



## Learning for employability in contexts of economic despair: Empirical insight from the Gaza Strip

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### Abstract

Literature on education for employment (EfE) predominantly focuses on the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in preparing students for the workforce. This focus covers links between employability, on one hand, and teaching, curriculum, assessment, and extracurricular activities, on the other. The role of independent learning, broadly understood as students' individual effort to enhance their employability, remains masked and is assigned secondary importance in the relevant literature. This scholarship deficit is arguably more pronounced in contexts of economic despair. In such contexts, an EfE logic still supersedes any logic of *learning for employability* (Lfe) in efforts to train a high-calibre workforce for economic recovery and development. Yet, this logic is often accompanied by decontextualized views of HEIs, which often lead to suboptimal problem formulations and unfeasible solution proposals. The study is an attempt at addressing this deficit. It proposes a parallel, not alternative, logic of Lfe, which centralizes students' independent learning engagements to examine and develop support for their own pursuits of employability development. The study draws on original empirical data collected, through a questionnaire and in-depth interviews, from new graduates in the Gaza Strip. Through interpretive phenomenological analysis, the study findings suggest that the participants exerted significant, independent, and strategic effort in seizing employability development opportunities. Based on the findings, I contend that a learner-centred logic of linking education and employability is of compelling significance to various stakeholders in the education and market spheres, especially in contexts of protracted hardship.

### Keywords

Education for employability; learning for employability, new graduates, contexts of economic despair; Gaza

### Introduction

In this article, I propose a logic of 'learning for employability' (Lfe) in parallel to that of education for employability (EfE). The proposal is shared in light of a dual scholarship situation of: predominant focus on what higher education institutions (HEIs) offer to support graduate employability; and under-exploration of the role of learning in students' transition from academic to work settings. While potentially a valuable addition for conceptions of learning and education, this proposed logic, as shall be demonstrated, is of particular significance to learners, educators, employers, and policy-makers striving in contexts of economic despair (CEDs).

The article is organised in the following order. First, I situate the proposed LfE logic against a relevant scholarly background, and I focus on scholarship covering education and employability in CEDs. I draw on this literature in presenting the theoretical framework of this study and discussing its suitability. Next, I analyse primary data contributed by research participants to examine the proposed logic against the established theoretical framework. I follow this analysis by discussion of results and a conclusion on potential ways forward. In summary, this research is aimed at contributing new theoretical and practical knowledge of learner agency and employability development in contexts of economic hardship. Throughout this article, I use the term 'new graduates' to refer to students who have completed an undergraduate degree within one calendar year.

## Literature Review

Through this review, literature on the link between education and employment is critically analysed to identify theoretical possibilities and practical realities of a potential LfE logic, along with the established EfE one. The current state of EfE shows that scholarly discourse and activity is predominantly focused on what and how educational institutions offer to support 'graduate employability' (Knight & Yorke, 2002, 2003, 2004; Wright & Jeffries-Watts, 2017). In this state, the role of learners in the transition from academic to work settings remains under-explored (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017; Tomlinson, 2012). This is especially the case in contexts of economic despair, where a hegemonic discourse of 'skills mismatch' both excludes learners' agency and ignores labour force dynamics (Adely et al., 2021). This critical analysis of the literature is shared in four sections. I first identify a relevant definition of employability, and I review relevant literature to interrogate the paradigmatic exclusion of learning from the link between education and employment. I then consider the implications of this exclusion in contexts of economic despair (CEDs). Finally, I synthesise my review conclusions with existing theories of learning to bridge a continuum towards LfE. Overall, the goal of this literature review is to elucidate conceptual and practical lens in light of which my analysis of data collected from Palestinian learners will be subsequently analysed. In critically analysing the literature, this review demonstrates the predominant focus in employability research on the role of HEIs and the lack of much, if any, accounting of the independent role of students in developing their employability.

## Defining Employability

Bhola and Sunil (2013) identify six major but different definitions of employability, demonstrating contested conceptual approaches to the topic. In fact, Artess et al. (2017) conclude in a robust study of literature on employability that it is 'notoriously complex to define' (p. 6). This is in part due to the increasingly recognised distinction of employability from employment, i.e., one can be employable but not employed—whether due to oppressive contextual factors or (temporary) personal reasons (Artess et al., 2017; Ergün & Şeşen, 2021). The difficulty of defining employability is also due in part to its nature, which may significantly differ from one context to another; for example, the set of elements seen as essential to employability in a free market, globally interdependent economy is different from — and sometimes contradictory with — that required in a foreign aid-dependent economy (Chen & Lo, 2022; Harris, 2021, 2023). For the purpose of this study, the definition by Hillage (1998, cited in Bhola & Sunil, 2013, p. 45) is most relevant: 'Employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment.' This definition provides that employability goes beyond a certain stage of age or education, and it emphasises the role, agency, and durable dedication of those seeking employment, i.e., lifelong learners (Bodea et al., 2016; Fejes, 2014). This broad but encompassing definition is of particular suitability to this study as it approaches the topic of employability from quite a new angle and focuses on a national context rarely covered in extant scholarship on the topic.

Building on the leading works of Knight and Yorke (2002, 2003, 2004) on the Understanding, Skilful practices, Efficacy beliefs, and Metacognition (USEM) account, employability is understood as the

complex combination of different elements: knowledge, experiences, skills, values, and attitudes—elements that individuals cultivate and are able to transfer across various work settings. While Playfoot and Hall (2009) see such a broad-ranging conception as difficult to pinpoint specific qualities required for employability, Hillage's definition, with its non-description—or, rather, non-prescription—seems to endorse it. It leaves to learners, even if only discursively, the primary role of specifying their paths in the labour market and thereby determining and pursuing their employability development needs. In other words, a learner-led approach to employability is useful, at the conceptual and practical levels, in the pursuit of effective graduate employability, especially when HEIs are faced with crippling challenges in CEDs as shall be discussed in this article. This approach is seldom adopted in scholarly discourse and policy interventions in the realm of EfE (Fryer, 2022; Morina & Biagiotti, 2022; Nabulsi et al., 2021; Tomlinson, 2012; Wright & Jeffries-Watts, 2017).

### **EfE: A Logic with Shortcomings**

Lack of a learner-led approach to employability is evidenced in the literature, albeit often implicitly and indirectly. In a study of Vietnamese graduates, Lan (2017) illustrates that, despite a perception of the rigidity of their received education, graduates made creative contributions in settings of intercultural professional service. In so doing, they relied on independent, on-the-job employability development and brought their capability to different positions. Although Lan's study shed light on learners' post-graduation and on-the-job employability development, the central focus was still on the role of HEIs—at the expense of fuller report or investigation of the learners' independent capability enhancement.

This dual limitation is arguably characteristic of EfE. In a study of Australian university students and graduates, Kinash et al. (2017) show that their research participants spent their study years struggling with uncertainty regarding their career plans. Following graduation, however, these students achieved positive results of identifying career interests and securing desired jobs. The authors interpret these as 'unexpectedly positive' results yet interpret them in rather simplistic terms (Kinash et al., 2017, p. 3), only reporting that the graduates' general potential met employers' expectations. Instead of explaining the deep processes of students' surprising success, the authors concluded their study with a list of recommendations exclusively for HEIs. In doing so, they perpetuated the same limitation of the above-mentioned study, i.e., missing to offer an account that would have been valuable to, inter alia, outline replicability of identified employability processes and outcomes. Such a shortcoming becomes all the more critical in contexts where employment opportunities are fewer and employers' needs more strict, thereby requiring deeper description and understanding of students' actions in/despite such contexts to advance their own employability.

Such limitations of EfE have received sound criticism from academics from different disciplines. In their extensive literature review, Artess et al. (2017) synthesise many authors' critical points in arguing that such a narrow EfE logic is complicit in supporting a hegemonic mode of capitalist production that, beyond reducing HEIs' mission to vocational training, passivises learners as vocational trainees to be matched to a particular outcome. Lan (2017, p. 140) further adds that 'there is little evidence to support assertions that so-called core or transferable skills are necessarily outcomes of all higher education programs, or to underpin the identification of good practice in skill development in higher education or employment settings.' At minimum, this criticism requires that the breadth of EfE be problematised, specifically as to whether its scope allows for assessment and evaluation of employability outcomes of non-formal, non-institutional, even sporadic or ad-hoc *learning* interventions.

Such limitations of the EfE logic are more problematic in contexts marked by economic difficulty, general fragility, or social injustice. Cloete (2012) demonstrates a phenomenon of de-coupling, until the mid-1990s, of African higher education from post-independence attempts at economic development. In this de-coupling, the relevance of universities to national development was little-regarded and seen as a 'luxury ancillary' (Cloete, 2012, p. 137). Similarly, Milton & Barakat (2016)

report on the frequent marginalisation of higher education in post-conflict processes of (economic) stabilisation and peacebuilding. Baki (2004) discusses how Saudi Arabia's higher education perpetuates women's unequal access to employment opportunities. In these contexts, higher education is at or is a contributor to disproportional disadvantage; its de-coupling, marginalisation, and unequalising effect undermine rather than contribute to inclusive graduate employability development. An EfE logic, given its predominant focus on HEIs, tends to ignore the broader political, economic, and cultural frameworks within which HEIs operate and, according to its limited scope, are still treated as the supreme and ever-resourceful duty bearer of employability. In this logic, decontextualised views of HEIs lead to suboptimal problem formulations and simply unfeasible solution proposals.

Consider the case of Palestinian HEIs, operating in a context of chronic economic de-development (Turner & Shweiki, 2014). Exemplifying the de-coupling reported by Cloete (2012), one employer in Palestine shared the following view, which was embraced by students and endorsed, including in recommended remedies, by the researchers (Nabulsi et al., 2021, p. 954):

*Palestinian universities are not playing their role and are really slow in taking up this challenge [of enhancing graduate employability], where part of the problem goes back to the huge number of students who are admitted every year without having proper planning at the faculty or university level in terms of resources and facilities needed.*

Proponents of such misdiagnosis, commonly including Palestinian researchers, look immediately into Palestinian HEIs (Al-Sharabati, 2015; Murrar et al., 2021; Sultan, 2017) and overlook their and their HEIs' perpetual subjection to direct, economic, and epistemic violence and deprivation (Jebril, 2018; Krueger & Maleckova, 2002; Pherali & Turner, 2018). They rush to prescribe some of the common solutions that are near-impossible in these higher education institutions' specific context, for example, increased investment per student, reformed curricula, and new career counselling initiatives.

These cases begin to highlight the shortcomings associated with the predominant focus on HEIs and marginalisation of learners characteristic of an EfE logic. The following section of this literature review begins to reflect some of the empirical literature that helps bridge a continuum towards a Learning for Employability (LfE) logic. Where possible, this empirical literature is drawn from Arab countries for regional relevance and cultural similarities.

### **LfE in Contexts of Economic Despair**

Pressure on HEIs to enhance graduate employability grows more serious in CEDs and is often heeded at the expense of HEIs' mission and quality as hubs for more than production of neoliberal subjects (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Akhtar (2010) explains that the quality of higher education in Egypt has been dramatically compromised amid the country's economic hardship. Jordan, pressed by mounting financial pressure, resorted to privatise higher education, a strategy that Adely et al. (2019) argue has decreased quality and equity of as well as accessibility of higher education—deterioration further documented by Salehi-Isfahani (2012). In the more serious context of Palestine, the co-published report by Arab World for Research and Development and CARE International (2015) concludes that for two decades the quality and equity of higher education have declined due to increasing enrolments, decreasing public funding, proliferation of institutions and programs, and a general crippling of economic opportunities. In such contexts, an EfE logic is insufficient to explain and propose effective approaches to employability development. Disenfranchised, underfunded, and overpopulated HEIs can only do so much to enhance graduates' employability. An LfE logic emerges as a necessity to fill existing gaps, to explore and propose additional solutions within given structural influences.

In their study of Jordanians at public higher education institutions, Adely et al. (2019) show that these learners, frustrated with the employability outcomes of their formal education, exercised self-reliance

and personal responsibility in their quest for jobs. Exhibiting the same level of agency, initiative, and independence as Vietnamese students mentioned earlier (Lan, 2017), these Jordanian students made calculated choices of engagement in academic and non-academic settings to navigate the stagnant relationship between higher education and the job market (Shirazi, 2019).

This show of learning agency, initiative, and independence challenges the human-capitalist assumption that rational choice governs learners' behaviour vis-à-vis employability, an assumption forced into analysis of Arab students' behaviour (Schwalje, 2013). That is, individuals can still exhibit agency, aspiration, and commitment in the learning for employability even when structural factors are hostile to their aspirations, as in the case of migrants (Beicht & Walden, 2019) and Palestinians (Khattab, 2003). Crucially, learners often exceed in their pursuit of employability its economic formulations. For example, Briggs' (2019) study illustrates how learning-for-employability can extend and be extended by pro-social forces of solidarity, compassion, and peer support.

## Summary

Academic (and grey) literature on the link between education and employment has been too focused on the questions of what and how well HEIs can, should, and do offer to support students' transition into successful careers. Although an important question, when it is posed singularly, it exacts too heavy a cost on HEIs (and governments) and constructs individuals as passivised and rather helpless, temporal consumers of education. Extant evidence, which is mostly qualitative, suggests that learners are actively, independently, and often creatively engaging in contextualised pursuits of employability development, especially in contexts of economic despair. This evidence serves as an empirical link between theories of learning and an LfE logic.

## Theoretical Framework

Emerging from the previous literature review is a need for establishing a logic of learning for employability. In line with Hillage's definition of employability and drawing on the empirical evidence from Vietnamese and Jordanian students, LfE can be conceived of as the range of cognitive, metacognitive, and practical activities learners pursue on their own to build and advance their potential for sustainable employment. This conception can be substantiated by theories of education in general and those of learning in particular.

Two learning theories most relevant to LfE are those of variation and of constructivism. First, Orgill (2012, p. 3391) states that the difference in learners' experiences of a phenomenon is based on learners' meeting of two conditions: awareness of and focus on certain aspects of this phenomenon. The conditionality of learning as posited in this theory is readily applicable to LfE in CEDs: individuals living in economic hardship develop (some) awareness of their situation and, therefore, may focus their efforts on trying to defy this hardship. Looking to develop their chances of employment, undergraduate students are uniquely positioned to achieve such awareness and focused effort—essential conditions of learning, per variation theory.

This potential awareness and effort are also emphasised in the constructivist theory of learning. Drawing on seminal work by both Piaget and Vygotsky, Powell & Kalina (2009) explain that learning is an individual and a social process, where learners engage in cognitive exercises and social settings through the processes of capability acquisition and development. Cognitive exercises facilitate awareness elevation, the first condition of variation theory; social engagements provide the space to exert focused effort, the second condition. Both are mutually reinforcing to individual learning, more so in such application-directed learning modes as in seeking certain experiences to advance one's employability (Busato et al., 1998). To use this theoretical synthesis in substantiating a conception of LfE in CEDs, it is useful to briefly review principles of constructivist learning environments.

Jonassen (1994) draws on many authors in discussing seven characteristics of constructivist learning environments. These characteristics are readily applicable in an LfE logic. In CEDs, an LfE logic captures the multiplicity and complexity of represented realities, authenticity and contextuality of constructed knowledge, and the need for ongoing self-assessment and -reflection, six of the seven characteristics highlighted by Jonassen (1994). It does so through situating learning amidst lived experiences of scarce resources, including limited resources at HEIs and in the market to develop employable profiles. Such a logic also suggests a continuous, active pursuit of employability capabilities as well as engagement in reflection-based planning for future access to economic security. Crucially, two of the seven key characteristics of constructivist learning environments entail that such environments 'enable context- and content-dependent knowledge construction' (Jonassen, 1994, p. 35) and 'support collaborative construction of knowledge through social negotiation, not competition among learners for recognition' (Jonassen, 1994, p. 35). These two characteristics establish a clear bridge between cognitive and social constructivism in learning in that they emphasise a continuity of both cognitive and social activities in constructivist learning: reflection that is situated in specific settings and subsequent actions in social reality (Fenwick & Parsons, 1998).

Against this theoretically-informed conception of LfE in CEDs, individuals, prompted by their awareness of circumstances of difficulty, are posited to actively seek meaningful learning opportunities, exert effort through engagement in these opportunities, and develop multidimensional skills to negotiate their employability development.

## Methodology

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used in this study (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA is coherent with the theoretical framework presented earlier in this article. In both, the research participants are viewed as 'sense-making creatures'. Theoretically, they are learners with a record of cognitive and social engagements in employability development. Methodologically, analysis of the accounts they share of these engagements reflects the sense they make of them (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Epistemologically, IPA's emphasis on research participants' lived experiences and subsequent sense(-making) is a good fit with the proposed learner-led nature of LfE. This coherent choice of IPA guides the research implementation, as discussed in the following sections.

## Participants and Their Context

Palestinian new graduates in Gaza with a successful record of gaining paid employment opportunities within a year after graduation were invited to participate in this research. Purposeful sampling was used in recruiting such graduates, as coherent with IPA's emphasis on the better contribution of a purposive homogenous sample to in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under study (Denovan & Macaskill, 2012; Rivituso, 2014).

All participants were from the Gaza Strip, an archetype of CEDs, particularly for new graduates. Ensuating Gaza's multifaceted, protracted crises, available data show that 69% of youth there aged 18-29 are unemployed (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019), with joblessness among new graduates being 'all but universal' (International Labour Organisation, 2017, p. iv). Among women, unemployment and graduate unemployment are even higher (Al-Mezan, 2018, 2019). Whenever available, jobs for university graduates are of short duration, are offered at an irregular basis, and are overall unsustainable (Gisha, 2019). In this context, the research participants' success in securing employment soon after—sometimes even before—graduation, a proxy to their quality employability, is seen as exceptional. Nearly all of them were in employment locally in Gaza in the first year after their graduation—before some moved on to graduate study abroad (on full scholarships), often followed by employment abroad or back again in Gaza. An IPA study of this exceptional success is of unique potential to illuminate a conception of learning for employability, with potential to generate helpful lessons for fellow learners and relevant stakeholders in similar contexts of economic despair.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Members of the purposeful sample who accepted the research participation invitation were first briefed on the purpose of the study and their participation rights, and they were provided with the necessary information to share their consent. They were next invited to complete an online questionnaire, which 34 of them did. All 34 were invited for a subsequent in-depth interview, an invitation 12 of them accepted. Interviewees had further opportunities to confirm their consent. These participants' background information is presented in Table 1 below. Finally, all participants were debriefed on the study results.

**Table 1: Demographic and Academic Profile of Research Participants**

	Questionnaire Stage	Interview Stage
Gender	18 women; 16 men	7 women; 5 men
Age	all were in the 21-29 range	
Field of study	English language, literature, and education (15) Engineering and mathematics (8) Medicine, dentistry, or pharmacy (7) Business administration and accounting (3) Other (1)	English language, literature, and education (3) Engineering and mathematics (3) Medicine, dentistry, or pharmacy (5) Other (1)
Number of represented HEIs	Five different four-year, undergraduate degree-granting institutions	Three different four-year, undergraduate degree-granting institutions
Academic Performance	86% (31) graduated with a final grade of 'very good' or better.	17% (2) of interviewees graduated with a final grade of 'good'  83% (10) of interviewees graduated with a final grade of 'very good' or better, including two who obtained 'excellent' and one who obtained 'excellent with distinction' degrees.

In the questionnaire stage, participants self-reported their demographic and academic backgrounds, their employment history and status, and, more importantly, their perceptions of how well engagements in certain learning activity areas during their undergraduate years contributed to their employability. The broad determination of these learning activity areas was based on my earlier relevant research, academic counselling, and education consulting experiences in Gaza. On a scale from 0 (never helpful) to 7 (most helpful), participants self-rated the extent to which they found their engagements in the nine learning activity areas helpful in finding post-graduation employment. Table 2 below lists these nine areas and presents basic results of participants' self-reported ratings:

**Table 2: Participants' Perceptions**

Learning Activity Area	M	SD
1. Individual effort	6.667	0.638
2. Teaching (how classes were delivered)	3.000	1.531
3. Assessment (how performance was evaluated)	4.515	2.033
4. Curriculum (what classes were offered)	3.563	1.603
5. Various opportunities on campus (what events or services were offered)	2.848	2.355
6. Various opportunities off-campus (including study, training, internship or work outside of university and/or Gaza)	5.606	1.840
7. Connections made through university (faculty members, university staff, classmates, alumni/alumnae)	4.091	2.393
8. Connections made through social network (of family, relatives, neighbours, etc)	4.455	2.219
9. Other connections (made through voluntary work, study abroad, internships, training courses, etc)	4.938	2.069

It should be noted that the purpose of this questionnaire was only two-fold: to confirm questionnaire entrants' participation eligibility and, given lack of relevant research in Gaza, to build initial insight into participants' perceptions of whether and how well their engagements in certain learning activity areas contributed to their employability. This initial insight was then used in building interview prompts and questions. Given the scope of this study, no further analysis of questionnaire results is reported.

In the second data collection stage, 12 interviewees joined semi-structured interviews, held virtually via Zoom for 43-76 minutes. Following interviewees' preference, all interviews were conducted in colloquial Palestinian Arabic (Aloudah, 2022; Isleem, 2010). Through them, interviewees were prompted to share specific examples of experiences they valued as particularly significant for their employment success. They were also prompted to discuss their perception of how these specific experiences related to the contexts of their life in Gaza, of their formal higher education, and of the sector of their intended careers. All participants were finally encouraged to share any further reflections, comments, or questions of their own.

The design and implementation of these interviews were informed by Alase's (2017) step-by-step guide of using IPA. Drawing on Smith et al. (2009) Alase's (2017) guide is especially helpful to bracket preconceptions, to modify planned prompts/questions and enable a more dynamic dialogue, and to focus analytic attention on participants' attempts at sense-making of their elicited lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). At participants' continued consent, all 12 interviews were recorded, transcribed, pseudonymised, and subsequently analysed.

Analysis was implemented in the following steps as outlined by Creswell (2013): The researcher's own experience with LfE was critically recounted to ensure bracketing. Next, transcripts were read once for familiarity with the data and another time for building initial lists of data relevant to LfE. Emerging topics within each list were built into codes, and descriptive validity was ensured through checking the extent to which the codes corresponded to the participants' accounts. Codes of empirical relevance to each other were developed into themes, and variations, whenever emerging, were noted next to each theme. Interpretive validity of themes, the extent to which participants' accounts are accurately interpreted, was ensured by re-reading interview transcripts and re-listening to the interview recordings—the latter to ensure nuanced linguistic and metacommunicative expressions are included in the data and participants are more authentically represented (Briggs, 1984).

Before presenting the findings, I wish to disclaim that all data collection and analysis were completed between October and December 2019. At the time, an earlier draft of this article was submitted as a



final assignment in a graduate course at my former university. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing personal circumstances, I could only now revise and prepare this manuscript for scholarly publication.

## Findings

The following sections present the findings from analysing the 12 interviews. Six phenomenological themes emerged from this study, with each one presented in the following sections. All direct quotes from participants have been translated by the researcher, myself, from colloquial Palestinian Arabic to English.

### Independence and Sustainability of Deep Learning Effort

All interviewees reported exerting independent and sustainable individual effort inside and, to a greater extent, outside their respective HEIs. In reflecting on the perceived outcome of individual effort, the research participants rated it as the factor most helpful in finding paid employment opportunities soon after graduation (see Table 2).

Interviewees reflected that, at university, they exerted individual effort to achieve deeper learning of the academic subject. This effort, they reported, was in the form of greater independent study time and review of additional materials available online. While ten of the twelve interviewees sought this deeper learning as part of their pursuit of high grades, the remaining two were more sceptical about the effect on their employability of high grades. One of them was Samer, who graduated with a cumulative mark of 'good' from a five-year electrical engineering program.

Samer knew he wanted to work in a certain specialty of his field that was insubstantially covered in his program, data engineering. Soon after his enrolment, he realised the little relevance of his degree content:

*My university did not avail to me any training or any opportunity through which I could build my self-awareness or advance my practical skills or expand my connections. The university is too focused on theory in the form of lectures.*

He decided to invest his time and effort seeking more relevant learning opportunities. With this in mind, he interned at four different workplaces prior to his final year at college. He used the minimal income he earned through two of these internships to pay for an online course covering his intended specialty. These internship experiences, only one of which was counted towards his degree, fostered his cultivation of essential professional communication and organisational skills as well as of useful connections in the industry. Samer attributed to his learning in the course his success in landing his first job during his final year of study. When asked whether his HEI was supportive of this effort, Samer shared memories of discouragement, verbally by some of his professors and structurally by instructional designs that he said restricted his space to balance internship commitments with high grades-earning work.

### Awareness in Action

The majority of interviewees, however, followed a less dichotomic approach to their employability. In sharing their experiences of balancing assigned academic work with out-of-classroom engagements, they were almost unanimous about the need for verifiable mastery of their subject, and they held that this verifiability is commonly guaranteed by high grades.

Kareem, who graduated top of his cohort from a five-year dentistry program with a cumulative mark of 'excellent', did not have a specific specialty in which he wished to work after graduation. Although this career uncertainty motivated him to keep his top academic performance, it equally motivated him to expand his voluntary and professional engagements outside university. In explaining this, Kareem

reflected that his sustained academic excellence was key to keeping all doors open for him after graduation, whether for employment or for graduate study. He also attributed to his extensive engagement in voluntary community service the development of his interpersonal, leadership, and communication skills as well as of his career awareness and professional network. This profile, Kareem demonstrated, was essential in landing him, during his undergraduate year, opportunities to deliver paid training workshops and, a few days before his graduation ceremony, a job as a student and alumni affairs coordinator at an education non-profit organisation.

Kareem's experience is quite unique as people with a degree in dentistry commonly aim, despite the lack of opportunities, to occupy high-income jobs or start up their own private practice or work at someone else's. However disinterested in dental practice, he willingly took on the pressures of continued academic excellence alongside extensive engagements in community service, including through founding and leading a community initiative dedicated to enrichment of student life in Gaza. In designing and following this path, Kareem reflected on a most formative influence of his participation in a non-formal education program during high school. In this program, Kareem became aware of the civic and professional advantages of engagement in voluntary work, and he had since grown this awareness while customising his engagements to compensate for his university's lack of employability development programming. Specifically, like some of the other interviewees, Kareem surveyed and analysed challenges facing young adults and college students in his community and programmed solutions to these challenges.

When prompted to reflect conclusively on his work throughout, Kareem held that his high grades were essential for his continued qualification for his tuition waiver scholarship, that they secured him eligibility for a broader array of opportunities after graduation, and that his out-of-university engagements provided him with a profile he gainfully marketed to employers outside of the traditional pool sought by dentistry graduates.

All other interviewees held the same or similar stance, in which they reported being aware of and acting accordingly with the traditional view in Gaza that academic performance is one reliable proxy to employability. They still recognised that this view does not preclude the necessity of a broader skillset. Omar, a graduate of a six-year medicine program, maintained an overall mark of 'very good' and acted on his awareness that his academic performance was not enough:

*You can have high grades but lack the skill to deal with patients or diagnose a case, so you lack a skill of your job as a doctor... . Some of my peers achieved higher grades than me, but my performance in clinical settings—examining cases, communicating with patients, and presenting before teams—was stronger. So, I dedicated much of my energy to developing my non-academic skills, e.g., in computer and internet, especially Microsoft Office programs and email communication, in English language, and in leadership.*

Joud graduated from a five-year dentistry program with a cumulative mark of 'very good'. In her second year, she had the same realisation as Samer (see previous section):

*The university gives us only knowledge; we memorise it, paste it in exams, and that is it... . My field is practical, but marks are everything. There is no [programming for] engagements with the society, developing professional skills, gaining experiences, or even [for] helping us realise our individual areas of strength, passion, and weakness.*

With this awareness, she started serving with her student-led dental school's student association to develop some employable skills, like teamwork and event organisation. She later used the skills she gained from this service to market her profile to non-profit organisations to which she later applied for voluntary posts during her study years. Through this voluntary professional engagement, she said she developed her professional profile and expanded her network of professional contacts, including

international health professionals whose advice to her contributed to her continued academic success, professional progress, and personal fulfilment.

Whether prompted or not, all interviewees reflected their critical awareness of a near-absence of activities organised by their HEIs to promote their employability, except occasionally or when third parties offered to implement such activities at their HEIs. Such exceptions, the interviewees reflected, included basic training on CV and cover letter writing, job search and interview skills, and remote work jobs promotion.

Given this critical awareness of HEIs' role, it comes as no coincidence that all interviewees asserted, albeit with varying degrees of confidence, that they planned, seized, and scaled up their employability engagements independently of their formal education experiences (also see Table 2). This awareness-in-action extended itself to the interviewees' approach to their practical curricular requirements (PCR), e.g., practica, fieldwork, and internships. The next section discusses this extension.

### **Pragmatic Learning Strategies**

Eight interviewees perceived little qualitative value of PCRs to their employability. Certain academic programs, albeit not in all relevant HEIs, require students to complete some level or form of practical learning as a curricular or graduation requirement. To the eight interviewees, this requirement was not as helpful as it is designed to be. Interviewees, despite their different fields of study, reported receiving minimal, if any, supervisory or networking support through finding workplaces where they could fulfil their PCRs, engage in rigorous academic-professional experiences, or build skills transferable beyond their fields of study. With this perception, interviewees were pragmatic and strategic about the choices they made, primarily in customising these required PCRs and their experiences through them.

Rozan, a graduate of a five-year industrial engineering program with an overall mark of 'excellent', decided to complete her required graduation project in the form of a research study evaluating against international standards the academic quality and employability outcomes of her program. Rozan's decision was motivated by two factors: her long-term plan to become an academic, and the encouragement of the then-newly arriving head of the program, who emphasised the need to improve graduates' employability. Rozan then led a team of classmates in conducting the study. She reported the following outcomes of her chosen project: globally enriched knowledge of engineering education and enhanced interpersonal, leadership, and research skills. Rozan, and her team, persevered in proceeding with the research despite challenges characteristic of research in Gaza, e.g., lack of funding and limited access to up-to-date literature. Another key challenge was the poor to modest commitment on the part of employers to research collaboration with Rozan. Her perseverance ultimately paid off when she presented her study findings and recommendations at her HEI and was instantly offered a job in her department (and later in a different office at her HEI), with academic program development responsibilities. She accepted the offer and moved on to pursue academic experiences that might directly prepare her for the teaching, research, and public service responsibilities of an academic career.

This pragmatic strategy was also actively employed by Walaa, who graduated top of her cohort from a four-year mathematics program with an overall mark of 'excellent with distinction'. Even before her enrolment in university, Walaa knew she was after a career as an academic. She knew this path would require quality postgraduate education abroad, which she also knew she could only do with a full scholarship. She reported taking several steps to achieve fulfil the requirements of this path: delivering distinction-earning academic performance; building strong rapport with her professors; utilising external sources to expand her disciplinary knowledge; and enrolling in a one-year education diploma to build her pedagogical skills. By the time she graduated from her bachelor's and diploma programs, Walaa, with strong endorsement from her (especially women) professors, had secured a full scholarship to complete her master's in mathematics in Jordan. There, too, she replicated her strategic

approach from her undergraduate years and now focused on disciplinary topics and skills commonly required by academic employers. Within six months after completing her master's, she landed a job at a local university in Gaza.

### Factors Influencing Quality of Learning Engagements

For all interviewees, they attributed their critical awareness of the importance of productive engagement in such off- and on-campus learning experiences to positive influence of one or, often, more factors. These factors included: prior engagement in non-formal programs, especially during high school; participation in local or international training programs; family background; peer influence; and circle of social or professional contacts and, to a lesser extent, certain members of university faculty or staff.

Khalid, a graduate of a four-year plant production and protection program with an overall mark of 'good', attributed to his engagement in community service initiatives his critical awareness and thus better navigation and defiance of existing social, economic, and formal education challenges to his employability. Omar and Kareem shared the same attribution. Their critical awareness, the three reflected, was broadened when they joined short-term training programs in the U.S. that exposed them to success stories of leadership, civic engagement, and/or entrepreneurship. Their peers and, more often, their families supported virtually all the actions they took upon this critical awareness—even when these peers and families were not clear on the relevance of these engagements to Omar, Khalid, and Kareem's success at university. These additional factors of influence, i.e., family and peer support as well as prior or simultaneous participation in non-formal learning experiences were equally positively cited by Leen, Hanaa, and Ihsan—three graduates of four-year English language and literature or English education programs at two different HEIs, all with an overall mark of 'very good'.

### Cultural Dynamics in Non-Formal Learning Engagements

While the motivation for these engagements was mostly pragmatic, i.e., building employable profiles, different interviewees cited a few various reasons. Two said they were motivated by their religious beliefs that emphasise, inter alia, service to others, dedication to one's work, and steadfastness in face of (Gaza's context of) hardship. Also, interviewees, especially women, reported that they pursued these engagements with a conscious aim of building their self-confidence as individual agents and as competent contributors in professional or civic settings. This latter point invites discussion of interviewees' reflection on the role of gender in their LfE experiences.

All interviewees were prompted to reflect on the role of their gender in their employability development pursuits. While all reported no incidents of outright gender-based discrimination, some shared subtle insights about such influence of their gender. Two specific insights are particularly worth sharing. First, men seemed at more freedom than women to engage in off-campus, non-academic activities. Ihsan, who is from a small town about half an hour away from Gaza City, said: 'My family would call me when it gets dark and I am still not home; they would just check on me, but they will not ask that I come home'. On the other hand, Leen, from the same town, reflected:

*I consider myself lucky because my family supports my engagements outside of university. They would be worried about me when it gets past 5pm, especially in winter, but they would not prevent me from doing what I have to do to develop myself. I am more lucky than some of my friends, whose families demand that they be home before Asir (late afternoon).*

These two contrasting examples begin to show how gender expectations can have influence on whether and how the interviewees engaged in non-formal and/or non-academic experiences. Some further specific differences reflected by the participants included that men were usually allowed to stay out of the house for longer hours and until later, and that they had more access to public spaces where they could collaborate on certain engagements, including starting up initiatives.

Second, while the influence of gender on pre-graduation employability development engagements seemed to be differentially enacted by an interviewee's family background, it could be additionally enacted by employers vis-à-vis how well those engagements translate into employment success and quality. Hanaa, a pharmacist, and Joud, a dentist, both said they felt preferred to men in the private healthcare sector because they were assumed to be willing to accept a lower salary than men. Both reported that this assumption follows the expectation that women are shy and therefore will not ask for a higher salary when offered a lower one. When each of them started challenging that assumption, they reported facing the same other assumption: their secondary economic role in households justifies their lower salaries than men's. Even more distressing, some of their job interviews included questions on their marriage and pregnancy plans, which if announced, they said, would result in less than objective assessment of their employability. Their shared explanation for this was that such plans would presumably mean, for them as women, suboptimal availability to do their work.

### Satisfaction and Self-Accountability

Towards the end of interviews, all interviewees were prompted to share how they felt about how they had handled their undergraduate years vis-à-vis their current employment status. Most combined in their responses expressions of satisfaction with a wish that they had done more to further advance their employability.

Almost instinctively, eight interviewees expressed in contextualised terms their gratitude for having a job: 'I am the only graduate from my cohort in a well-paid and secure job, I thank Allah everyday for it,' said Ihsan. 'You look at what jobs engineers do; it can be in management at NGOs, a low-paid job at a local factory, or something else different from engineering specialties. I am serving in a job I always wanted as an engineering student,' said Samer. Both Walaa and Rozan felt as much grateful for making concrete steps towards their intended academic careers. Joud felt grateful for the confidence with which she said she was now considering a switch from dental practice to a non-clinical career in the health sector.

Yet, ten of the twelve interviewees believed they could have done more to enhance their employability if they had been better trained to seize available opportunities or to compensate for unavailable ones. Some of their expressed wishes included to have begun their employability development pursuits earlier in their (even pre-)undergraduate years, engaged in experiences of more professional rigor or transferability, developed their English communication skills, and/or build a wider circle of connections in and outside of Gaza, among others. They expressed such wishes with undertones of self-criticism—or perhaps critical self-accountability—that they *should* have done more. Whether they actually could have is, however, subject to question. As Hanaa lamented: 'Our knowledge [of such employability development opportunities] is based on our life in Gaza, so it remains limited... we can only do the best we can.' This limitation of such knowledge is an expected consequence to Gaza's context of academic immobility and geo-cultural isolation, a consequence the interviewees had perhaps taken for granted and thus missed to factor it more substantially into their self-evaluation.

### Discussion

The findings suggest these Palestinian undergraduate students are conscious of the employability value they gained through their pursuits of learning engagements, in and outside of HEIs. They show that interviewed students attribute much of their (exceptional) employability success to their mostly independent, non-formal, off-campus learning engagements, which was not surprising given the relevant questionnaire result (see Table 2). The findings also suggest that a range of factors—e.g., gender, personal beliefs and sense of purpose, social background, and earlier educational experiences—may influence the extent and quality of students' motivation and ability to pursue such engagements in a sustainable and strategic manner. While some of these factors prompted

interviewees' awareness of their responsibility for their own employability development, this awareness seems to be also prompted by their realization of the limited (ability or) role their HEIs exercise in actively enhancing their employability.

Although I had planned to interrogate in more depth the influence of Gaza's context on these interviewees' trajectories, their accounts consistently left that context in the untold background. This may perhaps reflect their internalisation of the context as *the* normal framework within which they built and acted on their awareness of their responsibility for their employability development. Concisely, I wish to assert that Gaza's context was omnipresent as indeed the untold background of the data collected and findings presented. This context seemed to me, as it potentially would to people in and those studying Gaza, to play a significant role in determining what activities the interviewees *could* pursue, the extent to which they *could* benefit from those activities, and the ultimate employability outcome at which they *could* arrive within a year of graduation. I italicize *could* to emphasise the relevance of Sen's (1999) Capability Approach in appreciating these LfE outcomes as negotiated between these individual learners and Gaza's conducive and, more, oppressive opportunity structures (see Flores-Crespo, 2007; Fryer, 2022). With this note in mind, the rest of this section focuses discussion on how empirical findings relate to the theoretical framework followed in this research.

### **LfE: A Learner-Centred Logic**

The findings included much insight to illuminate the theoretically derived conception of LfE. The findings show the participants engaged in a continuity of cognitive, metacognitive, and social activities to expand their learning for employability. Their reading of their realities, their reflections on their own preferences, and their ensuing decisions, a cognitive and metacognitive exercise, increased their awareness of what to do, and this awareness was concurrent with, followed and/or enhanced by their engagements in their respective learning environments. Consider Walaa's experience. She was aware of what she needs to do in order to achieve her career aspiration, to become an academic. She, therefore, engaged with her subject with greater dedication to cultivate the cognitive experiences, intellectual skills, and demonstrated qualifications that were essential to her success. Socially, she took notice of her women professors' positive influence on her academic and personal goals, and she invested additional time and effort in earning their recognition of her achievements. Also, consider Samer's case. He made and followed through with the complex calculation that internships, even when not or minimally unpaid, would be a better boost to his employability. Kareem and Joud's decisions to switch careers followed their enjoyment of their engagements beyond dentistry, even in the face of social pressure to remain in the 'respectable Dr. profession'. These cognitive-social processes begin to illuminate a logic focused on *learners'* own engagements, reasoning, and choices—in their respective natural, complex, and situated settings—vis-à-vis their employability. Whether in their cognitive or practical activities, the participants' engagements in LfE demonstrate their construction of knowledge in context and via authentic learning tasks as well as their continued reflection on their progress in navigating their complex realities (see Theoretical Framework). This logic may be as needed as that focused on *students'* engagements in HEIs' offered activities, and may especially be so when HEIs, like those in Gaza, lack/are deprived of the epistemic and economic resources to offer high-impact employability development activities.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study is an attempt at theoretical and empirical advancement of a 'learning for employability' logic. The study findings show that learners have significant potential to independently seek and build opportunities to develop their employability. In Gaza's context, HEIs are under double pressure to fend for limited resources while enhancing graduate employability in an overall context of rare employment opportunities. Learners can meet this contextual hostility with a sharpened sense of purpose and push through with dedication and sustainable effort to engage in activities they see as

conducive to their employability development. Their progress can still be mediated by factors like gender, social background, and prior extracurricular experiences.

For learners in such contexts, an LfE logic means that they could, and perhaps should, assume greater responsibility for understanding of their complex and difficult environment, for acting—independently whenever needed—to advance their own employability, and for continuous reflection on their progress. For employers, an LfE means they should be more welcoming of learners' initiatives to volunteer, to intern, to launch activities of mutual benefit to employers' work and to learners' employability, and to present—at least some of their—LfE engagements as credible part of their job qualification. For HEIs, finally, an LfE means that, inter alia, they should have a policy of encouraging students to be owners of their learning for employability. Within reasonable (re)allocations, if any needed, this policy should at minimum offer students real freedom and self-responsibility to try to unleash more of their learning potential for employability.

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