewell (2007) who identified the main self-concepts (namely self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy), mediates the relationship between employability skill antecedents and employability. Since the way individuals react to real life-experiences depends on their level of self-esteem, or level of competency, such employees are believed to



possess satisfying employee needs (Pierce, et al., 1989), self-esteem is considered far more significant in perceived employability measures than other self-concepts. The study of Rothwell & Arnold (2005) introduced 11 aspects that can be used to operationalize SPE.

The study was successful in its attempt to report the self-report measures of employee's perceived employability; useful in measuring either internal employability or external employability. Self-perceived employability does not appear to be influenced by demographic factors as reported by employability studies which identified clear differences between male and female staff employability and perceived employability skills (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). Studies have also explored the link between psychological contract and self-perceived employability, confirming that high-potential staff do not feel indebted to their organizations investments through longer-term staff loyalty, or higher performance levels (Dries, et al., 2014).

Since the self-perceived employability, relationship with the psychological contract is under-represented and as there is a lack of research on the psychological factors that influence high potential employees' self-perceived employability, this study can be considered as a significant contributor towards self-perceived employability literature. The study did not determine any statistical significant relationship between self-perceived employability and a perceived psychological contract with regards to employer-employee in respect of relationship time duration. Positive and statistically significant relationship was reported between SPE and perceived employee performance (Dries, et al., 2014).

Furthermore, findings of the study disprove earlier fears among human resource managers that high self-perceived employees have a lower intention to remain with their current employer for a longer time period (Baruch, 2001) and confirms that a higher level self-perceived employability staff member holds themselves and their performance more accountable than their organizations. Hence organizations should provide guidance and assistance to their staff members to enhance their employability in a context where job security is not guaranteed to all employees (Dries, et al., 2014). Self-perceived employability was introduced as the perception of employees with regard to external labor market job opportunities (Cuyper, et al., 2014). Data about SPE and its effect on job performance was collected from 433 workers in Romania. According to the findings, job security appears to influence the relationship between self-perceived employability and job performance; for instance, when employees are highly employable, they might become high achievers, however they might withdraw from the organization if they feel insecure about their jobs. Also it was found that highly employable staff are less concerned about organizational values and norms; whilst perceived employability leads to higher levels of job performance when employees feel secure, there might however be additional malfunctioning costs.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

SPE appear to be a more suitable concept to conceptualize and operationalize employability, than employability itself. While employability concept clearly has multiple definitions, frameworks, and underlying concepts without consensus, SPE appear to have a clear definition, framework, and underlying concepts. Employability concept is



not clearly understood by multiple stakeholders due to their diverse perceptions and has limited application and generalization. SPE on the other hand does not appear to be affected by such concerns, while giving prominence to the self-concepts and psychological factors of employees whose ultimate performance depends on their SPE. Hence, SPE can enable proper conceptualization and operationalization of employability concept, which lacks research support and clarity required for conceptualization, and operationalization.

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