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International degree student conceptions of employability

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Employability has become a core directive of higher education. In Europe, the Bologna Process has been instrumental in strengthening the ties between higher education and the labour market to meet the needs of the knowledge economy. As higher education institutions are prescribed an increasingly important responsibility in contributing to national welfare and maintaining an economic competitive edge, internationalisation strategies aimed at attracting international talent are implemented both at the national and institutional levels. As an EU member state, Finland has incorporated such policies as part of its internationalisation strategy. However, student perspectives on employability are underrepresented in the prevailing employer-driven discourse and academic research. This thesis responds to the need for contextually relevant research on the role of higher education in employability development in Finland. It aims to fill the gap by investigating the perspectives of international degree students enrolled at the University of Oulu.

Using phenomenography this thesis investigates (a) international students' conceptual understanding of employability and, (b) their perceptions of and expectations of the employability development opportunities provided by the University of Oulu. The findings show that international students have a predominantly instrumental understanding of employability and expect the University of Oulu to provide them with more opportunities to find work. Students also indicate that they feel unprepared to enter the Finnish job market after graduation. A theoretical exploration of employability reveals that employer-driven definitions of employability are formulated narrowly. Alternatives propose a more comprehensive approach to graduate employability development which can be useful to the University of Oulu. A customisable model of graduate capital, in addition to developing an inclusive campus community with the input of the university's new Career Centre, may provide options for a new employability agenda that can support the attraction and retention of international talent.

Keywords: employability, higher education, career education, internationalisation, Finland

Contents

1   Introduction

Graduate employability has become a topic of major concern for policymakers, employers and higher education institutions. Having gained prominence as part of labour market requirements for the global knowledge economy and within internationalisation strategies, employability has also received academic attention. Notions of employability in this thesis are derived from perspectives originating in the European sphere, as well as the English-speaking world, where national governments, employers and higher education institutions are the main stakeholders in the discourse of employability. However, its intended beneficiaries, the students, are often overlooked. Departing from a global context, this thesis investigates how international economic policies affect the employability agenda in Finland and its higher education institutions. As such, the aim is to provide an initial exploration of student perspectives on employability within a localised higher education setting, namely that of the University of Oulu in Finland. This study is motivated by a perceived shortcoming in approaches to graduate employability as well as a personal intention of the researcher as an international student looking to settle in Finland after graduation. Since this thesis will feature the University of Oulu Career Centre, it is necessary to mention here that I, as the researcher, was employed at the Career Centre in 2022. As such, the purpose of this thesis is not to promote the Career Centre. This thesis seeks to contribute to a more holistic and contextually-relevant understanding of employability by rendering student perspectives more visible in support of student employability development.

1.1   Situating the research

The weight of economic incentives associated with internationalisation and employability resulted in employability being positioned as a measure of outcome of completion of studies in higher education (Bridgstock, 2009; Clarke, 2018; Harvey, 2001). Because higher education is expected to align more closely with labour market needs and employers tend to have a uniform understanding of employability (Griffiths et al., 2018), similar interpretations prevail within higher education (Clarke, 2018; Shumilova & Cai, 2015). This outcome approach to employability has led to it being narrowly defined (Bridgstock, 2009; Clarke, 2018; Harvey, 2001; Tymon, 2013). Also, as it is the employers who provide jobs and thereby determine whether an applicant is employable or not, they effectively act as the "ultimate arbiters of

employability" (Cox & King, 2006). This means that the responsibility to produce employable graduates is pushed onto higher education institutions (Bridgstock, 2009; Clarke, 2018; Tymon, 2013). With the requirements of the world of work and society being as they are, it is not unreasonable that higher education institutions ensure students are equipped for life post-graduation. After all, students are intrinsically part of the academic community and higher education therefore has a duty to help its students progress to the next phase of their lives (Griffiths et al., 2018). However, one-sided conceptions of employability do not accurately reflect reality and may impede efforts made by higher education institutions to invest in their students' employability.

Approaches and outcomes of employability are determined by how the term is conceptualised (Harvey, 2001). In treating employability as a measure of educational outcome, higher education institutions have not assumed an active role in developing a custom definition and matching approach to employability that extends beyond the notion of employability merely as a means to gain employment (Shumilova & Cai, 2015). Furthermore, there appears to be a disparity among students themselves about the meaning of employability and what employability development entails (Thirunavukarasu et al., 2020; Tymon, 2013). This lack of student involvement extends to research on (international) students' engagement with employability and applying for jobs. In brief, student's perceptions of employability do not receive much attention (Lees et al., 2015; Tymon, 2013). The shortcomings in institutional initiatives and understandings of employability shared by higher education institutions and students overall have led to calls for a reconfiguration of employability development opportunities (Bridgstock, 2009; Clarke, 2018). Such a reorientation is only worthwhile if it overcomes the standardised approach to employability, i.e., if it addresses the needs of all stakeholders. In his research on international students' integration into the Finnish labour market, Alho (2020) notes that international students' experiences of job searching "has received only very limited attention in previous studies" (p. 17). In recognition of this issue, Shumilova and Cai (2015) advise that initiatives to improve graduate employability are backed by "country and HEI-specific research on the skills needed by employers, eliciting the feedback from graduates on the relevance of HE to the labour market needs" (p. 29). Thus, the purpose of this study is to take a step in that direction by addressing the student side of the employability issue.

1.2   Aims and research questions

This thesis aims to address the gap in the research characterised by a lack of a comprehensive and institutionally relevant definition of employability accompanied by missing student perspectives. This study, therefore, aims to answer the following two research questions:

RQ1 – How do international degree students perceive "employability"?

RQ2 – How do international degree students perceive the employability development opportunities provided by the University of Oulu and what do they expect from them?

The first research question aims to gauge international students' understanding of the concept of employability. This question forms the basis for understanding the second research question since students' perceptions and expectation of employability development depends on how they conceptualise employability. As such, RQ1 and RQ2 are inextricably linked to each other. RQ2 consists of two interrelated elements: perceptions and expectations. This dual framing can provide broader or deeper insights into students' perceptions as they explore the issue of employability development from two slightly different angles. The reasoning underlying this formulation is that perceptions of certain phenomena will lead to, or include, expectations because perceptions are often stated as opinions with either positive or negative connotations. They constitute a judgement or evaluation that invites the subject of that judgement to provide suggestions of how things could be different, i.e. expectations. Thus, students' perceptions and expectations together form the general picture of the University of Oulu's commitment to enhancing student employability.

With the emphasis being on the perceptions of a group of people, the methodological approach selected is phenomenography. Phenomenography aims to uncover people's lived experiences and conceptions of a particular phenomenon (Marton, 1981). By taking student perspectives into account, the university becomes capable to develop a more comprehensive and efficient approach to employability development that escapes the confines of unilateral discourse. As such, this study does not mean to evaluate or instruct but is intended to be explorative and provide new insights. The underlining theory is that a better understanding of student needs can help identify areas of improvement within existing university services and target shortcomings in students' understandings and expectations. This will allow employability development to be better in tune with the needs of local (Finnish) employers, thus strengthening the connection with the labour market. Cooperation and transparency about stakeholder expectations are all

the more necessary because higher education institutions do not adequately make students aware of labour market requirements nor are the perceptions of employers, students and higher education institutions aligned (Succi & Canovi, 2020). With better support, students are also expected to be more successful in their careers which, in turn, testifies to the quality of education at the University of Oulu.

2 The neoliberal directive in higher education

The employability of graduates has become a prominent part of higher education institutions in the wake of global economic developments and shifts within higher education itself. Also, the emergence of the knowledge economy, propelled by neoliberal market doctrine, has played a part in redefining the relationship between higher education and the world of work. As higher education institutions are urged to meet labour market demands, it follows that they invest in the development of their students' employability (Humburg et al., 2013). With a role to play in the global knowledge economy, the attraction of international students becomes an active strategy of higher education institutions in the West (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Thus, to better understand student or graduate employability it is necessary to consider the role of higher education institutions and how it has shifted in response to predominantly global economic developments. With the focus of this thesis being on international degree students, it is also imperative to include perspectives on the internationalisation of higher education in this contextual frame. For this reason, internationalisation "must be considered in the broader context of the changing role and position of tertiary education in the world" (de Wit & Altbach, 2021, p. 31). Furthermore, the internationalisation of higher education provides a context for student employability. The broader context in question is shaped by a heightened prevalence of globally-dominant economically-oriented discourses which direct education policy to adopt more market-oriented features.

2.1 Neoliberal globalisation

Globalisation is an elusive concept. Its origins and effects on the various domains of human society will differ depending on one's approach to defining it (Rizvi, 2017). For example, both Garrett (2000) and, O'Rourke and Williamson (2002) classify globalisation as an integration of international markets. They differ in their periodisation, however, due to divergent causalities. Garret's inclusion of modern technology leads him to differentiate contemporary globalisation from the type of globalisation that emerged in the nineteenth century as presented by O'Rourke and Williamson. Nevertheless, despite causal differences, or whether globalisation is an ideological manifestation or represents a historical process of structural change, there appears to be an agreement that the world has seen increased interconnectedness and change at a political, economic, and cultural level (Held & McGrew, 2003). In this thesis, Garrett's conception of globalisation is taken as a point of reference. The aim is not to take a stance in

the globalisation debate but to assume a nuanced picture of globalisation that is built on the interrelation of "rapid technological change, mushrooming cross-border economic activity, and a spate of initiatives to liberalize foreign economic policies at the national, regional, and global levels" (Garrett, 2000, p. 975). To address the economic elements in this definition of globalisation we now turn to the discussion of neoliberalism.

In connection to globalisation, a discussion of neoliberalism can be approached in different ways. As an ideology, neoliberalism is based on the idea that economic growth and human welfare are best achieved through market politics (Harvey, 2005). In the spirit of *laissez-faire* capitalism, markets should be removed from government constraints and be free to regulate themselves (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Neoliberal policies are consequently characterised by the promotion of competition, the privatisation of the public sector, and the reduction of trade barriers (Bamberger et al., 2019), as well as the expansion of existing markets or the creation of new ones (Connell, 2013). The freedom granted to markets should extend to the individual and institutions as they should possess the autonomy to pursue their interests (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Thus, at the core of neoliberal theory lies the principle of individual freedom of choice. According to Friedman (2002) and Hayek (2007), a free society should therefore bestow upon its citizens the possibility to pursue a better life of which the possession of wealth is a part rather than the main goal.

By framing neoliberalism as an ideology that informs policy it is best understood in terms of its relation to the state. In being part of the domain of politics, it moves from being an abstract concept to a guiding principle with practical effects in the real world. Neoliberalism became appealing to national governments following the inability of Keynesian economics to correct a series of financial crises during the 1970s (Harvey, 2005). The United Kingdom and the United States in particular were at the forefront of the neoliberal turn in global politics. Aside from becoming the favoured philosophy in these countries, the fall of the Soviet Union marked a victory for Western democracy and economic liberalism (Rizvi, 2017). With the United States as the dominant global power, US-backed global institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund oversaw the dispersal of neoliberal ideology to the peripheral regions of the world through their policies and interventions (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Garrett, 2000). However, neoliberalism did not emerge solely as a reaction to global crises or as the economic philosophy of choice. Garrett (2000) notes that increased international trade, as part of globalisation, and the liberalisation of trade policies are closely connected. In fact, given the momentum and magnitude of worldwide change during the twentieth century, Olssen and

Peters (2005) suggest that even if neoliberal ideology had not emerged as the dominant economic model of the West, the effects of globalisation would have initiated profound economic and social change regardless. In a sense, neoliberalism can be seen as a logical consequence of the growth of the international flow of capital as part of globalisation.

The connection between globalisation and neoliberalism describes how the latter is framed as a discourse that shapes how global society is organised. Globalisation led to the establishment of a worldwide economic system on the one hand, while neoliberalism prescribed what that system looks like on the other. As neoliberalism became embedded in national policies and disseminated across the globe, it "extended beyond the sphere of the economy, and generalized as a principle for both reshaping and rationalizing government itself" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 249). In other words, neoliberalism has become the leading political discourse which has been actively promoted in the West (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Consequently, neoliberalism is considered by some to be of such significance to the development of globalisation to coin this form of globalisation "neoliberal globalisation" (Duménil & Lévy, 2011, p. 9). In a similar fashion, Rizvi (2017, p. 5) claims that neoliberal discourse has become so pervasive it has "acquired a taken-for-granted status, the only way in which economic, political and cultural relations can be envisaged". Following this line of reasoning, education policy would fall under the banner of neoliberalism, meaning policy decisions regarding education would be motivated mainly by economic incentives. Education institutions would then have to operate under new rules and pursue new objectives. As a consequence, the role of education is recast in economic terms and determined by adherence to human capital theory (Rizvi, 2017). Internationalisation strategies pursued in higher education are a testament to the neoliberal trend. With (international) students being members of the academic community, this development will ultimately also affect them.

2.2 The knowledge economy and employability

If policy decisions affecting higher education are made predominantly along economic lines it becomes necessary to analyse what those economic motives entail so that the relation between higher education institutions and economic rationales becomes visible. Just because higher education institutions have become more market-oriented does not mean they necessarily follow a neoliberal agenda. Arguably, this would imply that any policy targeted at or driven by financial gains is essentially neoliberal, which is not the case. As outlined above, economic

matters would have enjoyed a larger share of the policy agenda due to globalisation, regardless of the influence of neoliberal ideology. Also, as will be explained below, the emergence of the knowledge economy would restructure the economic landscape of Western nations and the world of work which, having gained global status, also contributed to redesigning the purpose of higher education (Olssen & Peters, 2005). In reference to the broader context of neoliberal globalisation, this section focuses on the knowledge economy as a key contributing factor as to why higher education worldwide adopted a new role and what that role is. The aim is to formulate a contextual overview within which it becomes possible to interpret the significance of the employability of university students.

If neoliberalism interprets areas of governance in primarily economic terms, the knowledge economy prescribes what type of economy is to be sponsored. de Wit and Altbach (2021) define the knowledge economy as "the increasingly technology and science-based globalized set of economic relations that requires high levels of knowledge, skills, and sophisticated international relations" (p. 32). Despite the argument that policies or strategies pursuing financial profit are not necessarily neoliberal in nature, neoliberalism and the knowledge economy would work in tandem to prompt change within global society and higher education. In fact, the knowledge economy is a fundamental component of the link between education policy and neoliberalism (Stiglitz, 2002). Since the 1950s, the value and contribution of knowledge, alternatively expressed as human capital, to productivity and technological innovation has increased (Kwon, 2009; Powell & Snellman, 2004). The shift, in developed countries, from an industrial system of production to a knowledge-based economy coincided with a move "from simple to complex divisions of labour driven by scientific knowledge that accelerates the pace of technological innovation" (Brown et al., 2008, p. 131). In theory, new technology introduced into the workplace will positively impact productivity. This change, as portrayed by Brown et al. (2008), highlights a number of key considerations which allow us to situate employability within the wider frame of the knowledge economy as "the most significant material change that underpins neoliberalism in the twenty-first century" (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 330).

Under the knowledge economy, an increased dependency on know-how corresponds with a need for highly-skilled labour whereby improving the quality of labour presumably leads to increased productivity. This idea forms the baseline of Human Capital Theory, which dictates that an individual's productivity can be improved by investing in the quality of labour (Goldin, 2016). Human capital encompasses the collection of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences an employee brings to the workplace, which can be acquired via education (Gillies,

2015). Indeed, since the 1990s OECD and World Bank reports propelled education as a "massively undervalued form of knowledge capital that will determine the future of work, the organization of knowledge institutions and the shape of society in the years to come" (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 331). The role of higher education, viewed through an economic lens, then becomes reconfigured as a production house for knowledge, i.e. human capital, in support of societal wealth and stability through economic growth (Brown et al., 2008; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Rizvi, 2017). However, ensuring the availability of a highly-skilled workforce, by itself, is not enough to achieve the expected rise in productivity.

Highlighting another dimension of change implemented as part of the new knowledge economy is the restructuring of the workplace at the organisational level. Introducing new technology into the workplace, supported by qualified personnel, does not automatically lead to a boost in productivity. Research has shown that productivity will not increase unless accompanied by the necessary structural changes in the organisation of work (Powell & Snellman, 2004). So, to effectively implement new technologies to enhance productivity, outdated centralised forms of organising work were replaced with more flexible practices which were supposed to enhance the quality of work (Powell & Snellman, 2004). The question is whether this is true in practice. Nevertheless, a new approach to work generated a new type of worker that possessed a new set of skills. It is in the context of new working arrangements that the concept of employability emerges and makes sense. The move to a more flexible working culture coincided with a demand for flexibility on the part of employers towards employees. Baruch (2001, p. 545) explains how this development resulted in the substitution of a stable employment contract for a "psychological contract" which rests on the employer's promise to provide their employees with employability by investing in them. As such, employability in itself could be considered a form of human capital that an individual makes use of to secure a new job or grow within a certain position. Furthermore, as labour market conditions have gradually become more susceptible to the effects of global events, countries were not able to manage their economies as they saw fit (Brown et al., 2008). This exposure to globalisation renders labour and financial markets more unstable, as demonstrated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Navigating a labour market in flux requires skills that enable people to adapt to new conditions in order to move up in their careers (Barrie, 2006). These types of skills can be understood as 'employability skills'.

Due to the importance of skill possession and transfer in the knowledge economy, skill acquisition becomes part of the machinery that drives economic growth. Employable workers

are those who continue the develop themselves while on the job (Curtis & McKenzie, 2001). Professional development programmes have become more available as a response to a competitive economy and an uncertain labour market (Sleezer et al., 2004). At the same time, employers provide less on-the-job training as they expect their future employees, in our case university graduates, to possess the required skills to seamlessly join the workforce (Bridgstock, 2009; Clarke, 2018; Harvey, 2001). As a consequence, higher education has come under more pressure, from both national governments and employers alike, to invest in making students more employable (Cox & King, 2006; Succi & Canovi, 2020). From the government's and employers' perspective, higher education is tasked with reducing the distance between academia and working life (Neumann & Banghart, 2001). From an educational provision perspective, one way of preparing students to function in a new organisational culture of the workplace is through incorporating skills training within the curriculum (Cox & King, 2006; Cranmer, 2006). Another option is to connect students and employers through company visits, job fairs and internships (Clarke, 2018; Harvey, 2001). At an organisational level, neoliberal governmentalism imposes a more hierarchical management structure that decides over course content and specifications (Olssen & Peters, 2005). From a managerial point of view, the new organisational structure of higher education makes sense. If education is to contribute to a policy-oriented towards economic growth, those involved in policy-making would want to exact a degree of control over educational outcomes. Indeed, viewing education as an investment, governments expect to see a return on their investment in terms of graduate employability (Holmes, 2013). Some consider employability as "crude measures of outcome" to be problematic (Harvey, 2001, p. 97).

The employability discourse, as characterised by the knowledge economy, spurs the further massification and commercialisation of higher education and can even negatively affect the control that higher education institutions have over their approach to student employability development (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). Nevertheless, the new role of higher education institutions as directors of employability is further reinforced by students' expectations. Students increasingly cite enhanced job prospects as the main motive to enrol in higher education (Puhakka et al., 2010; Stewart & Knowles, 2001). It appears, then, that all stakeholders share a similar conviction in the importance of employability which prescribes higher education a catalytic role in supporting national economic competitiveness. Employability is expected to expand as a cornerstone of higher education policy and as a driving force behind international student mobility.

2.3 Internationalisation of higher education

2.3.1 Framing internationalisation

In reference to the premise of this chapter, the previous sections set out to establish a context which shaped the new role of higher education. This role, characterised by an attunement to market needs and support for economic growth, is reflected in higher education and state internationalisation policies. The connection between neoliberalism and internationalisation is well-documented in research which indicates, to no surprise, that internationalisation strategies follow a predominantly economic directive (Bamberger et al., 2019; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017; Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a; Wihlborg & Robson, 2018). Contrary to the more abstract account of neoliberal ideology and intangible processes of globalisation, internationalisation, in an institutional context, can be seen as a more practical manifestation of market-driven policies informed by a neoliberally construed global knowledge economy because it is operationalised. The relation between globalisation and internationalisation is highlighted in the following quote:

> Globalization, a key reality in the 21st century, has already profoundly influenced higher education. We define globalization as the reality shaped by an increasingly integrated world economy, new information and communications technology (ICT), the emergence of an international knowledge network, the role of the English language, and other forces beyond the control of academic institutions. Internationalization is defined as the variety of policies and programs that universities and governments implement to respond to globalization. (Altbach et al., 2009)

Like higher education, the meaning of internationalisation has also changed over time. Due to the prevalence of economic discourses today, internationalisation refers to "any supra-regional phenomenon related to higher education (anything which seems to take world-wide) and/or anything on a global scale related to higher education characterised by market and competition" (Teichler, 2004, p. 23). A closer look at internationalisation strategies reveals that graduate employability is tied to internationalisation. By investing in internationalisation, higher education institutions not only attempt to improve their quality and reputation by attracting the brightest minds but also fulfil their socio-economic role of increasing a country's pool of human capital by acquiring international expertise in support of technological innovation and economic growth. For students, internationalisation provides the opportunity to acquire key employability

skills (Crossman & Clarke, 2010). Adequate support services become vital for the success of internationalisation policies and strategies aimed at attracting international talent. For higher education, this means that international students who are not provided with the necessary employability support will face more challenges in trying to enter the labour market and settle in their host country.

Although internationalisation is primarily framed within a global context, it is not exclusively dependent on the broader picture. Specific internationalisation policies are likely to differ depending on the institution or region (Bamberger et al., 2019; de Wit, 2013), yet there are a number of commonalities among approaches. In Europe, internationalisation gained prominence as a result of the Bologna process (Clarke, 2018; de Wit et al., 2015; Sin & Saunders, 2014; Teichler, 2014). Through the Bologna process, higher education has been placed "at the heart of Europe's so-called knowledge triangle of research, education and innovation, which are seen as the key drivers of a knowledge-based society" (Humburg et al., 2013, p. 2). Since a knowledge society is built on the belief that the application of certain skills in the workplace leads to increased productivity. Thus, internationalisation, which was originally pursued based on an income-based rationale, is now more focussed on the accumulation of human capital (Bamberger et al., 2019; de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Human capital theory prescribes that human capital can be generated through education, though it can also be made more available by increasing the number of people that can join the workforce. Aside from providing students with the skills required to function in the knowledge economy, higher education, as the main focus of internationalisation, concentrates on student mobility (Bamberger et al., 2019; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Knight, 2013). The massification of higher education is also considered a contributing factor in the drive to internationalise (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). The resulting increased availability of talent, coupled with more extensive networks and abilities to travel abroad as a result of globalisation, means the attraction of international talent becomes paramount. For clarification, what is meant by 'international talent' are "international specialists, employees, start-up entrepreneurs, as well as students and researchers" (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020, p. 2). Student mobility thus becomes a form of labour immigration (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a). Targeted labour immigration policies are not only motivated by increasing the pool of available human capital or revenue streams but also by an ageing population (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Jokila et al., 2019). National mobility strategies are centred around making a country more attractive to live and work in. More concretely, this involves the active pursuit of reputation-building, branding

and marketing activities (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Knight, 2013). For the state, having a large workforce ensures a stable tax-paying base on the one hand. On the other, the integration of highly skilled internationals, seen as an asset for the field of research, enhances the innovative capacity of a country overall (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Knight, 2013) and helps make it more appealing to investors (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). For higher education institutions, reputation is strongly associated with university rankings and rankings are associated with competition (Pusser & Marginson, 2013). Factors like the number of international students and staff, joint international publications and funding affect a university's position in rankings (Wihlborg & Robson, 2018). In a virtuous cycle, a high ranking helps attract more international students and staff which is positively reflected in the rankings. Furthermore, rankings can be used as a basis for comparison to justify the implementation of certain "proven" strategies. This not only helps solidify the position of top institutions but also leads to a situation where "institutions outside the United States are pressed into following the template of the globally dominant universities that lead the rankings" (Pusser & Marginson, 2013). As such, in their mission to internationalise, states and higher education management will implement strategies that will improve their prestige as symbolized by rankings (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Pusser & Marginson, 2013). As indicated above, one of those strategies involves increasing the number of international students in higher education (Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017). Another is to bestow upon students the skills they need to position themselves within a modern-day knowledge society (Teichler, 2004). Regarding educational provision, a third strategy is the expansion, in non-English speaking countries, of the use of the English language in academia. Higher education institutions favour international English language publications (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Mathies et al., 2020) and are expanding their range of courses and degree programmes taught in English (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017). At the national level, governments intent on retaining international talent could make similar efforts to curtail existing linguistic barriers which will help expatriates integrate easier into working life.

The increased emphasis on employability as a result of the reconfiguration of higher education along neoliberal lines poses a challenge for higher education, but perhaps also an opportunity. Internationalisation represents an endeavour towards excellence and aims to provide a service to society through quality education and research (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). In recognition of this potential, Wihlborg and Robson (2018) also point to the possibility that the contribution of education to society may diminish if economic goals are too dominant. Similarly, de Wit and

Altbach (2021), and Olssen and Peters (2005) make note of an existing discord between the neoliberal and a more inclusive approach to internationalisation that can be linked to the uneasy relationship between corporate-like management and the value of academic freedom. Furthermore, it is imprudent to allow economic rationales to take over internationalisation policy as "too much of a commercial approach will jeopardize the quality of education, the reputation of the institutions, and by that the future inflow of national and international students", thereby turning the virtuous cycle of a high reputation resulting in higher attraction rates into a vicious one (de Wit, 2013, p. 23). This is also not the case (Bamberger et al., 2019; de Wit, 2013). As such, there is room for higher education institutions to adopt a balanced approach to contributing to a prosperous and stable society while guiding students towards a meaningful and fulfilling career. On a final note, de Wit (2013) argues that the discourse of internationalisation is lacking student voices. As will be discussed later in this thesis, this is also the case for employability. Any measures taken to support the development of employability are likely to positively affect the international dimension of a higher education institution.

In sum, internationalisation has become a primary policy concern for states and higher education institutions across the world. For universities, student mobility is the main driver of internationalisation strategies which are aimed at attracting and retaining international talent as part of the national workforce. Set within the broader context of a neoliberally driven global knowledge economy, internationalisation efforts culminate into a global competition for talent (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Teichler, 2004). The atmosphere of competition as part of internationalisation is viewed as being so defining that it is deserving of being referred to as "the great brain race" (Knight, 2013, p. 84) or "the war for talent" (Brown et al., 2008, p.140). For this reason, internationalisation becomes a policy domain actively pursued by the state and educational institutions (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Wihlborg & Robson, 2018). It is important to recognise that internationalisation is not imposed directly by or as a consequence of a globally dominant discourse, institution, governing body or individual. International exchange between universities has existed for many centuries in one form or another and has shifted meanings throughout its existence (Bamberger et al., 2019; de Wit, 2013; de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Thus, it is not so much internationalisation in and of itself that begs questioning, but rather *how* it manifests.

2.3.2 Internationalisation in Finland

The contextual frame presented throughout this chapter would not be complete without an overview of the Finnish context. As will be argued later, student employability development needs to be contextually relevant. The same applies to internationalisation as there is no one-size-fits-all format. Instead, the implementation of internationalisation strategies is determined by the "internal context of the university, by the type of university, and how it is embedded nationally" (de Wit, 2013, p. 14). Furthermore, internationalisation is not driven exclusively by a neoliberal rationale but is the result of multiple interwoven political, socio-cultural, and economic factors (Bamberger et al., 2019). This section aims to clarify some of the aspects of Finnish internationalisation policy that are relevant to this study. Emphasis will be placed on the relation to global trends, and the motivations and intentions of the enacted policies. Because this thesis directly connects to the University of Oulu, its internal context is included in this overview.

Over the past two decades, higher education in Finland has undergone considerable change. The Finnish welfare state was able to meet the influx of graduates resulting from the expansion of higher education that took place since the 1970s (Puhakka et al., 2010). Over time, higher education in Finland has been forced to respond to the effects of globalisation as well as national and international developments. Since joining the European Union in 1995, educational policy in Finland has become more susceptible to influence from international organisations. In gaining EU membership, gaining access to European funding also meant aligning with European objectives (Laitinen, 2015). Built on the conception of higher education as a contributor to economic growth and national competitiveness, the European strategy for higher education is represented by the Bologna Process and instructs higher education to strengthen its connection with the labour market (Humburg et al., 2013; Kivinen et al., 2007). Though the nature of the connection between higher education and the labour market is contested (Tomlinson, 2008), the prevailing idea is that higher education should contribute to students' employability. Indeed, with higher education being more available to the masses, students feel they will face stiffer competition in the labour market because a degree no longer sets them apart from others (Tomlinson, 2008). Students therefore increasingly enrol in higher education with the expectation to enhance their employability (Puhakka et al., 2010; Stewart & Knowles, 2001). By adhering to the provisions of the Bologna Process (Laitinen, 2015), Finnish universities seem to have accepted the employability agenda (Puhakka et al., 2010).

In joining the European international community and adhering to its policies, Finland also began to actively implement its own internationalisation strategies. In its aim to form a European Higher Education Area, the Bologna Process connects the higher education systems of the participating countries "to facilitate student and staff mobility, to make higher education more inclusive and accessible, and to make higher education in Europe more attractive and competitive worldwide" (European Commission, n.d.). With internationalisation efforts revolving mainly around mobility, immigration policies focussing on the retention of international students have been put in place around Europe (Caruso & de Wit, 2015).

Since 2001, Finland has been developing internationalisation strategies for higher education counting the increase of the number of international students in Finland as one of its primary objectives (Auranen et al., 2018; Jokila et al., 2019). Revised every eight years, there have been three strategy documents so far, with the next one set to be released in 2025. The Finnish government assumes an economic view on the attraction of international students by expressing their potential in joining the labour force (Ministry of the Interior, 2013). In the *Roadmap for Education-based and Work-based Immigration 2035*, the Finnish government confirms that increasing the flow of immigration is motivated by a declining workforce and resulting talent shortage caused by a declining population and brain drain (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). With policy intent on attracting expertise from abroad, Finland joins the global competition for talent.

In a shift to a more commercial approach to student recruitment, Finnish higher education introduced tuition fees for non-European students in 2017 (Jokila et al., 2019). Coupled with reduced budgets and a funding model based on outcome, represented by successful completion of studies, universities and the state would want to see results indicative of the excellence that internationalisation is supposed to represent (Laitinen, 2015). As such, charging tuition fees is understood as a selection procedure for obtaining the most talented students. Students who are willing to pay tuition fees, considered to exemplify quality, are the ones most likely to perform well and remain in the country after graduation in search of employment, particularly if the host country is wealthy (Caruso & de Wit, 2015). These students will have higher expectations of their educational institution when it comes to their employability (Choudaha, 2017). Thus, in order to be competitive, Finnish higher education institutions need to provide international students with improved career prospects.

In 2016 the European Commission reiterated how an ageing population, declining labour force, and skill mismatch are negatively affecting the competitive capacity of the EU and hampering economic growth (European Commission, 2016b). The following year, the Finnish government under the then Prime Minister Juha Sipilä launched the *Talent Boost* programme. Citing Finland's declining population due to decreasing birth rates and an ageing population, the Talent Boost programme aims to sustain Finland's economy and support the welfare state (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020). Talent Boost is currently spearheading Finland's ambitions to "improve Finland's employment rate; to enhance quality, diversity and international activities in higher education institutions; to boost growth, internationalisation and renewal in business and RDI activities; and to support investment promotion to Finland (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020). Building onto the economic value attributed to international students, the Marin cabinet (2019 – 2023) concentrated on attraction and retention strategies by supporting international students to find work and improving the international competitiveness of Finnish higher education (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2021). As such, Finnish national policy for internationalisation is closely aligned with the principles of the Bologna Process. Yet, for the proposed strategies to be successful, certain challenges must be overcome. Living conditions in Finland are good as the country has consistently provided a free, safe and prosperous environment to live in (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017). These factors play a positive role in student mobility (Caruso & de Wit, 2015). However, Mathies and Karhunen (2021a) state that while the stay rate of international students in Finland is high, it is still low compared to other European countries due to the small number of incoming students. Since 2012, the total number of international students arriving annually in Finland lies around 20 000 (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2021). The plan is to triple that amount by 2030 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). This does not take away from the fact that international students face difficulties in trying to join the Finnish labour market (Alho, 2020; Ministry of the Interior, 2013). The most common barriers international students are faced with are language requirements and a lack of professional networks (Alho, 2020; Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a; Shumilova & Cai, 2015). International students also often lack the opportunities to find and apply for jobs because employers often apply informal recruitment strategies, resulting in a hidden job market (Alho, 2020; Maunu, 2018). Furthermore, pointing to the role of higher education in supporting student employability, Shumilova and Cai (2015) mention a lack of career guidance within higher education. Finally, the selected field of study also affects job opportunities (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021b). Technical skills acquired through STEM programmes contribute to the

knowledge economy (European Commission, 2016a). As such, students enrolled in related programmes will arguably have better job prospects. Mathies and Karhunen (2021b) therefore suggest that higher education institutions should concentrate on helping students prepare to enter the labour market. Enhancing graduate employability would provide a much-needed boost to retention rates and thereby make attraction efforts more worthwhile.

The University of Oulu

Having moved from the global and generic to the national level, the final section of this contextual overview addresses the institutional level. This section is based on an analysis of university internationalisation policy by Haapakoski and Pashby (2017) and the *Annual Report 2021* of the University of Oulu (University of Oulu, 2021). A synthesis of both documents indicates that the internationalisation strategies of the University of Oulu altogether appear to follow the global trend.

The *Annual Report 2021* shows an increase in university ranking, total funding, number of publications, and staff (University of Oulu, 2021). The University of Oulu also expresses multiple strategies to increase the share of international students and foster student mobility. One such strategy targets the further development of high-quality degree programmes with connections to working life. Such efforts demonstrate the role of institutional reputation as a factor of student attraction (Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017). In a similar spirit, plans to establish a new city campus aim to "create campus environments that support the attractiveness of the university and the city of Oulu as a university city, since competition for students and staff is tightening as the size of these age groups decreases" (University of Oulu, 2021, p. 7). In the report, the University of Oulu (2021) also states that the graduation rate of students acts as the primary measure of academic performance. This suggests that with funding being output-based (Laitinen, 2015), the University of Oulu would benefit from a higher number of incoming international students. Looking upon globalisation and multiculturalism favourably, Haapakoski and Pashby (2017) note that the University of Oulu is looking to expand its engagement with student exchange within and outside Europe. Its main efforts centre around the dual-degree programme with the Nanjing Institute of Technology (NJIT) in China and the European University of Post-Industrial Cities (UNIC), a cooperative of eight European universities striving for improved student mobility and educational cooperation (University of Oulu, 2021). Regarding employability, the University of Oulu appears to acknowledge the value of adequately preparing students for working life. In September 2021, the first university

Career Centre in Finland was established in order to boost student employability and maintain a connection to the world of work (University of Oulu, 2021).

In recognising the competitive nature of international student mobility and striving for excellence in education, research and innovation, the University of Oulu's policy reflects the general attitude towards internationalisation. Internationalisation policy in Finland abides by European norms which are predominantly outlined in the Bologna Process. With its main emphasis on economic motives, European policy is in tune with the requirements of the global knowledge economy. Within this framework, graduate employability is considered a key factor in ensuring societal and economic sustainability and stability in the future. As prescribed by its new role, compounded by internationalisation initiatives, higher education institutions must now support international students' transition to working life and integration into society. Instead of depending on the government for leadership, higher education institutions are encouraged to develop their own, contextually relevant, approach to internationalisation (Laitinen, 2015). This means that, rather than following a standardised approach, measures to support student employability must be attuned to local circumstances and target students in a way that addresses their needs.

3   Approaches to employability and employability development

This chapter deals with employability on a more conceptual level. It builds on the content of the preceding chapters which describe the context in which employability emerged and provide the motivation for the need to study employability in a context-related frame with the inclusion of student voices. The employability agenda of higher education traces its origins to the rise of the knowledge economy. Prompted by new requirements on the nature of work, governments in developed countries saw higher education as having an increasingly important role in supporting national economic competitiveness and economic growth. Subsequently, national and international policy directives, such as the Bologna Process in Europe, incentivised higher education institutions to pay heed to the needs of the labour market. The new responsibility of higher education in producing employable graduates was also spurred by the massification of higher education (Boden & Nedeva, 2010).

One of the consequences of greater access to tertiary education for students is the perception of increased competition in the labour market due to an oversupply of qualified workers. Consequently, a degree is considered a mere formality as students expect to gain additional value through their studies with which to distinguish themselves on the job market. The calls for higher education to align more with working life requirements are matched by appeals for higher education institutions to engage more actively in the creation of an employability development framework with supporting services. The following section continues the discussion on employability from an academic and conceptual point of view before moving to an outline of models of employability development proposed by research. The final entry discusses employability development opportunities and the role of career centres in helping students transition to working life.

3.1   Defining employability

Employability is a multifaceted concept. It is interpreted in different ways by its stakeholders, which makes pinpointing a mutually acceptable definition difficult (Cranmer, 2006; Tymon, 2013). Definitions of employability are also linked to its measurement as any measure of employability outcome depends on how employability is defined (Harvey, 2001). The result is an array of concurrent perspectives, some of which compete with one another. Within this employability debate, employers perceive employability in terms of possessing soft skills and desirable personal qualities (Cox & King, 2006; Succi & Canovi, 2020; Tomlinson, 2008). In

a similar vein, students feel the need to acquire additional skills to supplement their academic qualifications to be considered employable (Pitan, 2016b; Tomlinson, 2008). For higher education institutions, employability can provide more funding by positively affecting rankings, whereas governments favour employment over employability (Tymon, 2013). As implied in some of the stakeholders' interpretations, the conceptual point of departure of employability is closely associated with skills.

Holmes (2013) translates the different views on employability into three perspectives. One way of conceptualising employability is as a possession. From this perspective, employability becomes a tool or skill that is applied to attain employment. The positioning perspective frames employability as an institutional accomplishment and indicator of quality displayed by graduates through their ability to be more socially mobile. Finally, the processual perspective casts employability as an identity that is negotiated by employers and the graduate as a prospective employee. In this case, employability can be seen as the outcome of a relationship whereby graduates seek to prove their worth and employers who through the act of recruitment, confirm applicants' employability. Clarke (2018, p. 1925) relays these three perspectives respectively in terms of: (a) human capital; (b) social capital; and (c) career self-management.

Compounding the difficulty of reaching a consensus on the meaning of employability is the fact that employability is also subject to a range of external effects, some of which cannot be controlled. Shumilova and Cai (2015) group the factors that affect international student employability into four categories: (a) factors related to higher education; (b) individual factors; (c) employers' perceptions of international graduates; and (d) contextual factors. Among the latter, they identify the extent to which the labour market is international, integrated attraction and retention strategies, and the presence of organisations or individuals connecting international talent with the labour market (Shumilova & Cai, 2015, p. 28). These factors are not mutually exclusive but they do not necessarily compete with each other. Instead, they indicate that a shared understanding of employability can be reached by including the understanding of all stakeholders.

The absence of a standard for conceptualisation has not prevented broad definitions of employability from being formulated. Definitions within the literature tend to emphasise employability as a procedural and continuous engagement (Tymon, 2013). A selection of such definitions is listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Definitions of employability in literature

Source	Definition
Clarke, 2018	"the human capital, social capital, and individual behaviours and attributes that underpin an individual's perceived employability, in a labour market context, and that, in combination, influence employment outcomes" (p. 1931)
Shumilova & Cai, 2015	"a graduate's ability to gain and retain satisfying/decent work, conditioned by employers' beliefs and interaction of individual (e.g. skills, socio-cultural background), institutional (educational background) and contextual factors (e.g. labour market situation)" (p. 26)
Pitan, 2016a	"the ability of graduates to possess and exhibit the knowledge, skills, attributes and attitudes needed to attain and maintain jobs in which they can be successful and fulfilled" (p. 3)
Knight & Yorke, 2002	"the possession of the understandings, skills and personal attributes necessary to perform adequately in a graduate-level job" (p. 261)

Though research that explores the student perspective is limited, some studies have found that students generally perceive employability as a possession (Lees et al., 2015; Tymon, 2013). The definitions in the literature portray employability as something that you do throughout your career. Yet, in practice, employability is most often understood as the capacity to be employed (Harvey, 2001). Indeed, in inquiring about students' perspectives, Tymon (2013) concluded that students have a more limited understanding compared to the literature and that they regard employability as "a short-term means to an end" (p. 852). Additionally, advocating a more holistic approach to employability development, Lees et al. (2015) see "a need to reorient student perspectives on employability to encompass a conception which encourages self-reflection and self-development rather than simply viewing the concept as an object they possess upon graduation" (p. 257). As such, one of the issues with defining employability revolves around the dichotomy between employability as "job acquisition" versus "being equipped for a job" (Harvey, 2001, p. 98). Similarly, in their findings, Lees et al. (2015) discern

between "employability as a noun" and "employability as a verb" (p. 255). While employment and employability are inextricably linked, both terms are clearly distinguished in the literature.

In reality, the discourse of employability differs from scholarly assessments. Within higher education contexts, employability is considered an institutional achievement represented by the number of graduates becoming employed within a short period after completing their studies (Clarke, 2018; Harvey, 2001). Underpinning this viewpoint is the idea, referred to as the "magic bullet model of employability", that getting employed proves that graduates are employable and that they acquired employability through their education institution (Harvey, 2001; Harvey et al., 2002). In other words, graduates are able to land jobs because they possess skills required by employers that they have gained through their education. This explains why employment rates act as an indicator of institutional quality. The reason why higher education institutions opt for measuring graduate employability as employment rates is because it is easier than taking into account the effects of their own employability development opportunities, the gatekeeping role of employers, and student choice (Harvey, 2001). The institutional perspective also reinforces the appeal of skills training as part of employability development.

By being more receptive to labour market needs, employability development in higher education has become heavily centred around skills acquisition (Tomlinson, 2017). While subject-specific qualifications remain a base requirement, the general approach to employability development focuses on transferable skills (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Within the literature, the term *transferable skills* is used interchangeably with *generic skills* (Bridgstock, 2009; Clarke, 2018) and *soft skills* (Tomlinson, 2008; Tymon, 2013). Overall, these terms are used to refer to what is understood as *employability skills*. However, employability is a complicated concept which cannot be reduced to merely possessing certain skills (Bridgstock, 2009; Holmes, 2013; Jackson & Wilton, 2016). A purely skill-based approach to employability enhancement in itself is also problematic. Succi and Canovi (2020, p. 1837) point out that "employers, higher education providers, and young people do not understand each other" despite a shared interest in skills development. (Griffiths et al., 2018) argue that there is no agreement on what employability skills truly are. Adding to the complexity, the distinction between generic skills and subject-specific skills is not always clear. What is considered generic differs according to the field of work and context (Clarke, 2018). This means that generic skills are likely to change over time, instilling them with the trait of adaptability (Curtis & McKenzie, 2001). Finally, various studies have questioned the efficacy of formal skills training as part of educational curricula (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Cranmer, 2006; Succi & Canovi, 2020;

Tomlinson, 2017). The main argument put forth is that skills acquired in educational settings do not transfer well into working life due to contextual differences (Tomlinson, 2017). In light of these challenges, appeals from the academic corner call for a renewed interpretation of employability which includes student perceptions and a reconfiguration of skills education within a more comprehensive approach to employability development. This study aims to provide a contextually relevant interpretation of student employability based on the input of international students enrolled at the University of Oulu.

## 3.2   Towards a working model of employability

Reconfiguring employability development in higher education requires a reform of the institutional outcome approach. Using graduate work destinations as a benchmark for institutional success does not provide safeguards for future employment, which means it is an inadequate indicator of employability on its own. Employability is an individual "process of learning" as it are the students, not the university, that get employed (Harvey et al., 2002, p. 16). Though both subject-related and generic knowledge, and skills transmission remain fundamental elements of employability development within formal education, broader conceptions of employability increasingly emphasise the personal dimension (Pool & Sewell, 2007). Underpinning the personal dimension and informing ways in which to engage in employability development are the notions of student identity and self-perceived employability (Griffiths et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 2017). Self-perceived employability can be understood as an individual's appraisal of their chances in the labour market based on the "interaction between personal factors and structural factors" (Clarke, 2018, p. 1932). Students can improve their self-perception by increasing their self-awareness and knowledge of the world of work via a process of self-management (Jackson & Wilton, 2016). As such, multiple models proposing comprehensive employability frameworks point to reflection as the key method for students to engage with their employability (Bridgstock, 2009; Pitan, 2016b; Pool & Sewell, 2007). Bridgstock (2009, p. 35) summarises the main activities involved in students' preparation for joining the workforce as follows: (a) clarification of personal aims and abilities; (b) understanding the requirements of the labour market; and (c) the ability to actively engage in the career building process. An active engagement with employability on the part of the students thus signifies a reflective process whereby they consider personal goals, interests and qualities in conjunction with an awareness of labour market needs and opportunities for the development of a career plan.

Tomlinson (2017) proposes a model for graduate employability with a focus on the students, in a move away from the dominant skills discourse. Working models should be easy to understand and provide clear information on the different components of an employability framework (Pool & Sewell, 2007). Following (Tomlinson, 2017), graduate employability is understood as the acquisition and application of various forms of capital. The model comprises five "interactive forms of capital which are acquired through graduates' lived experiences" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 340). Thus, students' employability development is not confined to formal educational contexts but encompasses encounters with the broader environment. This is predicated on the idea that employability skills, i.e. transferable skills, alone do not necessarily enhance employability. Furthermore, it is also important to note that improved employability does not automatically ensure employment (Sumanasiri et al., 2015). It is therefore necessary to adopt a broader stance when dealing with graduate employability. As such, Tomlinson's model of graduate capital does not dismiss the value of skills but provides them a place within a wider framework. The five forms of capital within the model are: (a) human capital; (b) social capital; (c) cultural capital; (d) identity capital; and (e) psychological capital. Each form of capital is linked to a set of resources that enable students to engage in career planning and navigating the labour market. Tomlinson (2017) notes that the successful deployment of *human capital* is, to some extent, reliant on graduates' ability to communicate the relevance of their skill set to employers, which requires knowledge of labour market trends and the ability to capitalise on opportunities. Possessing *social capital* is vital for discovering opportunities. Opportunities can be created through formal (work experience) or informal (networking) interactions with employers. Involving a strong social component, *cultural capital* refers to the body of "culturally valued knowledge, dispositions and behaviours that are aligned to the workplaces that graduates seek to enter" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 343). It allows graduates to fit in their working and living environment and can be enhanced via interactions with fellow students, university staff, and employers or through focused "recruitment training" which includes for example practising job interviews. *Identity capital* translates into how students perceive themselves, the value they bestow on their employability, and how they behave in career planning. For students, the challenge lies in translating one's personal identity into a professional profile that enables them to articulate their value in work settings. In job applications, the CV becomes functions as a prime representation of the relationship between an applicant's sense of personal self and professional self. Finally, *psychological capital* refers to the ability to overcome challenges. Dealing with unforeseen circumstances requires a mindset of resilience and adaptability (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 347). Due to the interconnectivity

of these forms of capital, and the highly personal nature of identity and psychological capital, the task for career counsellors lies in developing practical methods that are applicable within an institutional setting. The various forms of capital should not be treated in isolation from each other. Since each is shaped by students' lived experiences, which prominently take place on campus, it is important that students' higher education experience cultivates their ability to develop capital. Tomlinson (2017, p. 349) foresees that such processes occur in "multi-layered, interacting component communities" that exist within higher education institutions as well as those created in cooperation with external actors.

Figure 1

Tomlinson's graduate capital model
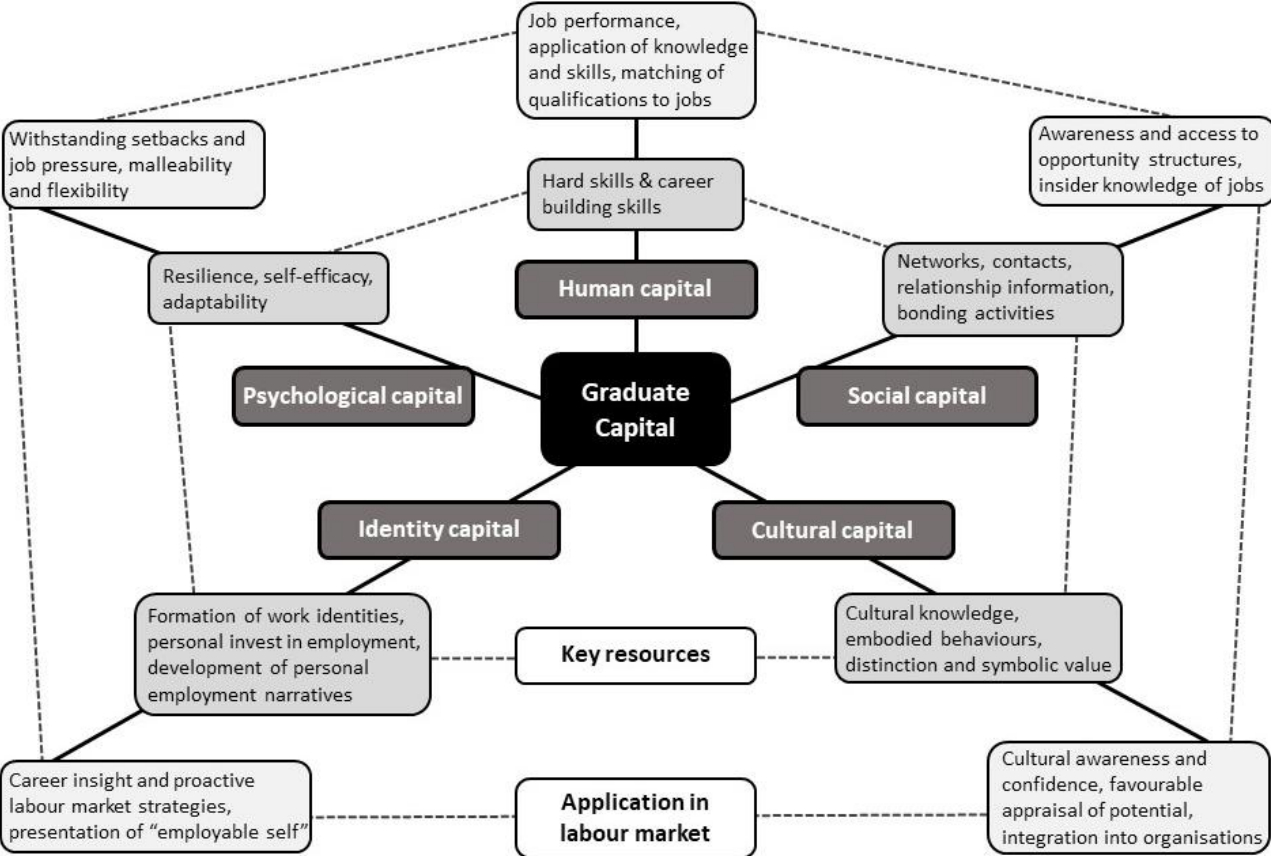
Adapted from "Forms of graduate capital and their relationship to graduate employability," by M. Tomlinson, 2017, *Education and Training*, *59*(4), p. 340.

A similar call for the broadening of the scope of the skills approach is presented by Bridgstock (2009). Bridgstock (2009) argues that the emphasis on generic skills, driven by investments in human capital to meet the needs of the knowledge economy, is inadequate for employability development and that students need career management skills. Also, within higher education, the significance of individual characteristics in employability development is often overlooked (Clarke, 2018). Career management skills are higher order skills which Bridgstock (2009, p. 34) describes as "'meta" work skills – the abilities required to continuously recognise and capitalise on employment and training related opportunities and integrate these with other aspects of the individual's life." Career management is a component of employability and is defined as the "intentional management of work, learning and other aspects of life through reflective, evaluative and decision-making processes" (Bridgstock, 2009, p.35). Career management skills are the sum of self-management skills and career-building skills. Career management skills are complemented by generic and discipline-specific skills, as well as underpinning personal traits, to form the totality of employability skills. Thus, career management is the application of all the skills at a student's disposal in the formulation of career goals and planning.

Student engagement with the various elements of career management will differ from person to person and according to field of study (Bridgstock, 2009). Adopting an approach that makes sense within an institutional context, therefore, requires a shared understanding of stakeholder needs and ways to operationalise strategies aimed at enhancing students' employability, such as including career management skills as part of courses. Students who are more adept at managing their careers are also better equipped to navigate a competitive labour market, which ultimately has a positive impact on economic growth. In relation to the model of graduate capital proposed by Tomlinson (2017), the various forms of capital function as the building blocks that students can use to manage their careers more effectively. For higher education institutions, a career management framework can act as a conduit through which the higher education communities as a whole can support the development of graduate capital.

3.3 Transitioning to the world of work

As mentioned earlier, the outcome approach to graduate employability has predominantly been measured in post-graduation employment rates. This measure is used as an "employability performance indicator" for the higher education institutions' ability to produce employable

graduates (Harvey, 2001). Following calls for a shift away from this outcome approach, characterised by the skills discourse, means new forms of measurement must be introduced. The broader conceptualisation and operationalisation of employability development heralded by such calls incorporate a personal personal-individual dimension which necessarily implies more extensive measurements of employability. More comprehensive measurements of graduate employability can be obtained through an assessment of an institution's employability development opportunities and how students engage with them (Pitan, 2016b). In an empirical study on student engagement with employability development opportunities at Nigerian universities, Pitan (2016b) identifies four opportunities, also framed as 'structures' with a positive effect on graduate employability: (a) real-world activities: generally understood as having an increased connection with the world of work, relying on strong ties between the university and employers; (b) reflection and evaluation: this allows students to assimilate their learning experiences and plan their next step; (c) career education: supported by career centres and the integration of career education into courses; (d) work experience: work experience, such as internships, had a significantly lesser impact on employability than the top three structures. Pitan (2016b) notes that all employability development opportunities complement each other, with career education being connected to all other structures. Consequently, the importance of career education gives rise to the need for "institutionalised functional careers service units" that help students with career management (Pitan, 2016b, p. 299). Students themselves should also recognise the importance of actively engaging with employability development.

Career services have a longstanding tradition and their existence is no longer debated, yet it is worthwhile to pause at why they are beneficial. Finding work after graduation is an important topic for students (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016) and higher education institutions are urged to provide more resources to support the development of graduate employability (Griffiths et al., 2018). Lehker and Furlong (2006) argue that career guidance for students helps them prepare for the realities of the labour market which do not always match their own perceptions. Fouad et al. (2006) also express the need for career centres and that students must be made aware of their existence, while the career centres themselves should provide information about their services and the process of career planning. The efficacy of employability education in classroom settings, particularly skills transmission, is also brought into question, which encourages higher education institutions to develop alternative avenues (Bridgstock, 2009; Tomlinson, 2017; Tymon, 2013). Furthermore, balancing employability education with the

teaching of subject-specific skills within a "crowded tertiary curriculum" will likely have an adverse effect on both strands (Bridgstock, 2009, p. 39). It is therefore vital that career centres encourage students to start planning their careers early since they often only do so late in their studies (Bridgstock, 2009; Pitan, 2016b). With career development involving individual traits, it is therefore up to career counsellors to inform students about "the importance of career self-management and personal responsibility for maintaining and enhancing employability" (Clarke, 2018, p. 1933). The recognition of the personal-individual dimension (in reference to identity capital and psychological capital) in career management also means that the role of career centres extends beyond formal forms of guidance to more informal encounters conducive to the wider university community and culture.

Aside from preparing students for working life, career centres play a crucial structural role within the organisation of higher education institutions. Consequently, career centres also have to respond to paradigmatic shifts caused by changes in the economy. The global financial crisis of 2008 led higher education institutions to redesign their approach to employability development in the wake of increased expectations from stakeholders (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Students will seek out services that are specifically designed to meet their needs (Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Lehker & Furlong, 2006). It follows that a uniform programme for student employability will not suffice and that higher education institutions should opt for customised models for career development that are in tune with the times. Dey and Cruzvergara (2014) argue that career centres can support students best when they adopt a personal and informal approach, noticing that students will look for support from people they trust. The prevalence of employability also requires higher education to maintain close ties with employers and authorities. As such, the development of an effective model for employability development necessitates the inclusion and cooperation of all stakeholders in a "career ecosystem" (Cruzvergara et al., 2018). A career ecosystem, as both concept and action, relies on the mobilisation of "the large and complex network that exists on a college campus in order to connect key stakeholders" (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014, p. 11). Career centres occupy a strategic position within the ecosystem since they are situated at a crossroads where various actors meet (Cruzvergara et al., 2018). It is within this context that the role of career centres has shifted from being transactional to one of building relationships and communities (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). These considerations have implications for higher education management in terms of resource allocation and organisation of the design of a holistic employability development plan. Ensuring students' successful transition to the world of work, then, is a

matter of providing adequate employability development opportunities which are carried by a synchronised university community and connected to a broader ecosystem, supported by a common understanding about the purpose and meaning of employability. The inquiry on students' perceptions and expectations that drives the second research question of this thesis can shed light on how various resources provided by the University of Oulu, such as the new Career Centre, can be deployed with the aim of preparing students for working life.

4   Methodology

The previous chapters established that the concept of employability emerged as part of the restructuring of work within the framework of the knowledge economy and that definitions of employability are relative to stakeholder interests. Considering this contextual background, employability resides within the realm of discourse (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). The need for a more comprehensive conceptualisation of employability along with the call for student perspectives to complement more established employer-driven narratives supports the idea of employability as a discourse by positioning students as actors within the discursive process of meaning-making. Situating employability as a discourse enables it to become the object of phenomenographic inquiry since "discourse is a domain of language-use and therefore a domain of lived experience" and lived experiences are exactly what phenomenographers are after (Olssen et al., 2004, p. 65). Qualitative research can lead to improved insights into a particular topic which, in turn, allows it to be addressed more effectively (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018). In the case of enhancing student employability, a better understanding of employability, complemented by student perspectives, can support the creation of a comprehensive employability development framework.

4.1   Foundations of phenomenography

The choice of phenomenography as this study's main research approach is further justified by considering its origins and main principles. Phenomenography was developed during the 1970s by a research group at the University of Gothenburg in an effort to better understand thinking and learning within higher education settings (Richardson, 1999; Svensson, 1997). Marton (1981) first used the term 'phenomenography' in reference to a research approach that aims to discover the ways in which people perceive and experience reality. As such, phenomenography adopts a "second-order perspective" (Marton, 1981, p. 178). Whereas a first-order perspective attempts to make statements about reality, a second-order perspective is concerned with how reality is perceived. Phenomenography appears to be a fitting methodological choice since this study also concentrates on higher education as a context and aims to understand students' thinking about employability. Furthermore, phenomenography is useful for producing insights which support the development of better career counselling practices (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018).

Marton (1986) defines phenomenography as "a research method for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them" (p. 31). This definition highlights a key principle of phenomenography. Phenomenography supposes that the individual stands in relation to reality (Marton, 1981). This relationality implies an exchange of sorts: each person exists in the world as it is and, in turn, each person develops a personal perspective on the world itself and his or her place in it. In other words, the (subjective) experience cannot be removed from the (objective) reality it is part of. This principle of relationality describes the non-dualistic ontological basis of phenomenography. Marton and Booth (1998) state the following:

> There is only one world, a real existing world that is experienced and understood in different ways by human beings; it is both objective and subjective at the same time. An experience is now a relationship between object and subject that encompasses them both. The experience is as much a part of the object as it is of the subject. (p. 537)

Connected to this ontology is the fundamental epistemological assumption that knowledge about people's conceptions cannot be acquired independently from "context and content" (Marton, 1981, p. 194). Phenomenography is, therefore, an empirical research method (Svensson, 1997). Since the aim of phenomenography is to understand people's conceptions of lived reality, statements about those conceptions must follow the accounts given by individuals.

The most popular form of acquiring these accounts from research participants is through interviews (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018; Marton, 1986; Säljö, 1997). Conversely, due to the non-dualistic nature of conceptions of reality, interpretations of those conceptions cannot follow a predetermined structure or categorisation (Richardson, 1999). This would imply the existence of an externally objective reality counter to the non-dualistic ontology. The outcome space of phenomenographic research, therefore, is based on the knowledge emergent from individual accounts represented in the research data.

Ultimately, phenomenography aims to provide a categorised overview of how a phenomenon is conceived. This structural overview consists of "categories of description" which represent the different ways in which reality is conceived (Marton, 1981, 1986). They form "the basic unit of description in phenomenographic research" (Marton & Pong, 2005, p. 336). It is the task of the researcher to ensure that, taken together, all categories reflect the entirety of the ways in which a phenomenon is conceived (Åkerlind, 2005). This means that the categories are formed based on their unique content and that the outcome space reflects the variation between each

category (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018). For the categories of description to be able to provide a holistic picture of an experienced phenomenon, they need to be formulated in general terms. Working our way backwards, this degree of generalisation, or abstraction, is achieved by decontextualising information from so-called "pools of meaning" (Marton, 1986). Contrary to categories, these pools of meaning are contextually tied to the interviews they originate from. Pools of meaning are created by merging excerpts from across the whole range of interviews, referred to by Marton (1986) as "utterances", and grouping them based on a shared meaning. Essentially, the categories of description are a grouping of various pools of meaning. Those pools of meaning are a collection of utterances (or codes) that have been extracted from the entire set of data. Being decontextualised, the categories of description exist at a conceptual level and can be used as a tool for the interpretation of different contexts (Marton, 1986). Marton's definition makes reference to people's experiences and understandings of reality, highlighting another major characteristic of phenomenographic research. If we are looking for ways in which people perceive and experience the world around them, it naturally follows that we include the perspectives of multiple individuals. Thus, the outcome space becomes a collection of categories of description that represent the variety of ways in which multiple individuals collectively make sense of the world. The outcome space can then be considered as a form of "collective intellect" and a "superindividual system of forms of thought" (Marton, 1981, p. 198). It is important to note that the outcome space is not absolute in the sense that not every individual necessarily embodies every single conception of reality presented therein. Alternatively, it also does not mean that a person cannot agree with a certain aspect of the outcome space if that person has not voiced any sentiment on that topic.

4.1.1   Phenomenography and discourse

This section addresses epistemological considerations stemming from critiques of the phenomenographic approach during its years of formation. The aim is to solidify the validity of research findings by framing the accounts received through data collection, i.e. interviews, as discursive practices. To illustrate this, I draw on the ideas of Richardson (1999) and Säljö (1997).

Following the accounts of previous research, Richardson (1999) states that qualitative research, in its effort to gain scientific recognition, encountered a dilemma. This "dilemma of qualitative research", as described by Hammersley (1989), points to a dichotomy between the dominance

of the positivistic notion of an existing objective reality and the internally constructed interpretation of a social world. Put simply, the inherent subjectivity of personal existence was at odds with the prevailing objectivistic view of reality as an objective truth. It is precisely this contrast that Marton's nondualist ontology attempts to solve. Additionally, Richardson (1999) suggests a constructionist view where conceptions of reality are constructed based on interpretations of the real world. Thus, subjective experiences become linked to the reality from which they are created through social interaction, thereby establishing the relationality Marton advocated. Richardson (1999) states that "conceptions of reality are not psychological entities somehow residing in the minds of individuals. Rather, they represent discursive practices that are used as resources in particular communicative encounters" (p. 72). This basis of phenomenography in constructionism, places discourse as the object of study in phenomenographic research.

In his arguments for (social) constructionism, Richardson (1999) references earlier works of Roger Säljö, a colleague of Marton's and contributor to the development of phenomenography. Säljö (1997) noted that participants in phenomenographic research were not, in fact, sharing their experiences. Instead, what they provided was an account of their experience. This account, or narrative, is communicated to the researcher through language. As such, language, or "talk" takes priority over the experience (Säljö, 1997). It is only through the use and interpretation of language that an understanding of an experience can be attained. Säljö (1997), therefore, argues that "phenomenographers observe, collect and analyse discourse" whereby language is a "conduit metaphor of communication" (p. 179). In accordance with constructionism and the non-dualistic ontological foundation of phenomenography, the rationale behind this statement is that the act of sharing an experience is an internalised interpretation of existing accounts (i.e. discourses) that have been told in the past. By relating experience to discourse the categories of description that form the outcome space of phenomenographic research do not directly represent experiences or conceptions. Rather, they are "(at best) an account of that experience and/or relation" (Säljö, 1997, p. 185). This apparent reduction does not discredit phenomenographic outcomes, however. On the contrary, it is by framing students' accounts of their perceptions of employability as a discursive practice that their conceptions gain value. Employability as a discourse provides the needed space to participate in discourse and meaning-making. In reference to the ontological and epistemological principles stated above, employability is the phenomenon that exists as part of a discursive reality. It sets the conditions

of the world of work and defines the relationship future graduates, and jobseekers in general, have with employers and the labour market as a whole.

4.1.2   The value of thematic analysis

Although phenomenography defines the main methodological approach, this study borrows elements from thematic analysis in an effort to enhance research validity and reliability. One way to enhance validity is to ensure that the methodology matches the research purpose, i.e. whether the applied methods "are actually measuring what they are intended to measure" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 599). This was established throughout the previous sections. A way to improve reliability is to render the research process more transparent by describing the analytic steps in detail (Åkerlind, 2005). The contribution of thematic analysis, then, is its step-by-step depiction of the analysis process.

The reasons for including thematic analysis as a complement to phenomenography all relate to an apparent ambiguity surrounding the methodological approach to (phenomenographic) data analysis and the research outcomes. Despite this common trait, the variation between reasons is nuanced. First, some scholars point to a "lack of awareness" and "confusion" concerning the methodological approach of phenomenography among researchers (Åkerlind, 2005, p. 322). Indeed, phenomenography does not provide concrete procedures for carrying out phenomenographic research (Marton, 1986). Though Marton (1986) recognises that there are multiple viable data collection methods, he does not divulge practical guidelines on how to visualise the analysis of acquired data. However, Marton (1986) does state that analysing data takes place in two stages, which will later be discussed in connection to the research data of this thesis. The third reason for accommodating thematic analysis originates from dissatisfaction among qualitative researchers with how analytic processes and research findings were presented, notably during the period when qualitative research was gaining recognition (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) note how research findings are said to "emerge" or be "discovered" as if they existed within the data (p. 80). This perception shares the idea that conceptions of reality do not merely wait to be plucked from their contexts, but instead are "generated" by the researcher through their own subjective interpretation (Richardson, 1999, p. 72). This idea, of course, refers to Marton's non-dualistic ontology and reaffirms phenomenography's place in the constructionist tradition.

Thematic analysis can be defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The method is compatible with constructionism as it "is not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework, and therefore it can be used within different theoretical frameworks" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Considering this paradigmatic compatibility and degree of flexibility, it is reasonable to assume the role of thematic analysis is beneficial. As a complement to phenomenographic analysis, the phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) guide, rather than define the process of analysis. They fit *within* the broader phenomenographic framework and serve to highlight the research process of this thesis which will be discussed in the following section.

4.2 The research process – the phenomenography of employability

4.2.1 Data collection

Interviews were selected as the method of data collection for this study. As such, preparation for the collection of data started with drafting the interview questions. The questions were inspired by previous research by Tymon (2013) on higher education students' perspectives on employability. Tymon (2013, pp. 849–850) used the following line of questions:

1. What is your understanding of the term employability?

2. What, if any, are the core/transferable skills that might make up employability?

3. Either: (a) For first-year students: To what extent do you expect the university to support the development of your employability, and how? (b) For all other groups: How much does the university support the development of your employability, and how?

4. To what extent do you think employability matters?

This list was expanded to seek out more contextual and specific information on students' conceptions of employability in relation to the University of Oulu and their stay in Finland. Following a pilot study with an alumnus to test their viability, the interview questions were amended and finalised. All questions are open-ended and can be consulted in Appendix 1 of this thesis. The interview format was semi-structured. In combination with the open-ended questions, this provides interviewees with room to express themselves, while allowing the researcher to follow up with more in-depth questions (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018; Queirós et

al., 2017). All interviews were conducted in English and participants had the option to either meet in person or have the interview online. Participants were asked to sign a consent form stating their rights as research participants in accordance with EU General Data Protection Regulation and Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK guidelines. The consent form is added as Appendix 2 of this thesis. All interviews were recorded (audio only) and all information concerning the research participants was treated anonymously.

Because this research aims to provide a university-wide impression of employability, it was imperative to acquire a representative sample. The sample had to therefore be heterogeneous in the sense that it had to include students from as many different faculties as possible. For this reason, participants were sampled through a combination of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. In practice, my initial set of participants consisted of students whom I knew by name and contacted personally via email. The main criterion for selection was their field of study since the objective was to acquire participants from as many faculties as possible. A second phase of recruitment occurred as some of the initial participants suggested some of their friends might be interested in participating in my research. I agreed to let the initial participants share my contact details with their friends, after which I was contacted by the new batch of participants.

Purposeful sampling is used in "information-rich cases" that require an in-depth study of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002, p. 230). The discursive nature of employability makes it an intricate subject, the study of which will likely produce a substantial amount of information. Studying a relatively small sample in-depth would therefore yield better results. With the aim being the inclusion of a diverse range of research participants, the particular type of purposeful sampling used was *maximum variation sampling*. This sampling method helps to offset the potential shortcomings of a small sample size since any commonality emerging from a heterogenous group is "of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon" (Patton, 2002, p. 235). With a focus on discovering a shared conception, purposeful sampling is well-placed within phenomenographic research. In practical terms, participants were selected based on their known profiles. To increase participant variety, that is, to reach potential participants who possessed different profiles, snowball sampling was used. The main selection criterion for a variety of participants was the field of study, represented by their faculty. Participants were further differentiated according to work experience and country of origin (EU or non-EU). In total, 15 international students participated

in the research. The group consisted of both first-year and second-year master's students. Eight of them have work experience. The vast majority of participants (12) come from a non-European country. The table below lists the number of participants according to faculty.

Table 2

Number of research participants per faculty

Faculty	Number of participants
Faculty of Biochemistry and Molecular Medicine	1
Faculty of Education	4
Faculty of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering	4
Faculty of Science	1
Faculty of Technology	4
Oulu Business School	1
Total	15

Large amounts of data can be difficult to manage. To ensure the feasibility of the analysis of interview transcripts the number of participants had to be considered beforehand. Bowden (2005) suggests the number of interviewees required to provide adequate information range from 20 to 30, while Trigwell (2006) states this number could lie between 10 and 30. However, it becomes challenging to keep track of every bit of information if the number of interview transcripts exceeds 20 (Åkerlind, 2005). In view of these recommendations, the target was set for acquiring a minimum of 15 research participants, which was met. The manageability of data was not the only steering factor in determining an appropriate amount of interview participants, however. According to the principle of saturation in qualitative research, the gathering of data should continue until nothing new is discovered (Bowen, 2008). As such, the number of research participants suggested by previous research, as mentioned above, indicate points at which saturation may be reached. Yet, despite the general acceptance of saturation as a measure of quality, saturation cannot be comprehensively represented by a number (Saunders et al.,

2018). Instead, saturation is tied to the scope of a particular study. How saturation was attained should therefore be explained by making reference to the research (Bowen, 2008; Saunders et al., 2018). As stated earlier, participant selection acts as one indicator of saturation. A second measure of saturation in this study is the number of references to a category and the number of participants that responded to that theme.

4.2.2   Data analysis

This section serves to clarify the analysis process in more detail. While it is true that the findings reside within the data, they must be extracted by the researcher. In this sense, phenomenography, and qualitative research overall, involves a degree of subjectivity on the part of the researcher in that research outcomes are the result of interpretation (Åkerlind, 2005; Svensson, 1997). To ensure that results reflect the data as much as possible rather than them being fabrications of the researchers, Marton (1986, p. 41) encourages researchers to "'bracket' (hold in check) their preconceived notions and depict their immediate experience of the studied phenomenon through a reflective turn, bending consciousness back upon itself". Marton follows Edmund Husserl's logic that, in order to study a phenomenon, one must observe it through a lens of neutrality by distancing oneself from any preconceptions (Richardson, 1999). Much like films rely on the audience's suspension of disbelief to render the story more credible and the experience ultimately more enjoyable, bracketing any knowledge or outlook that may interfere with the interpretation of accounts shared by research participants helps in providing a more truthful depiction of a phenomenon as experienced by others.

In building a case for the applicability of thematic analysis as a complementary method of analysis in the sections above, it was mentioned that Marton roughly divided the process of data analysis into two phases. In simple terms, the first phase leads to forming pools of meaning. The second phase leads to creating categories of description. The overall structure of the analysis is based on a thematic analysis framework, developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which consists of progressive steps highlighting the thought processes that informed the interpretive decisions made in this thesis. The same steps are described below, though some have been renamed to more accurately represent the context of this thesis.

Step 1: Exploring the data

The purpose of the exploration stage is to become familiar with the data in order to be able to orient oneself within the data during later stages of analysis. Transcribing the interviews allowed for an initial exploration of the data. I transcribed the interviews via the transcript generator available in Microsoft Word. I then corrected any errors in the transcripts by listening to the interview recordings. After all the transcripts were revised, I read each of them again. It is important to explore the data with an open mind to be more receptive to the variety of information (Åkerlind, 2005). It is therefore recommended to read the transcripts multiple times before coding (Bowden, 2005; Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this initial stage, patterns and topics of interest already began to appear. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest taking notes which will act as a reference point when analysing certain passages in more detail. I started to make some assumptions and connections which later on would be reconfigured as my understanding of the relationship between the selected passages deepened. This back-and-forth process of reinterpreting and reorganising data is indicative of the entire analysis process. Selected passages were compared, organised, and subsequently reorganised following new insights. As such, the process was not linear.

Step 2: Generating codes

A code describes a segment of data that has been identified and selected because it "appears interesting to the analyst" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). What is deemed interesting or relevant is relative to the research questions and aims. Thus, coding and the development of pools of meaning and categories of description are connected to the research questions. In my analysis, I do not depart from a theoretical standpoint. My process of reasoning is inductive, which means I allow the data to speak for itself and do not select information with the intent to test a theory. In support of the identification of interesting passages, I followed a set of keywords such as *employability*, *career*, *skills*, *university*, *students*, *help*, and *support*, which acted as a type of "criteria of relevance" (Marton, 1986, p. 42). The role of these keywords was to help me recognise potentially valuable passages more easily and mark them for further analysis.

The data was coded and organised into categories of description using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. When a relevant passage, referred to as "utterances" by Marton (1986), was selected a code was assigned to it. The code assigned to a selected utterance, i.e. the name given to the code, often depends on the researcher's positionality (Saldaña, 2021). In reference to the

inherent degree of interpretation in coding, this means that naming codes is dependent on the relation between the researcher and the research itself. Data was coded line by line, though this does not mean that a code cannot refer to multiple sentences or even a paragraph. Furthermore, codes may overlap, meaning a single utterance can be part of two or more different codes. To support the search for meaning later in the analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) propose including more text than just the utterance of interest as part of a coded segment. Selecting utterances takes place within the context of the interviews those utterances are part of. Therefore, to code accurately the researcher must take into account a larger section of the interview or even the whole interview. An example of line-by-line coding is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Example of line-by-line coding of an interview segment

Selected segment	
No, I'm not aware. It could also be that probably the information is out there and gets lost when I'm trying to check the Finnish translation. I don't want to say categorically that none exist, but I'm not aware. The information I have thus far was the ones I gleaned from the career office when I visited and it's been very helpful.	
Line-by-line coding	
It could also be that probably the information is out there and gets lost when I'm trying to check the Finnish translation.	Lack of clear communication
I don't want to say categorically that none exist, but I'm not aware.	Lack of information about employability development opportunities
The information I have thus far was the one I gleaned from the career office when I visited and it's been very helpful.	Positive experience with Career Centre

The coding phase was a time-consuming process as I wanted the codes to be descriptive so that they clearly reflect the content they represent. The rationale behind this decision is that the final categories of description (or themes) should present the findings as an intelligible narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, when presented with an overview of the categories of description, a third party should understand what the research is about and what it aims to

achieve. I also followed the advice given by Braun and Clarke (2006) to code extensively as it is better to have too much information than too little.

Step 3: Creating pools of meaning

In this phase, the analysis shifts from the transcripts to the codes. I consider this stage the last step of the first phase of analysis since the next two steps involve a higher degree of abstraction and the analysis is decontextualised from the transcripts. The goal of this stage is to group codes into pools of meaning, i.e. an overarching theme that connects all codes belonging to it. The main activity that defines this step in the analysis process is comparison. Codes are compared to each other to uncover similarities and differences (Åkerlind, 2005; Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018). In practice, this meant I sometimes merged codes with essentially the same meaning or renamed other codes. This not only reduced the number of codes I had to work with, making the data more manageable overall but also added value to the codes since they appeared more frequently. The 'dialogue' between codes, accompanied by frequent re-reading of the transcripts, illustrates how the pools of meaning are shaped by taking into account all interview transcripts collectively. As pools of meaning are formed based on identified commonalities of various codes they begin to stand apart from others. Though I did not explicitly look to establish a hierarchy at this stage, it was slowly becoming apparent how these pools of meaning were positioned vis-à-vis one another. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 89) suggest visually representing these relationships by drawing a "thematic map". My map was made using sticky notes on the wall which I could easily move around and rename as I gained new insights.

Figure 2

Initial construction of a pool of meaning with aggregated codes
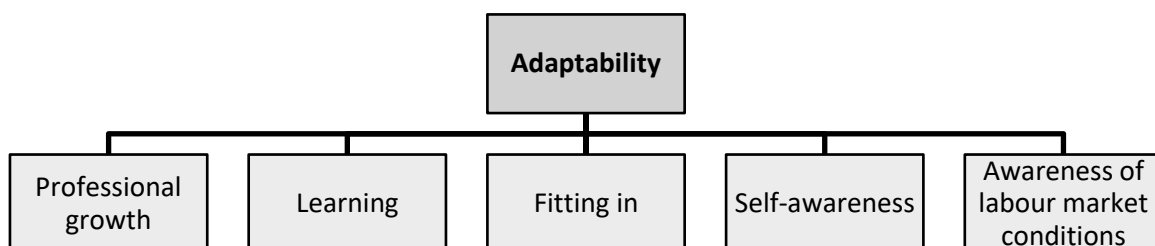
This third stage would result in a preliminary overview of the main pools of meaning, the relationships between them, and the categories of description that are derived from those relationships. An important side note here is that the actual process of analysis did not proceed in stages with a clearly established starting point and end. As I tried to explain earlier, the various steps flow into each other. For example, as more pools of meaning were being formed, I was considering potential categories to which some of these groups could be attributed. As stated under Step 1, the analysis would shift from transcripts to codes and pools of meaning, and back. As such, the fourth step explicitly involves revisiting the coded segments to test the validity of the pools of meaning.

Step 4: Refining the pools of meaning

The difference between phenomenography and thematic analysis becomes more apparent in this step. In thematic analysis, pools of meaning would correspond with sub-themes, whereas themes are comparable with Marton's categories of description. Though the relationships between themes and sub-themes are not final, the structural overview of a thematic analysis will consist of (offshoots of) established themes. In phenomenography this is not the case. It may be the case that a thematic map formed during step four would include some of the themes generated in step three. However, in phenomenographic research, categories of description are not formulated until the final stage because adopting a second-order perspective requires decontextualization as we transition from pools of meaning to categories of description. It would be wrong to assume the categories of description are devoid of context. This is not possible. Rather, the pools of meaning function as the new context in which the categories of description are situated (Marton, 1986). Additionally, Bowden (2005) argues that creating and naming categories early in the analysis entails the risk of becoming too fixated on 'what there appears to be' and thereby potentially overlooking 'what there could be'.

A divergence between thematic analysis and phenomenography does not mean the former has become obsolete. Before establishing the categories of description, the quality and validity of the pools of meaning must be evaluated. Doing so requires breaking the rules we have established for conducting the analysis by moving back to the context of the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, we are re-evaluating the relationship between the pools of meaning and the codes they consist of. The points of departure are the pools of meaning, however. As a miniature deductive analysis, I re-read the transcript segments that were coded and judged whether the meanings attributed to the pools were indeed part of their respective coded

segments. Again, determining whether codes match the meaning of the pools they are assigned to is a highly interpretive task. Sometimes the meaning of a coded segment is more nuanced than it appears. Codes could also 'overlap' and connect to two different pools of meaning. Instead of offering the impractical advice that searching for deeper meaning simply required 'reading between the lines' (which obviously did happen), it was more helpful to "go back a few pages earlier than the designated page in the transcript and, as well, read forward a few extra pages" (Bowden, 2005, p. 25). The subsequent re-readings of the transcripts sometimes helped to uncover the nuances in the participants' messages. As the interviews progressed, participants would themselves come to new realisations and shape their ideas as they went on. It is therefore worthwhile to review the links between codes and pools of meaning, though not excessively. Ultimately, if the connection between the codes and the pools of meaning makes sense, it is time to stop the evaluation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As the saying goes, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Reconsidering earlier decisions does not necessarily equal progress.

Step 5: Forming categories of description

Forming categories of description is more than finding a common feature among various pools of meaning under which they can be categorised. For Marton (1981), categories of description describe how people think. The collective conception of a phenomenon, then, is constructed by bringing all categories of description together into a decontextualised structure (Marton, 1986). Categories must be decontextualised, or else they cannot represent a collective view. However, it is at this stage particularly that bracketing becomes important (Marton, 1981). So, in thinking about which categories to 'pick', it is essential to formulate them in a way that describes how students think about employability. Braun and Clarke (2006) stress the importance of accurately naming themes, in this case, categories, since they represent the "broader overall 'story' that you are telling about your data" (p. 92) and should provide an answer to the research question(s). Thus, the terms used to define the categories of description are arrived at through a synthesis of the meanings that lie at the core of the pools of meaning that share a connection with each other. This final step is particularly challenging as the categories of description must be abstract enough to be decontextualised from the original meanings embedded within the codes and pools of meaning, yet simultaneously representative of those very meanings. The categories must be formulated using general terms which could be applied in different contexts but, once unpacked, reflect the more concrete expressions entrenched within their content. The

outcome space of this study is represented in the figure below and its structure and contents will be discussed in the following chapter.

Figure 3

Representation of student conceptions of employability, and perceptions and expectations of employability development opportunities
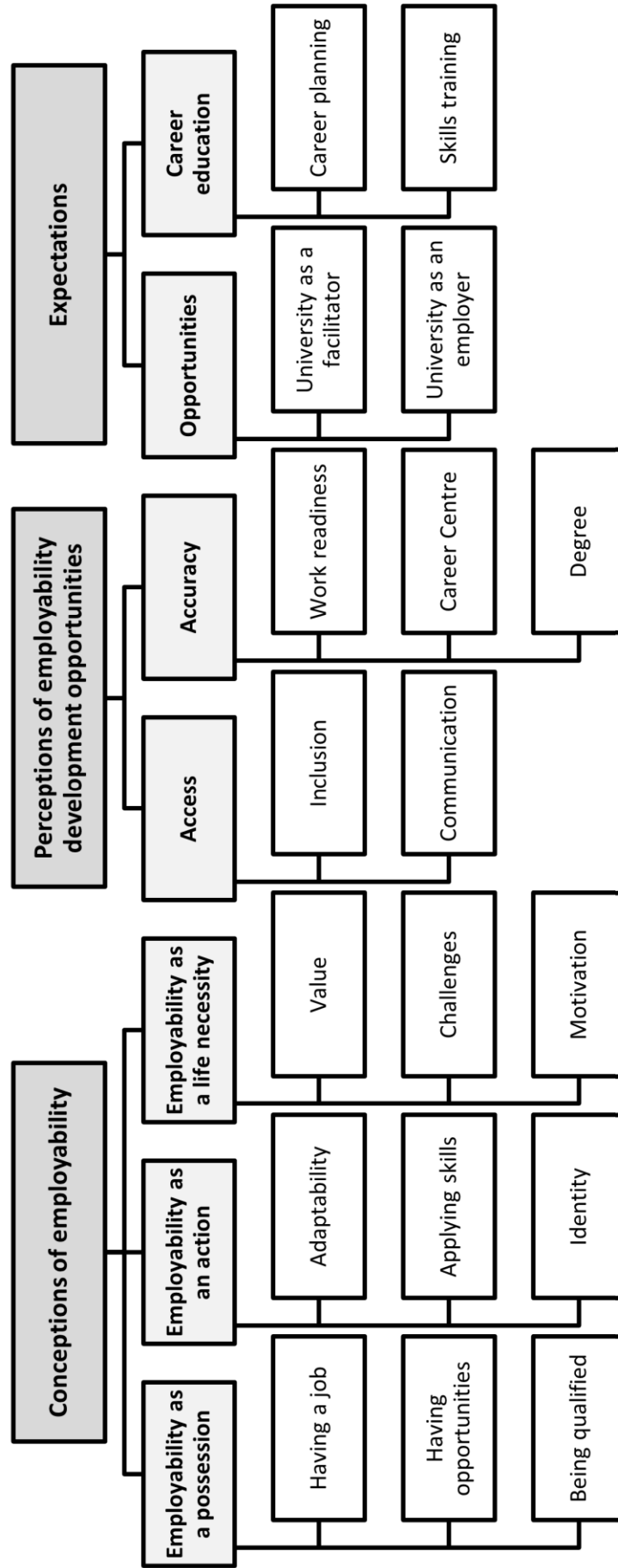
5   Findings

5.1   Conceptions of employability

The conceptions of employability of master's students at the University of Oulu are divided into three categories. The first two forms of understanding, *employability as a possession* and *employability as an action*, indicate a conceptual interpretation of employability, while the third category of *employability as a life necessity* expresses employability in terms of importance and personal value.

5.1.1   Employability as a possession

Having a job

Among international students, there is a strong association between employability and employment. Students perceive their employability in terms of job acquisition and having an income. Such expressions are grouped under having a job and provide a basic understanding of employability which assigns the other two pools of meaning to an auxiliary role. As such, students define employability in the following ways:

> *"Employability means for me like, getting a job. On the basic level. Working for an employer in return for income. I think that's the basic concept that I have."*

Retaining the focus on job acquisition, for some students place employability within a spectrum that represents how easily they can land a job. In doing so, they recognise that employability is a multidimensional concept that does not automatically lead to employment. The following quotes also make it apparent that the contents of the quotes refer to different categories and pools of meaning. As clarified in the methodology, an interview segment or part of a segment can be connected to different pools of meaning and event different categories. The fact that a quote is selected to support a particular category does not mean it cannot be used as part of another category. One such example is listed below and hints at a connection between employability and higher education studies:

> *"Getting a job after doing your masters' or after doing higher studies. So it is something like getting a job after that. Yeah, finding a job. . . . I think the employability is high if it*

is easy to find a job after some certain master's programme. And it is low if it is difficult to find a job after your master's programme."

"I think it's the ability of getting a job. Like, easily. . . . I think easy means kind of how many offers we could receive. Kind of the percentage of offers we receive when comparing to the applications we did. And also, the second thing is the ability to deal for an appropriate salary. Because I think low employability is when we have to accept a salary that we are not really satisfied. But because we need that job we have to accept that. However, if we have a higher employability we are able to deal for the salary that we want."

Having opportunities

The examples above describe employability as something malleable as opposed to being purely static. Employability is not merely a status that one achieves after securing a job. Students believe they can enhance their employability and in doing so, increase their chances of getting employed. Based on these findings, employability for employment can be divided into passive and more active forms. A similar distinction can be made for the second pool; having opportunities. One way of increasing opportunities is to expand and maintain a professional network. Students appear to be aware of the value of having connections that lead to job opportunities. Part of networking involves getting to know "how the system works". That is, students need to know what the social protocols are for approaching working life matters. Finnish working culture and social conventions are different from what international students are used to in their home countries. In connection to expectations (as part of the second research question), students also expect the local environment to provide them with opportunities. Students feel the need for institutions to guide them towards those sectors in which there is a demand for qualified personnel. On the one hand, students want to be made aware of these opportunities so they can plan their studies accordingly. On the other hand, it is suggested that educational institutions and (local) authorities cooperate in overseeing the expansion of job sectors for which universities provide qualifications, while also adapting educational provision to address labour market needs. Along these lines, employability is related to the regional availability of jobs. This perception of opportunities is based on the perceived ability of the labour market to accommodate people that possess the qualifications they have acquired through their studies. Such sentiments are portrayed in the quotes below:

"To have a chance of getting employed. It means there should be like opportunities and beside the opportunities, there should be like, those opportunities should be good and well-paid as well."

"But here it's very important that you have, to have like many connections, just get to know more people, as much as you can. Because that's kind of like a door to many opportunities. That's the thing. I guess it's more important than having skills, to have connections, I would say."

"On an individual level, I can be working hard day and night. I could be, you know, learning so many things and making myself better every day. But there's also the aspect of the need versus demand. Or demand versus supply. No matter how much these students are preparing for their future, the existing institutions and organisations who need new employees don't know them, don't know about them, don't probably associate with them, or don't even have a plan for them. . . . And there's also this aspect where some places are more sought after by the applicants because those are the only ones they know. Like, maybe everyone wants to apply to Nokia just because they're in the IT. But they don't know what other opportunities exist. That means someone has to intervene and connect these two parties. . . . So I think it's very important that the government has the data about what is going on with the university, what is the university teaching these people. And the government should also know what is the current industry need. . . . And your country is not getting better from it anyway. They're just going to leave the country and find some other place to work at. Which is funny, because that's the case with Oulu."

Being qualified

The third and final pool connected to employability as a possession depicts employability as being qualified. In this case, being qualified equates to possessing credentials whereby qualifications act as a quality label signalling recruiters of a student's worth on the job market. Students express their ability to provide value mainly in terms of possessing skills. Acquiring or expanding a skill set is a move to become more desirable in the eyes of potential employers. In the excerpts below, one student speaks of enhancing skills. Another student mentions aligning one's skills with employers' needs and actively promoting oneself on the job market. This relationality with employers or recruiters along with the idea of qualifications as signals means being qualified has to do with perception. The last two quotes illustrate this slightly more

nuanced picture of being considered qualified for the job. Aside from recognising the need to possess the necessary skills, these students make note of the importance of being perceived as a good fit. Such perceptions are not directly tied to formal qualifications but point to the prevalence of personal traits, demonstrated by an awareness of local customs or appropriate language use, and contextual factors like the existence of connections through, for example, previous work experiences (such as traineeships). Such traits are strongly associated with the conception of employability as an action through themes such as professional identity, awareness and integration into the working community. However, in this context, they support the idea of employability as a possessing because students consider them as instruments that serve the short-term goal of becoming employed.

> *"Employability? Maybe skill-matched. You learn something and you sell your skills in the job market. Yeah, this is my understanding."*

> *"It's both like, me having a set of skills that can be useful for getting a job, but also a set of skills or experience and network that make other people see me as employable. Like 'OK, this guy, we know him.' For me the employability, I both have like some basic skills that I can learn through courses and do my shit. . . . And so then I see that my employability is also dependent on that, like how I'm perceived as a good or not worker."*

> *"So two things. They might look at you and say, employability, they look at you and say 'OK, you have the right skill sets and all that technical.' But they might also look at you and say, even from the point where you write your application letter, 'Do you actually use the right kind of words, have you gotten into the thinking of the people'? . . . So maybe the technical skills, yeah, you're fine. But probably even in the way you say 'Hello', 'Hi', it sends the wrong signals. And they're thinking, 'Will this guy even fit in at all?' And you may not even know you're putting the wrong foot forward. So the way I see employability is having the right skill set and the way the other guy sees you from afar."*

5.1.2 Employability as an activity

The idea of employability as a possession positions employability as an asset to be deployed in pursuit of the objective of landing a job. In contrast, when considering employability as an

activity, employability itself becomes the purpose. That is not to say that both approaches cannot exist side by side. Employability is not a physical entity that can be directly manipulated or captured within a single action. Students do not go about 'doing' employability in a literal sense. Instead, employability as an activity refers to a mindset that guides an approach to professional development and performance within and outside the workplace. This approach translates into behaviours and attitudes that connect to the individual and to the surrounding environment. In these terms, employability covers activities such as introspection and reflection, and includes core themes such as professional self-image, how you are perceived by others and how you function as part of a working community.

Adaptability

According to the research participants, being employable requires adaptability. Adaptability is mainly understood as the ability to learn and grow. Students recognise that the process of learning continues during work. Being able to adapt is seen as a necessity to either adjust to broader environmental change or to function more efficiently within certain working contexts. Stating that "the word is changing" indicates that job requirements can shift and no position is fixed. One should strive to be progressive and evolve with the times by cultivating a learning mindset. Another student explains adaptability as a form of teamwork for which it is necessary to collaborate with people from different fields. These insights are based on an awareness of the surrounding circumstances and a solid understanding of those conditions.

> *"Yes, I think one of them is adaptivity. Yes, as I said. And not underestimate yourself. And having this thirst for learning. This is true about the software field, we should always try to read and learn. And I think this is true now about every other thing, every other area. The world is changing really fast, so you should keep up with that speed too. We can't just stop. The world is not going to stop. It's just going to move. So you should also keep moving and learning at the same time."*

> *"I guess there are some essential aspects of personality that you should have like honesty, responsibility and being adaptive. . . . And one important thing is the ability to communicate, and teamwork. You should be able to communicate, like let's say, in English with your group or team leader or teammates in the company. And should have also the teamwork skill. You should be like adaptive to work with different persons from different areas. Like at least, for example, in game industry for example, you are a programmer but you need to you need to be able to work with an artist."*

Nearly all participants agree that they have a personal responsibility in enhancing their employability. Adapting to changing circumstances does not only require situational awareness, but also self-awareness. Recognising personal responsibility also means that adapting through assimilated learning is a personal and internalised process. One student explains that assimilation occurs through observation or learning by example, after which the learner reflects on his own capabilities before applying what is learned.

> *"So let's say first of all, how to improve? . . . Get trained. Don't talk, just do. And every time observe the mistakes and you know, interpret it and learn from the... It's like apprenticeship. Learn from the skilled persons. It's hard skill, very, very basic. Like cooking and things. And for the soft one, how to develop? Observe. I think it's very important to observe before judging and doing. . . . So in this way, let's say for the soft skills, let's just see what people interact and how the society goes, how the vibe looks like. And then you have to very critically justify how you will assimilate to it. It's not 'like in Rome, you have to do like all the Romans do.' There are many things which, you know, are debatable. So for the social skills, how to improve? Observe, reflect, practise. You have to practise. For example, like wait in the queue. Do you think it's OK for you? You have to feel, you have to be honest to yourself and then critically adapt to it. Adopt those skills or modify."*

Applying skills

The second element that supports the idea of employability as an activity is the practice of applying skills. Although it is evident that doing a job requires the application of skills, it constitutes a vital component of employability as an activity since it stands as a practical manifestation of adaptability and having a professional identity, while simultaneously contributing to the formation of that identity. Consequently, students consider such skills more as personal or personality-related attributes as opposed to "professional skills" or "working skills" as mentioned in the interviews. Sometimes participants made the distinction between soft skills and hard skills along similar lines, though their relation to being either personal or professional was not always apparent. As such, the skills that were most often linked to personality were; teamwork, communication (including language skills), problem-solving, and creativity. Honesty and self-awareness were also listed as important skills. Examples of these can be found in the quotes above and below this section. When expressing the usefulness of skills, the students emphasised their functioning within the workplace and their contribution

towards creating a positive working environment. Students also highly value their relationships with future colleagues and how they are perceived by others. This outlook is seen as being conducive to a well-functioning working environment through which the students project themselves as valuable members of a team that are capable of adding value.

> *"Employability will mean that you've got the right skill set that allows you to fit in and add value in any environment you get to. Yeah, I mean... So apart from the core technical skill sets that you require, probably also means that you understand the culture and the way people relate with one another in the office space, you know. So that's the 'where you can move', if you get what I'm saying."*

> *"So I think we need two things. Maybe firstly is the professional skills and knowledge. We have to prove that we have enough skills to work, we are very good person, we are very good like, persons in terms of professional skills and knowledge. It will be shown in our degrees, in our transcript of records, maybe in our certificates and the experience in the CV. But the second thing is about the interpersonal skill and working skill. I mean the collaboration skills maybe, how we can manage time, manage the relationships, how we can collaborate in harmony and create the positivity in the working... in the environment."*

Identity

While students expressed concern for the way others perceive them, expressions of perceptions of the self are also made implicit within the findings and are brought together under the concept of identity. That is not to say that identity does not include others' perceptions of oneself. Students care about how they are perceived. This is part of their self-perception and is embodied in their reputation.

> *"I feel that my definition of employability is the, to build my self-reputation in my field as a reliable worker through internship. That matters a lot to me, to do good job there. If it's about having a shiny degree with many courses, not really. I do it for myself."*

The findings also suggest that self-awareness and honesty are essential for the further development of skills or the advancement of career plans. Identity also refers to a belief in one's capabilities and therefore affects confidence. As illustrated in the following excerpts, the way we label ourselves can either act as a force of limitation or liberation. The way we choose to think or act is the main factor in determining any outcome, as exemplified in dealing with

rejection. Searching for a job or pursuing a career is therefore also a matter of resilience. Thus, identity is essentially about how a person carries himself or herself both internally and in relation to others and external circumstances.

> *"First I would say honesty. That's my... I think the most important thing. And that opens up for other skills, other attributes. And keep self-awareness, I would say. Very important. Obviously, it's very hard to be self-aware. But it, yeah, it lets you know what you do know, what you're good at and what you're not good at. And then work from there. And yeah, the other thing I would say: never label myself. I'd never say I'm good at...I might say I'm kind of good at this, but I'd never say I'm bad at this. Never ever. It makes it sound that I would never be able to be good at something."*

> *"Just believe in yourself and just don't tell yourself, 'I'm not good for this position. Why should I apply?' Just apply. . . . So this is one of the things that the person who is looking for the job also should keep in mind, that just do it. Of course, after the rejection you get disappointed. So how you should know that you're going to get it? Because there is only maybe one or two between among the hundreds of things. You should find the one or two."*

Aside from qualities, confidence and resilience, students also deem interests, motivation and values to be indispensable to finding direction. Students describe the process of finding direction as an intensive activity which requires the consideration of one's qualities, interests, motivations and values.

> *"So besides the working knowledge, your values need to align with the line of work that you're doing. For example, if you are someone who doesn't like hurting animals, then you can't do anything with animal research and drugs. And in some cases, even if you're highly motivated, 'I really love drawings', but you know, or maybe I'm shitty at it and there's nothing I can do about it. So there's a good balance between motivation and capacity."*

5.1.3 Employability as a life necessity

Compared to the cognitive and conceptual interpretations of employability, the category of employability as a life necessity projects a more experiential appreciation of employability. Such conceptions of employability are rooted in reality and contextually bound. They,

therefore, imply a relationality between the individual and their environment and represent an embodied vision of employability in connection to what it is like to be an international looking for work in Finland.

Value

Students' general sentiment towards the importance of employability is summarised as value. Students declare that they value their well-being and happiness, and nominate employability as a vital element for the fulfilment of a good life. There are two closely connected interpretations of this conviction. First, being employed is essential to sustain life. Having a job equals having an income, which enables people to provide for their basic needs. More idealistically, the second view conveys the belief that a satisfying job brings satisfaction to life. Investing in one's employability consequently means investing in your future. As one student points out, people move abroad, leave their families, and sacrifice in pursuit of their passion or a better life. Such drive forms the basis for motivations to move abroad to study.

> *"It's super important. Because if I want to be honest like, I came here to study. I don't have the infinite money or budget. So I have to work. And there are like many opportunities to have, like to work on some.... I don't know. Not in your field. Like I don't know, you can go to work at McDonald's somewhere. Yeah, these are options but every person, every student at last he or she would want to work in their field. It is important for them because that's the...If you want to live, the first thing is to have income, I would say. If you don't have income, you cannot live at all. Then you cannot think about other things."*

> *"When they [people]switch careers because they're unhappy, it's completely different when it's like, 'Oh all my life, I've been a doctor, but I really wanted do this with my life. So I'm going to switch everything in my life.' So that means they're willing to do everything it takes. They're willing to give up their financial stability. They're willing to give up things like whatever happens with their personal life. Maybe move away from their loved ones. That's something that you do when you're passionate about something. So you're replacing something that's missing in your life. And then you're choosing what you can sacrifice."*

> *"I feel like, in order to have a happy life and a balanced life in the future we need to care about employability. Because I feel like it's really, it's the most essential thing in*

my life now. It really, really matters which kind of job I can get. So it decides which kind of life I will have in the future, whether I could be happy or not in the future."

Challenges

Part of the journey to a fulfilling life includes overcoming challenges. Associating employability, or employment, with a happy life implies that the quality of life will suffer if work cannot be found. Thus, challenges manifest as contextual factors that affect students' ability to find a job or integrate into the workforce and broader society. Two issues stand in in students' accounts. Firstly, and not surprisingly, students mention the language barrier. Students feel at a disadvantage when applying for jobs when they do not have Finnish language skills. They mention that employers prefer to hire Finnish or Finnish-speaking employees to maintain smooth internal communication, which students also acknowledge. The second factor rendering Finland a difficult place to find work relates to openness and willingness to accept international as part of the workforce. Students state that they get the impression that Finnish society and working culture are relatively closed to outsiders. Students also suggest this may have to do with employers not being used to working closely with internationals, or not wanting to risk investing in someone who might end up leaving the country. Such perceptions indicate the underlying issue might be a question of trust.

> *"I think the university tried to do something, but it's not just university's solution. 'Cause it's kind of institutionalised barriers in Finland, in Finnish society. Wich is kind of implicit exclusive. They will never say that it's discriminating or exclusive. It's always, 'OK, OK. Equal.' But when it comes to the real judgement, like who to hire? Like you know, if you look at the iceberg, you know, there's a lot of hidden stories. Or like, they say it's customs, traditions. But unfortunately it's happening everywhere."*

> *"Maybe it is only in Oulu or across all Finland, but they don't... They don't want to accept international students. I mean like, normal people. I'm not talking about universities. Universities are OK. And you are like coming here and they're like, 'OK, you are studying stuff', but they don't have any plans for the next steps. Like, 'OK, you are done with your studies, then what do you want to do?' For me like it was easy because as I told you, like my field has like many jobs. And you don't need even know about Finnish language because one of the very, like difficult barrier, is to know Finnish language."*

"But for like the real job, not research, in the outside world it's a bit different I think. I feel they would rather have a Finn often. And they would be like . . . 'Oh, we would rather have someone who speaks the language. It would be easier for the discussion internally.' Which, fair. OK. But then also, if you apply as a foreigner they would readily, I think, imagine that you are not going to stay in Finland or that you're just here for a short time. And so they're like, 'No, we'd rather take someone who wants to live here, like forever, and get invested.' And that's what I want. But because you are from abroad, often they assume that you're not going to say."

Motivation

The importance bestowed on employability for a fulfilling life can also be interpreted as motivation. In fact, the main reason why students participating in the research choose to study is to improve their job prospects. In other words, employability motivates people to pursue a degree in higher education. One student describes it as a "return on investment". International students, particularly those from non-EU countries have a vested interest in attaining credentials. In connecting education with employability, students also address the extent to which possessing a degree contributes to their employability. From their accounts, such as those listed below, it is evident that having a degree plays a role in graduate employability. However, opinions on this matter appear to be mixed. This issue will be discussed as part of the answer to the second research question, which relates to the way students perceive or experience the employability development opportunities offered by the University of Oulu. In simplistic terms, this section deals with the perceived quality of said opportunities.

"For me it's very, very, very important. It's one of the main reasons I'm here. If at any point, I think it's my job prospects. Or, let's say, if even I get a job and I feel that this job is not leading anywhere, I leave Finland immediately and go back home. Because I'm not fleeing war, I'm not seeking material...I'm not seeking cars, houses. I'm not seeking anything. The only reason I'm here because I think there's an opportunity for me to be actually productive."

"It is everything. I mean, why would you commit to investing a degree, really? You know? So two routes, is that I set up something for yourself or you make yourself useful in employment. Even if you set up something for yourself, it means you are gainfully employed doing something even though it's just that you're a business owner. So for me, I think it's everything. . . . Employability is actually the whole reason why we're all here,

why we are sweating day and night trying to just get a good grade. And hopefully we look for a good return on investment in education."

"I think it's the end goal for everyone, so it does matter. Because for me like getting a degree and going back home, that's not the goal. The reason I came here was to get employed and to like, get better prepared for the for the world. And it doesn't matter whether in an academic environment or like in an industrial environment. But to get better equipped with skills, technical skills, as well as soft skills so that I become more viable to work in any place, or like, become more employable."

5.2 Perceptions and expectations of university employability development opportunities

Students' perceptions about the employability development services provided by the University of Oulu are divided into two categories of description. The first category, *access*, broadly denotes the availability of services. The second category, *accuracy*, stands for the quality and students' overall perception of the university's investment in employability development. This section also presents the findings related to students' expectations. The rationale for doing so is that sharing perceptions indirectly sheds light on expectations, as explained in the presentation of this study's research questions. Thus, RQ2 encompasses both perceptions and expectations. This structure is recurrent in the current section. The categories that describe student expectations are *opportunities* and *career education*.

5.2.1 Access

Access to employability-related services concerns questions about whether students are aware of them and whether they know how to reach them. It also covers their degree of relevance. Students are of the opinion that access to employability support is suboptimal. On the one hand, students do not feel included in working life events organised on campus. On the other, communication about employability support and events is not always effective.

Inclusion

Much of students' perceptions towards inclusion are about being integrated within the university community and having the possibility to interact with Finnish students. Based on these revelations, the general sentiment among international students is one of exclusion and

lack of integration. Such opinions echo similar statements about Finish society and working culture as discussed above. When mentioning career events, international students feel that they are mainly intended for Finnish students. One student remarks that this may have an adverse effect on students' desire to stay in Finland. Conversely, there appears to be some agreement that being included and made to feel welcome will increase students' participation on campus and their engagement with employability development.

> *"Amongst us international students, we're not truly engaged with the university. We attend our courses. We do what we have to do, but we're not very invested in this student life. . . . I think the integration with the Finnish students, once you're integrated with the Finnish students you, you're going to feel that you're part of the university and you belong here. And you're going to be much more engaged in the job events that the university does. For some reason, I don't feel the university is mine and I'm not part of the university."*

> *"I feel in every Guild there is someone dedicated to the alumni network and maybe like career thingy. A lot of those events are in Finnish only. Even in my Guild, which is really bilingual in everything and you can get involved in English, everything bilingual, those career events are mostly only in Finnish because they assume that international people are not going to stay. And then it's not inviting neither. So no one stays. It's a circle. . . . It was like, 'Oh yeah, but it's for you . . . , you are the exception. You are coming and you want to know something, but no one else does.' Yeah, no. Because maybe I'm coming to ask you like, 'Can I come? Is it actually also made for me?' But there is a lot of others that just assumed it's not for them and feel a bit pushed away from the job market. So that could be improved. 'Cause there is those events of like alumni evening and people telling about their experience and blah blah blah. But I've always felt not welcome there, like it's something not for me."*

> *"It's also about your involvement and your spirit. So everything we can do in this campus as being active as a student and a kind of citizen there, so in organisation in the life of the uni itself, with the student union, with everything, is relevant for your career and your employability."*

> *"I've seen, I've seen some [employability services]. But few. Very, very few. Also, there's a thing, the language barrier. Because there have been some of these kind of events.*

Most of them are directed to their own people. Just Finnish between Finnish. So I don't know if it's only about here, this country, this city, or it's about the whole system."

Communication

Students also report experiencing issues with the communication of employability-related services and events organised on campus. The main takeaway is an apparent lack of clarity in the available information. In general, students know that services exist and that career events and company visits take place at the university. However, they appear to be unsure about the purpose and intended audience of such provisions. Students are also not well aware of how they can reach or access services. One reason impeding their engagement could be that students do not immediately see the importance of particular events or services. Depending on their background, they may not be used to such happenings and as a result, do not pay much attention to them. The way students conceptualise employability also affects their engagement with available services. If a student is not concerned about their employability or if they perceive it as an individual responsibility that does not require external support, they are possibly more likely to dismiss any form of assistance.

> *"I'm very well aware of the career centre. I'm aware that there's programmes like the mentoring programme, that it kind of helps. But those are the services that I'm aware of. Not too much more than that. I'm aware that there's job fairs. Various ones. In the previous semester we had those. And like workshops. I think the couple of weeks ago there was also some job-related workshop. So mostly those are the things I'm aware of. Nothing else than that."*

> *"Well, it might be me I think. I don't take them seriously enough, I think. Yeah. And it might be from my background because whatever events we used to have, no one takes them seriously and nor should we take them seriously back home. But I think I figured I should take them seriously. But I think there's effort at least, and the university do care to help us. Yeah, I think maybe also it's not advertised well enough. . . . I think one, advertisement. I think that would be much better. Like letting students be well aware of the of the upcoming event."*

The lack of clear communication leads students to seek out services on their own initiative. Alternatively, students often learn about the existence of services and events via their peers through word-of-mouth. Another item brought up by students is the efficacy of communication

via university email. Students mention that they receive a lot of electronic mail and cannot sift through all the information to find out what is relevant to them. Receiving emails in Finnish also has students wondering whether those messages contain any useful information, but simultaneously contributes to the experienced disconnect between them as international students and the Finnish university community. The idea that they can potentially miss out on important information because messages are written in Finnish can result in an overall loss of motivation.

> *"Even this career centre is something I've found by myself. I searched for the OYY and searched for the general information of the university and I found this. I just gave it a try. This is totally my self-practise."*

> *"The things that I've learned and I've known that they're happening right now, it's because I am a person that likes to know things, and I like to ask, and I like to answer. . . . But I know friends of mine that are lost and they're like, 'I don't know what to do. I don't know where to look for.' So this is like also a big reminder like, 'Hey, not everybody has the same personality.' So there must be stuff going on, but most of the time I figure it out in the event. . . . Also, emails that university sends, all of them are in Finnish. So it's like, why would I read? It's not motivational enough to look for it. You don't get motivated enough."*

> *"As an international student, it's really difficult to check my email every day and see everything in Finnish. So I have to translate everything and it's just too much information. Because half of the emails are not related to me. . . . So if they would send me more focused information. Because I know there are already some workshops and some techniques, and they are offering help with related employability stuff. But I think the mistake is in how they transmit that information to the students. Maybe the email is not something that students watch over every day."*

5.2.2 Accuracy

Accuracy is a translation of students' overall rating of the University of Oulu's general contribution to employability development. Instead of a quantitative measure, the analysis of student opinions revealed three dimensions that play a role in employability development which

could arguably be considered as the main building blocks of graduate employability development explicit to higher education.

Work readiness

Work readiness represents the first dimension and provides an indication of the extent to which students feel ready to enter the job market. The impression of work readiness is based on various contributing factors that are subjective to the students and is thus based on one or multiple experiences that have affected students' views of how the university helps them prepare for working life. Factors that might influence students' opinions are the availability of career guidance, the inclusion of employability skills as part of degree programmes, the quality and relevance of courses, the availability and accessibility of career events on campus, connections to the world of work, and the conviction that the university cares about its students. This dimension does not represent an evaluation of any or all aforementioned factors but intends to provide a general picture of the current state of affairs. The segments below highlight students' impressions about their work readiness in relation to support provided by the university. Students state they are not well aware of what options they have on the job market or how to plan their next step:

> *"After my graduation I really don't know what I should do and what I can do, and what my future would be. I really don't have any clue. I have to apply for many opening positions. Like by sending several emails, thousands of emails per day, to acquire one interview. And then after that, going through some interviews, get the position. So I don't see any help from the university in this way."*

> *"Sometimes we are very hardworking and very eager to work. But we are like, you know, headless flies bumping around and feel disappointed and frustrated. And worst of all, we used our energy and time and emotion, but get nothing. It's a wrong direction. So I think the programme leaders should really be responsible for leading the, make sure we are on the right track."*

Students notice that there is an effort on the part of the university to address graduate employability and feel supported by this. Some students recognise that their employability is not only dependent on their personal or the university's input but is also affected by external factors. Despite certain market trends or employer hiring practices that increase the threshold

for international students, it is suggested that the university adapts to these circumstances by creating more international-friendly work opportunities in collaboration with employers.

> *"For instance, it's University of Oulu saying, 'I have a programme. I can teach my programme in English. These are the kind of things you'll be able to do when you have the degree.' So I would also expect that, as part of the package, the university also makes it very, very... creates a programme that makes it very, very easy for people to transit into the workplace in Finland, you know. And I think the university is trying its best. Whether the impact is significant enough, I may not be able to say."*

> *"My opinion is that it is very active and dynamic at the moment and we can see obviously that you care a lot about that, about our employability, about our future career. And one good message that you spread out is that like, you make it very clear that this country needs you, this country needs more of international talent. And I think that I really love that message. I would love that, like, when someone tell me that you are appreciated here, you are needed for this country."*

Career Centre

Student perceptions of the Career Centre provide an additional perspective into work readiness. As such, accounts of the Career Centre could have been included in the previous section but are instead clarified separately. Since the Career Centre is a new entity on campus, accounts of student perceptions of or experiences with the Career Centre provide initial feedback on its performance. Furthermore, the Career Centre is invested in supporting student employability development as has a visible physical presence on campus which allows it to be assessed more accurately. With employability being the focus of this thesis, understanding student employability development requires an understanding of their views of a service such as the Career Centre. Students appear to be well aware of the Career Centre and most have used its services at one point during their studies.

Among students, there is an appreciation for the career events organised by the Career Centre. Also, Career Centre events tend to be more visible and accessible compared to other events organised on campus. They also help students become more aware of the Finnish labour market and employers, which increases their opportunities. Attending such events allows students to establish connections with employers, thereby expanding their professional network and further increasing their chances of finding a job. As a student career service, students believe the Career

Centre is also better equipped to help them in their job search or job application than teaching staff or faculties in general. Students of the Faculty of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering, who reported receiving more information on job vacancies and having closer ties to local companies than students from other faculties, also felt that the faculty's efforts to prepare them for working life fell short. As such, Career Centre guidance on how to draft a CV and cover letter, in addition to the opportunity to practice job interview skills, are perceived as being particularly helpful.

> *"Well, first of all, it's the career centre. It's really helpful. It's open to help students in terms of finding employment. They arrange different events like the presentations from the companies. They like invite companies to hold their presentations. Because when I came here, I didn't know that there were so many industries out here. But I was more focused on academia at that moment. But in...but like communicating with my peers and events like the ones held by career centre, I got to know about these companies."*

> *"A lot of our teachers sometimes are a bit outdated on the new way of applying for jobs. They would not have LinkedIn or they wouldn't care much about the CV. So between them and maybe...yeah. The career centre, I feel, also can do really good like at this...At organising events. It's really good. At having marketing power as well. Like any event you have, I feel, are really, really visible. While from our faculties, whenever they do something, they do not know how to communicate on it at all. So it's very often invisible."*

> *"Because the university is having this career centre and it helps a lot when preparing ourselves for job interviews and also making CVs and motivation letters. So they help. I think those services are really helping students."*

Having a Career Centre as a separate service with its own office is also perceived as a benefit. The fact that the Career Centre is not a formal part of any degree programme or involved in the assessment of students' academic performance grants it a semblance of neutrality. This can help students who are reluctant to seek help overcome certain barriers they face. The idea of the Career Centre as a neutral space helps reinforce the sense of care that students value and expect from the university.

> *"I always rather went to my professors. But it can be hard. Because I'm not shy and I can go and speak to them and be like, 'Hello. Can I speak with you for five minutes?' I*

know a lot of people would not dare to do this. For them it would be easier to go, for example, to a career centre, to have someone more neutral who is not your teacher with whom you don't feel like in a bit of a power position that might have judged you because of your grades or whatever. So I think in that way the career centre can be really nice."

Students also expressed a hope to receive more personalised guidance in the future. They correctly observed that the Career Centre is new. Evidently, second-year students who participated in the research knew this beforehand since the Career Centre did not exist at the time of their enrolment. The COVID-19 pandemic also forced the University of Oulu to organise events and courses online. This undoubtedly affected the access to and delivery of services to students. Nevertheless, by expecting the Career Centre to broaden its service, they perceive it as an added value and a staple part of the university.

"But I have a feeling that the career service are in the beginning phase. I feel like everything is in the forming phase. . . . It's broad, but like I think when it comes to the, like after some years or after some time it will be more structured, more efficient, more in depth. Not only broad, but also very deep. Like kind of, every students can receive some kind of personalised service for themselves."

Degree

Student opinion on the contribution of their degree provides a third and final perspective on how well higher education prepares them to transition to working life. Perceptions of a degree as a contributor to employability ignore any forms of employability support provided outside of the formal curriculum. In this sense, the possession of a degree and the acquisition of skills through a degree programme act as basic indicators of students' perceived employability. Students voiced their perceived value of possessing a degree in positive and negative terms. Higher education degrees have intrinsic value if the mere possession of one improves the odds of being considered for a position. The underlying assumption here is that being qualified provides more opportunities. Conversely, should a student not possess a degree, they would not be considered for a position. In contrast, some students feel that acquiring a degree will not affect their job opportunities at all, indicating that they would be eligible for a certain position regardless of whether or not they possess a degree. The second dimension of a degree's contribution to employability is expressed in terms of skills acquired throughout the degree programme that enhance employability and enable graduates to perform well on the job. Student

opinions about the presence or relevance of skills within the curriculum were mainly framed negatively.

The following excerpts highlight the possession of a degree as a positive factor in the job search process, with one explaining how the skills acquired through a degree programme enable the student to do good work.

> "Yeah it does. It does actually. Because I personally have applied to different industries, not only wireless. And like, I've also got responses from them, so it means they consider you. My degree is basically allowing me to work in industries other than wireless communications as well. So it's pretty good. It like, boosts my employability sometimes."

> "But in terms of the course content itself, I will say yes, they're not doing very badly, honestly. I mean, I must give it to them, really. I've done accounting for, God knows the better part like half of my life. And finance. And you know, the kind of detail they go into, in trying to just pass some basic knowledge across, is impressive. They go to the base. So, anybody going to the programme here, honestly, drop the person anywhere, they should be able to fit in."

The segments below reflect students' perceived lack of adequate skills training and quality course content. They feel that their degree programmes do not prepare them well enough for working life.

> "This is not what I expected really. And this is true for me and other people here, at least the people I know. And for software engineering, we should know more practical. But the thing is that we are learning here, what they teach us, is just not suitable for our future. We're just here to write. Write some summaries. Write some articles by watching YouTube videos, or papers... We could do that at home too. We just learn a little of everything here that is not even going to be helpful for you in your career. This is not really up to date."

> "My degree was disappointing in the course content. Like, the quality of courses is not especially good. It's OK, but it's not especially good. It would not be shiny on your CV to have done that. . . . And so then your employability, I always feel that I'm going to get my job by my network, by getting the most experienced as possible, by doing internship research training. All of that. And that will come from there. Not from just having a degree and hoping for the best. So almost none from my degree."

70

The final excerpt offers a nuanced view of the relevance of degrees to acquiring a job and job performance. Here, possessing a degree is considered a formality. In this situation, possessing a degree is a question of eligibility, since employers require candidates to possess a degree by default. This line of reasoning emphasises the relationship between educational credentials and employability and thereby pertains to high education's role in employability development. At the same time, while possessing a degree is essential, the type of degree makes little difference. This could explain why the student is sceptical about the contribution of degree programmes with regard to skill acquisition.

> *"I think there's two parts. I think it's very important and it's not so very important, in both ways. If I may explain. The first one is, I think most employers, they want to see a degree, but they don't care about the degree. Like, 'Are you a university graduate?' 'Yes, I'm a university graduate'. They don't even maybe look at the transcript or what courses, or what did you learn or what not. But that shows that you're at least disciplined and you do have the capacity to, basically the IQ, to work at this place. But they don't care about the degree itself. So it could be a business degree, but I'm working in whatever, something else. From that point of view it's important. But in terms of the work itself, I don't think it's really important and I think they most employers do realise that now. Maybe it was back in the day, but I don't think it's anymore. Because we don't really learn technical skills or practical skills. We basically go to the work place. We have the theory but we don't know what to do. We need a bit of time to pick up on things. And we don't really learn skills."*

5.2.3   Opportunities

The first category describing students' expectations from the University of Oulu is also the one they were most vocal about. Simply put, students expect the university to provide them with more opportunities to find work. This notion translates into two different roles that the university can assume according to students who were interviewed.

University as a facilitator

The first role ascribed by students for the university is one of the university as a facilitator. According to the students, the university should foster more collaboration with employers as well as connect students with companies. The type of collaboration referred to is one where the

university secures a number of positions at certain companies that are reserved for university students or graduates and then renders them available to the students. Compared to international students, the university is better placed to reach out to employers since it is an established institution, has more resources, and has a better understanding of the job market. As such, students expect the university to provide a platform where students and employers can meet, by organising career days or recruitment events for example. Inviting companies to the campus helps reduce the gap some students experience between academia and working life. Students noted that such events not only allow them to learn which companies exist but also enable the university to promote its students and the students to promote themselves. This can be seen as a two-way street of supply and demand whereby students and companies simultaneously occupy the supply and demand side of the job market. Students also commented that they see the Career Centre as having an active role in organising working life events.

"If it's an international programme there should be at least the same opportunities for international people, I mean English speakers, than for Finnish speakers. I get that we have to learn some Finnish as well. Yes OK, but the working Finnish, that's something else. I think it would be better if the university just have some agreements for some positions, fixed positions, for international students. Then international students could, not fight, but look for the same position. And then it's in terms of 'who is more employable for this position, who is better for this position.' But we just find out that there are no agreements with those companies. If they don't have the funding for hiring you here at the university and doing the internship with the university, why don't they look for companies?"

"I think Career Centre should focus on that part, like talking with the companies and make them, 'Ok, can you treat like some internship positions?', and some collaboration between company and the university and these things. I think this should be the main aim of the Career Centre. Because this government has done its job. But the companies are still resisting in this section. Maybe the Career Centre should provide some ways, 'OK this way, and this way you can hire international students.'"

"So I hope it will be more, kind of like the university is a bridge between students and employers because the university has more knowledge about the job market here and more and better relationships with the companies around the city, around the country. Because when we have to reach out to them by ourselves, it will be very difficult. For

example, I sent out the emails to a lot of companies, but no response at all. So I feel like it will be easier if you do that on behalf of the university and the faculty. You can also conduct for example like the tour, the visit to that company. So that we have looked at the working environment, we have better motivation."

University as an employer

Aside from seeing the university as a bridge between academia and working life, students also wish the university would provide more opportunities to gain employment at the university directly. By opening up positions for students, the university can partially alleviate students' struggle in finding opportunities. Paid internships are perhaps the most obvious form of employment that students are after. This not only provides them with experience which will help them when applying for jobs in the future but can help propel them towards a career in academia. Also, some students sense that, in certain faculties, there is enough work to permit hiring students. Such observations are complemented by the impression that there is a lack of effort to integrate students as part of the university workforce. In the last excerpt, for example, the student voices concern about a perceived lack of support, on the part of the university, for the faculty and its endeavours. Another point of interest is the experienced lack of clarity or lack of information surrounding internship opportunities.

"I think that the biggest mistake is university is making is that they're not trying to keep the students here. If I were like someone who has some responsibility at the university, my first goal was to keep the students at the university. Talking about the software fields, I think I'm more inviting them to keep them at the university. Because there are so many tasks or so many researchers that we could get help from their students. And by providing little tasks to them and probably little salaries to them, we can keep them, we can get help from them. And this is also helpful to the students."

"I always felt left out from the university employment thing. Because I feel the employment they promote is not the one that is relevant to me. Maybe a bit sad, but I think that that's honestly the case. We are never part of it. And if, whatever they would say, that we are going green and everything and like sustainable development is important. It's like, 'OK then, put money in the fields that are actively working on this.' But it's not the case. The university is where we study, but it's also the employer of our teaching staff. And when they see how there are funding cuts in every direction, I feel that I don't trust the university to provide me an employment if they cannot provide good

employment conditions to my teacher. So I don't see it as a reliable partner. I'll see it more as a marketing and branding entity."

5.2.4 Career education

While students hope the university to guide them towards better opportunities, they also expect to be taught how to capitalise on those opportunities. Career education, then, is aimed at helping students land a job and, ideally, successfully manage their careers in the long term.

Career planning

The first focus area of career education, as conceived by the interviewed students, relates to career planning. Based on students' statements, career planning is geared towards becoming employed and as such, ranges from knowing where to look for work to landing a job in Finland. Within this spectrum, being able to craft a good CV, doing job interviews, and creating a profile that is appealing to employers were mentioned regularly. Some students were also explicit in their expectations that the university provides them with education on working life, both in terms of job searching as well as skill training to either increase one's chances of getting hired or perform well on the job.

> *"I know there are already some kind of workshops for helping you out, learning how to do your CV, or how to do your...an interview, how to discuss your salary with an HR person and so on."*

> *"It is also the responsibility of the institutes where I study and also the whole society. And even the government, I think so. Because as a, you know, like personal human being, we cannot be aware fully, adequately about everything, about the needs of the society in maybe next 10 years. Or, I mean like we cannot see the whole picture. So I think it's also the responsibility of the institutes where like, provide us the training."*

> *"I think there's a lack of information about the real world and the real employability that is going on. That it's just like, 'OK, you study and you finish your degree, and now go to the real world and get yourself a job'. No one tells you how to do it. You just have to go there and hunt and just notice step by step. . . . I would say, like 50/50. I would say faculties or institutions where are you are like studying, it's not about a percentage. They just have to give you that. Because it's education. It's part of it."*

Skills training

Skills training forms the second block of the type of career education that students expect to receive. The following paragraph acts as a bridge connecting the themes of career planning and skills training because it includes both. The student in question was simultaneously talking about the need to teach students how to successfully apply for jobs and a more practical aspect of skills that are needed to *do* the job.

> *"I think what else can be done is how to create like better profiles. Because not everyone is experienced in these things. Like how to create better CV, how to like present yourself, become more presentable. I know Career Centre helps in these things, like preparing for interviews and preparing for CVs. But when we speak about, faculty-wise for instance, if someone is from the management side and someone is from the engineering side, they will have like different ways to present themselves. And these different things are actually needed by different employers."*

Both career planning and working skills can be categorised under the umbrella of employability skills. However, for the sake of analysis, both themes are treated separately since they pertain to students' interpretations of the concept of employability. In short, students view career planning as helpful to get a job, whereas when talking about skills, students are referring to the capability to do the job well. Therefore, in the excerpts below, students are speaking within the context of their field of study. Two main findings emerge here: (a) degree programmes should be in tune with trends in the industry and teach technical skills that are useful in a certain line of work; and (b) students expect soft skills training to complement their technical skills. These statements also indicate that students consider skills training as an integral part of their higher education studies.

> *"To improve my employability skills I think is responsibility of your university or your school or your high school or whomever has given you your formal studies. Because as soon as you are out of the university, you are in the working world. You are looking for a job and they start asking, 'OK, do you know how to use this programme?' Maybe in your university or studies you will learn two programmes and they are not really useful in an industrial market, in looking for a job. . . . So I think there would be a chance for making it easier to find a job if there were some workshops, not as a part of the formal studies but as additional studies."*

"During the courses, like professors and advisors should help you to achieve these needed skills."

"These things can be made like compulsory for the students, part of the programme. Without credits of course. For a day or two like sessions are created and attendance is marked. Not trying to be too strict, but. Like everyone should be asked to attend these things. And it's not just for the students. I think the university will also increase its reputation, I believe. Because once these students possess these relevant skills, when they go out they have a better chance. And they compete with students from other universities. They'll have a better chance. And with the passage of time people will know what the University of Oulu is and what its students are."

6 Discussion

As anticipated, the interviews with international degree students yielded extensive and diverse results. In this chapter, the results will be discussed alongside the theoretical principles of employability presented in this thesis to formulate an answer to the research questions. The discussion will progress on par with the same structure, determined by the research questions, as the presentation of student conceptions and perceptions in the previous chapter. Adhering to the phenomenographic method, the main units of discussion are the categories of description which represent the collective perceptions of international degree students at the University of Oulu.

6.1 Conceptual foundations for developing graduate capital

At best, international students at the University of Oulu have a more confined understanding of employability compared to the literature. These findings closely resemble the results of studies conducted by Lees et al. (2015) and Tymon (2013). Such views are characterised by students' conceptualisation of employability. Drawing parallels to Harvey (2001) and Lees et al. (2015), students exhibit both notions of employability as either a possession or an action. The foremost indicator of employability brought up by students is having a job, since this evidently means that one is employable. Having job opportunities, i.e. available and accessible jobs, and being qualified which, in this context, is seen as a prerequisite to being eligible for a job, set the conditions in which employment can be acquired. However, not having a job does not mean one is not employable (Sumanasiri et al., 2015). Instead, this means that employability is determined by more than just the possessive aspect. These perceptions, combined with the challenges that students face when looking for work imply that students are aware of external factors that affect employability, as discussed by Shumilova and Cai (2015). Students also recognise the personal aspect of employability, which manifests itself as an action carried out by an individual.

Student conceptions of employability can also be framed as an action. The indicators, represented by the pools of meaning, that were derived from students' statements touch upon more long-term processes of employability. The two main markers of applications of employability are adaptability and the application of skills. Adaptability is what allows students to make good decisions or find new opportunities, whereas the application of skills is what allows them to do their job well. As such, these constitute conscious efforts made on the part

of the students in pursuit of a satisfying career. Even though students recognise the active and procedural components of employability, there is no indication that they will also actively engage in career planning and employability development. This lack of evidence to suggest that students do, in fact, systematically approach employability development and career planning raises two considerations.

First, the conceptions of employability outlined in the outcome space represent a collective view and do not measure whether or not, or to which extent individual students translate their understandings of employability into practice. Put simply, just because somebody knows what must be done, does not mean that person will actually do it. It is therefore difficult to make statements about students' level of preparedness to join the labour market when clear insight into student activity is missing. As for why the general student body does not appear to take control of their employability development, the findings suggest two explanations. The first reason is the incomplete conceptual understanding of employability, as explained above. Some students may not even consider employability at all. For example, during an interview, a student could not explain what employability meant. The second is that students are not primarily concerned with career planning or employability development, perhaps in combination with a more narrow concept of employability. Previous research suggests that students often only start planning their careers and seek career advice towards the end of their studies (Bridgstock, 2009; Pitan, 2016b). Given the lack of evidence to suggest that the interviewed students are invested in enhancing their employability, there is reason to believe that students at the University of Oulu also consider career planning in the later stages of their studies rather than early on. It is plausible that students' main concern is simply finding a job after graduation. This may be for the simple reason that, since they do not yet have a career there is no need to manage anything. As students, their main concern is to graduate. Establishing a professional profile may not be relevant because they have not yet entered working life. Having to focus on career planning may simply be too demanding or time-consuming in combination with a rigorous study programme (Bridgstock, 2009). Such realities may relativise what long-term planning means to students. What the literature refers to as short-term thinking aimed at finding employment may be long-term planning in students' eyes. Yet, the findings appear to support the notion of employability serving a purpose, as stated by Tymon (2013), to a certain extent. By describing employability as a life necessity, employability becomes a tool to be used in pursuit of a goal. Employability has instrumental value rather than intrinsic value and functions as a constituent of a fulfilling life. In the interviews, students stated that they chose to study abroad in hopes of

improving their job prospects and having a better life. Thus, international students share the same motivation to acquire higher education credentials as Finnish graduates (Puhakka et al., 2010). Their goal is to find a job, and becoming more employable will help them to do so. Matching this reasoning to the perspectives on employability as expressed by Holmes (2013), the view of employability as a possession is prevalent among international students. Thus, becoming employed symbolises the success of having overcome challenges, such as a hidden job market (Alho, 2020; Maunu, 2018), the language barrier (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a; Shumilova & Cai, 2015), and a lack of a professional network (Alho, 2020), by successfully completing studies.

The second consideration suggests that students' conceptions of employability contain elements of the knowledge economy skills discourse. Arguments in favour of this notion lie in the view of employability as an action, particularly within the themes of adaptability and applying skills, and also in students' expectations towards the University of Oulu. Students assume a similar form of adaptability as required by the modern labour market. The necessary disposition is one of negotiating one's position within a competitive and fluctuating working environment, both in the job market as well as on the job (Barrie, 2006; Puhakka et al., 2010). Possessing and applying the right skills is part of the equation. Students emphasise the application of skills as a crucial indicator of being employable and, consequently, expect the University of Oulu to provide them with relevant skills training. It becomes reasonable, then, to assume that student reasoning matches the human capital narrative, which assigns a central role to higher education institutions in the production of the knowledge and skills needed to support economic activity. The employer-driven skills discourse, underpinning human capital theory, that is characteristic of the knowledge economy is embraced by the Bologna Process. Since Finnish higher education institutions observe the tenets of the Bologna Process (Puhakka et al., 2010) and student views align with the prevailing skills discourse, the University of Oulu seems predisposed to top-down, employer-driven discourses of employability. Herein lies a potential pitfall for the University of Oulu as it progresses with its employability agenda. The emphasis that students place on skills, coupled with the expectation of more skills training, may entrench the notion of employability as an institutional achievement and perpetuate the skills discourse. Given the nature of discourse, it is likely that students derive their views from it. This could hamper efforts to adopt a more comprehensive approach to graduate employability given the incompatibility with the top-down-driven paradigm of the knowledge economy. Students would find it more difficult to see employability in a different light and join the discourse. However, universities

have the capacity to be agents of change (Shumilova & Cai, 2015). By considering the potential value of student perspectives, the University of Oulu can steer students in the right direction and project an approach to employability development which benefits all stakeholders. Thus, moving forward is a matter of being proactive, rather than being reactive.

Not all elements of the outcome space of this study point to a reproduction of established paradigms. With the focus still being on the concept of employability as an action, the theme of adaptability can be connected to what Tomlinson (2017) calls psychological capital. Within Tomlinson's model of graduate capital, adaptability functions as a resource that students can use to deal with setbacks or challenging circumstances. Such setbacks can occur at any time throughout one's career and may manifest as high levels of stress resulting from competition, receiving rejections, uncertainty, and high-performance expectations (Tomlinson, 2017). The aim of harnessing psychological capital, then, is to manage how you react in the face of adversity. Since employability development is a personal process (Bridgstock, 2009) and not all future challenges can be foreseen, there is no straightforward approach to increasing psychological capital. Investments into improving students' psychological capital would benefit from career guidance and career planning, where students learn how to readdress goals. It is important that students understand that career progression is not linear and that initial expectations are not guaranteed to be met (Lehker & Furlong, 2006). For a career to be fulfilling and sustainable it should be in tune with an individual's interests, qualities, and values. Such resources are part of identity capital and form the foundations of smart career choices. Thus, psychological capital can be cultivated by tapping into identity capital. Indeed, Tomlinson (2017) points out that the various forms of graduate capital complement each other. The application of identity capital can be understood as formulating personal employability narratives which relate to personal experiences.

Identity capital determines the relation between a person's personal and professional identity and represents how a person sees themselves in a professional setting. As such, identity capital bears a strong resemblance to the concept of self-perceived employability (SPE) forwarded by Clarke (2018) and Griffiths et al. (2018). Such meanings correspond to what students shared during the interviews. As illustrated by one of the interview segments in the previous chapter, one student translates identity capital as a belief in yourself and confidence in your capabilities which drives further action which, in this case, meant applying for a position despite the possibility of rejection. Other students made clear references to values, motivation and interests as stimuli to move forward or adapt. One way of developing identity capital, as well as social

and cultural capital, is through exposure to informal experiences at the university (Tomlinson, 2017). A strictly formal university experience for international students would be focused solely on degree programmes or subject-related exchanges, proceeding according to an in-and-out scheme whereby a diploma is the only meaningful manifestation of that experience. When discussing their perceptions of the employability development opportunities offered by the University of Oulu, international students mentioned that they do not feel part of the university community, mainly due to a lack of interaction with Finnish students. Students that were interviewed also felt that events and activities organised at the university targeted international and Finnish students separately and were not aimed at the student body as a whole. Such testimonies suggest the existence of two segregated campus communities. On the other hand, some interviewees explained that being included in campus life and increased interaction with Finnish students would positively affect their employability. These assumptions have merit, as establishing and strengthening connections between international students and Finnish students expands the informal space through which the formation of identity capital can be fostered.

Community-building and creating informal spaces are closely connected procedures. Broadening the informal space can support the formation of a more tightly knit community, whereas a community as a space of its own can foster the creation of new formal or informal spaces. Commenting on the Career Centre as one such space, international students felt that the Career Centre cared about them and their future. Another student noted how the Career Centre functioned as a neutral space. In being perceived as neutral, the Career Centre is not tied to any field of study. It is impartial and open to all students. One student noted how this may contrast with how students perceive discussing matters related to working life with members of their faculty. Some students may prefer to keep the relationships with their teachers strictly study-related and are more comfortable seeking career guidance from the Career Centre. As such, the general sentiment towards the Career Centre is one of trust and supportiveness. Furthermore, students also consider the Career Centre to be more suitable for employability development and supporting the job search process. Job fairs are considered to be particularly helpful. Inviting employers to the campus helps bridge the gap between the world of work and academia, at least for students that are employable by those employers. The improved connections with employers and increased job opportunities resulting from such events cater to the needs of international students who are not always familiar with the Finnish job market. The presence of employers on campus also contributes to community-building. As such, the Career Centre fulfils a valuable

role in the creation of a campus community, especially in combination with the sense of inclusion and care they project towards international students.

The University of Oulu Career Centre thus exhibits characteristics of the career centres of the 21st century. The role of the modern career centre is to build communities by way of informal relationships and a personalised approach (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Also, by catering to students' employability needs, either through guidance or increasing job opportunities, the Career Centre builds such relationships and fosters trust. These actions contribute to an environment that brings new experiences to students which enhance their identity capital. Since developing identity capital and psychological capital is not bound to any specific field of study, and the Career Centre provides services to all students, the Career Centre has an important role in supporting the development of graduate employability. With human capital investments largely taken care of in the formal curriculum, future progress in enhancing employability will rely on advances in approaches aimed at improving psychological and identity capital. Because the various forms of capital interact with and complement each other, optimising their delivery would benefit from increased cooperation between the faculties, the Career Centre, and other units within the university. This could strengthen community ties at an organisational level and for the students, which would open new pathways for various forms of capital to interact. The guiding principle dictates that "it is through various communities that multi-modal forms of learning and personal development occur and where capitals are nurtured" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 349). While such connections are important, it is equally necessary to render them visible by communicating them clearly to students. As will be clarified below, communication is a topic of concern for many students. Also, being informal lowers the threshold to participate. Any formal requirements or expectations can be seen as an obstacle that adds to the pressure resulting from an already demanding study schedule.

In response to the first research question, international students generally perceive employability in instrumental terms. This image consists of considering employability as a possession and employability development as a means to an end. Students' emphasis on skills indicates the presence of the knowledge economy-driven skills discourse as part of their conceptions, at least to some extent. Key indicators of such an understanding are the bestowed symbolic value of being employed as a reward for overcoming challenges and acquiring higher education credentials, in combination with the consideration of employability as a life necessity, improved employment prospects as the main motivation to study, and the lack of evidence to suggest that students actively engage in employability development for the long-

term. However, student conceptions of employability are not one-sided. Not indicating that they do not consciously or systematically engage in employability development as a lifelong (or career-long) process, does not mean they do not do so in their own way. By establishing a link between their personal and professional identity, students do recognise that employability can be embodied and that it includes a personal dimension. Thus, they also acknowledge the connection between personal and professional development. These findings confirm that employability is a multidimensional phenomenon. The conceptual exploration of employability within the context of the University of Oulu also establishes that there is a correlation between said conception and its operationalisation, implying that a solid conceptual basis is essential to an effective employability development plan. The identified shortcomings in students' perceptions of employability as well as their willingness to receive career education and employability support means that the University of Oulu can steer its students towards a greater appreciation of employability whereby psychological and identity capital, based on Tomlinson's model of graduate capital, providing new areas for growth.

6.2 The value of student perceptions on employability

The discussion of conceptions of employability touched upon various different topics that are part of the discussion of student perceptions and expectations of employability development at the University of Oulu. The section focuses more on the identified gap in the research pertaining to the value of student voices as part of approaches to employability development in higher education.

6.2.1 Community-building as part of employability development

Based on the research findings, international students consider being part of the university community as important and beneficial to their employability. The earlier discussion of inclusion connected students' sense of belonging with the cultivation of identity capital and the role of the Career Centre in support of a campus community. Given the challenges to enter the Finnish job market, a strong campus community can act as a vaulting board of employability by, for example, helping students expand their professional network. Being part of a community can also act as a motivating factor for students, thereby enhancing their psychological capital. Job opportunities can be increased if employers latch onto this campus community, which supports a broader employability ecosystem. Such initiatives could have a spillover effect

characterised by an improved ability, on the part of international students, to participate in Finnish society and working life thanks to their experiences at the University of Oulu.

Another important element that regulates access to said community and employability development opportunities, such as career fairs, for example, is communication. Students expressed a lack of clear information about career-related events and employability development services. They are often not aware of the available events and services and only learn about them from other students or on their own initiative. This means that certain information released by the university does not reach them. Particularly the large amount of emails, many of which are in Finnish, is problematic. Having to determine whether certain messages contain relevant information is time-consuming and adds to the workload. Unclear communication also entails the risk of alienating the international student body. Having to find out about various employability development opportunities on their own can potentially erode their confidence in the university and negatively affect their sense of belonging. Furthermore, a lack of clear information may take away from students' attention to employability development. Given that many students do not think about their careers or engage in employability development until the later stages of their studies (Bridgstock, 2009; Pitan, 2016b), showing support through clear communication about existing services can raise awareness about the importance of employability development. This ties into the "duty of care" that universities have with regard to providing adequate resources to help students transition to the world of work (Griffiths et al., 2018, p. 910). The absence of an unequivocal means of communication raises the question of whether there is a guiding framework for all employability-related matters. Whether there should be one or what such a framework would look like is another matter. What matters to students is that information regarding employability should be more explicit. This would benefit efforts of community-building and encourage students to consider career planning sooner.

Student perceptions about the employability development opportunities provided by the University of Oulu are captured under the term *accuracy*. Accuracy represents an overall appraisal of the quality of employability development that students enjoy. The presentation of the findings offered an initial clarification of students' overall opinion, which was divided. In brief, students are not confident about entering the world of work once they leave university, generally speaking. In other words, they do not feel work-ready. International students are under the impression that, once they graduate, they will be released from the university into the real world to fend for themselves. This impression is accompanied by the feeling that they are only

at the university to earn a degree, which translates into them not being integrated as part of a broader campus community. Students signalled that better integration would improve their engagement with employability. Feeling secluded then, would presumably have the opposite effect of reducing the likelihood of finding work and participating in Finnish society. This could prompt more students to leave Finland which would have an unfavourable effect on retention efforts. Thus, supporting students in their transition to working life should be seen as a key component of retention strategies. The contextual framework of this thesis established that international student mobility in Finland has primarily been about attraction (Auranen et al., 2018; Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017; Jokila et al., 2019). Furthermore, Mathies and Karhunen (2021a) concluded that the retention rate in Finland is high relative to the small number of incoming students. While the attraction and retention of international talent is certainly a numbers game, one should not come at the expense of the other. The key takeaway from the information garnered from students' perspectives, is that it is important to include them as stakeholders of the employability discourse since they signal how efforts to enhance their employability can reach them better. The best approach to enhance student employability will then fall short if it cannot reach the students. As such, students' role is similar to that of the canary in the coal mine. Not in the sense that they act as an authority on how employability development should be approached, nor as a critic of how employability should not be implemented, but with the intent to raise awareness of certain issues that, if addressed, could maximise the impact of the delivery of employability development opportunities.

As will become apparent in the discussion of student expectations, the University of Oulu, and higher education institutions in general, do have a role to play in enhancing graduate employability. This is not only motivated by a responsibility towards the students but also by the potential impact on employment rates at a national level. As such, the main argument put forth by this analysis is that aside from being a matter of quantity, attraction and retention strategies should also focus on quality. In turn, strong employability prospects backed by a range of employability development opportunities that address students' needs can be a powerful factor in raising the attractiveness of the University of Oulu and Finland as a place to settle. Students' claim that being valued members of a campus community would encourage them to better engage with their employability warrants further study, however. Sense of belonging is an abstract concept and its correlation with employability needs to be better documented. Based on the analysis of this thesis, it can be stated with confidence that there is a correlation between sense of belonging and engagement with employability development.

Further study is required to determine whether that correlation has any significant effect. For reference, Caruso and de Wit (2015) conducted a study on factors affecting students' decision to study abroad. They also noted that there are different types of students and that factors will affect different types of students in different ways. Along these lines, two new avenues for research become available: (a) assessing whether an inclusive campus community could contribute to students' decision to stay in Finland and (b) determining whether the availability and awareness of employability development opportunities could be a pull factor in attracting international students.

Student perceptions of the Career Centre and the value of a degree were, up until this point, omitted from the analysis of the accuracy of employability development opportunities. The Career Centre was discussed earlier in relation to the creation of a campus community and the development of identity and psychological capital in students. This discussion was partially supported by students' perceptions of the Career Centre as being neutral and trustworthy. It also included a positive appraisal of the Career Centre's activities such as the organisation of recruitment events, and jobs search and application guidance. One of the reasons why the Career Centre is featured again is for the sake of totality. Based on students' positive experiences with the Career Centre, we can conclude that the Career Centre has a positive effect on the quality of the employability development opportunities at the University of Oulu. Given the Career Centre's visibility, as well as neutrality, the threshold to access its services is also low, meaning that it also improves the accessibility of its services. Another equally important, reason is that students mention the Career Centre explicitly. The same applies to the value of a degree, which is why both topics carry more weight and are discussed individually.

Aside from a perceived lack of access to employability development opportunities and uncertainty about their work readiness, students were also sceptical about the effect of a degree to their employability. Overall, the international students that took part in this study are not convinced that their degree provides much-added value to their employability. Paired with the motivation to acquire higher education credentials to increase job prospects, such outlooks echo the increasingly relevant sentiment that a degree alone is not enough to increase opportunities in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008). That said, possessing a degree is still seen as a necessity to be eligible for a job in one's field of choice. Particularly, students whose faculties maintain ties with the industry state that having a degree enhances their employability. Conversely, not having credentials, or at least not being enrolled in a relevant degree programme, most likely impedes their chances of being employed. Though the degree in itself

is considered valuable, albeit as a necessity, it was the content of the degree programmes that received the most criticism. Some students feel they are not taught the necessary skills required by the modern workplace and believe some content to be outdated. These students will have to rely more on themselves or look elsewhere to acquire the skills they need and to stand out in their job search. Since students will look for help from those whom they trust, they might find adequate support at a career centre (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Paired with the significance of conceptual understandings of employability, the recurring attention to skills acquisition along with the Career Centre as a new resource and the relative lack of access to certain services can serve as important talking points on the employability agenda of the University of Oulu.

6.2.2 Improving job prospects through career education

In this study, expectations are treated as an extension of perceptions and provide an alternate take on student perspectives. Therefore, the second research question is made up of both elements. The case for two research questions was premised on the idea that conceptual understanding of employability will affect students' more operational takes on employability development provided by the University Oulu. Divulging student expectations shows that this assumption is correct. Student expectations are characterised by a call for more opportunities and career education. Based on their communication, these expectations are initially geared towards improving the chances of securing a job. As such, student expectations are driven by their conception of employability as a possession. This is particularly the case for the theme of *opportunities*. This outcome is to be expected considering that improved job prospects are the main motivation to study. Students expect tangible results, in the form of employment, from their effort of moving to a foreign country and completing their studies. As relative newcomers who are not familiar with the Finnish labour market, international students expect the University of Oulu to assume a greater role as both a facilitator of employability and an employer. As a facilitator, the task of the University of Oulu is to bridge the gap between the academic community and professional communities. Students assign this responsibility partly to the university since, as an institution, it can act with more authority and credibility. The role of a facilitator could also translate into having a more direct hand in providing students with job opportunities, either through connections with employers or by becoming an employer itself. In connecting students with employers or by integrating them into its own workforce, the university is essentially engaging in community-building. With students stating that being part of a campus community would increase their engagement with employability development

opportunities, a community that includes employers can, in some cases, also lead to improved opportunities.

An investigation of the theme of career education adds nuance to the relationship between conceptions of employability and student expectations. By receiving career education students hope to be better equipped for the Finnish job market. However, in expecting more education on career planning (also understood as career management), students have improved job opportunities in mind. Thus, career planning is geared towards job acquisition and employability as a possession. Skills training, by contrast, is supposed to enhance performance while on the job. As such, students do not only expect to be taught how to be successful in their job search but also want the university to provide them with the skills they need to flourish in the workplace. This take on the role of higher education again aligns with the notion that students expect their educational institution to provide added value to their degree in the form of employability (Tomlinson, 2008). It should be noted that students talk about skills in terms of generic and subject-specific skills. Nowhere in the interviews is there any reference to career planning or management as a skill in its own right, at least not explicitly. Herein lies a potential fallacy in students' perceptions and attitudes. Their comments related to skills acquisition were relative to their personal situation, determined by their field of study. Generally speaking, students wish to improve or update their technical skills and complement them with generic skills.

Returning to the matter of answering the second research question, student perceptions of the employability development opportunities at the University of Oulu are characterised by a perceived difficulty to access employability-related services and a perceived lack of preparedness to enter the Finnish labour market. The former is caused by a combination of shortcomings in communication and a feeling of exclusion from the university community. The latter, concerning the accuracy of efforts to enhance student employability, is expressed as the impression that international students are merely transiting through the university and subsequent mixed feelings about the contribution of a degree to employability. International students feel they are not adequately prepared for the transition to working life and are not certain if they have acquired the right skills through their courses. However, international students do recognise that the University of Oulu is putting in effort to enhance their employability. The new Career Centre stand apart as the best example. Students view the Career Centre as trustworthy and supportive. Its recruitment events are visible and career guidance has helped students in their job search and application. As for expectations, students hope that the

University of Oulu can provide more opportunities, either by employing more students directly or by freeing up positions through established partnerships with employers. Students also want career education to contribute to their capacity to navigate the labour market and improve their chances of landing a job. Such expectations are more in line with the conception of employability as a possession. Students also seek additional skills training, either through updated course content or through other arrangements, to help them perform well in the workplace after graduation. As such, these attitudes correspond more to the notion of employability as an action.

6.3 Limitations and future research

The research on student conceptions and perceptions of employability has revealed a vast amount of information and highlighted the complexity of employability development. As this thesis functions as an initial study of student employability within the context of the University of Oulu, the results are broad rather than detailed and therefore should be the object of further study. Since employability is a multidimensional concept, any further research on the subject will likely involve a mix of any of the topics mentioned below or touch upon the content of this thesis. Also, different research avenues can be pursued using different research methods.

A solid starting point for future research would be to acquire a deeper understanding of student conceptions of employability through analysis of variance, whereby the variance in conception is compared between different students groups based on field of study or faculty, age, work experience, and level of progression in the degree programme. Such a study could be combined with the explicit evaluation of the connection between conceptual understandings and expectations of or engagement with employability development. This approach would likely provide a more representative image of student conceptions of employability. Precisely because employability is complex and contextually dependent it should be approached from different angles, which implies different ontological and epistemological perspectives.

The abovementioned strategies could also be applied to inquire about Finnish students' conceptions, resulting in a comparison of the viewpoints of international and Finnish students. The inclusion of the perspectives of Finnish students is essential given the reported potential of an inclusive campus community for employability development. It follows that, if international student perspectives are important, so are the opinions of Finnish students. Another avenue of research could be to test the hypothesis which states that an increased involvement in campus

activities through the inclusion in a campus community increases engagement with employability. Additionally, as suggested in the discussion above, it would be interesting to explore whether improved employability development opportunities could be leveraged as a pull factor to increase the attractiveness of the University of Oulu.

Motivated by the same rationale as the one advocating further research on the conceptions of employability, a focused study of students' perceptions and expectations of the Career Centre is needed. Using the same variables, such research can highlight what type of support students with different personal backgrounds expect from the Career Centre. The graduate capital model, with an emphasis on psychological and identity capital, can form the theoretical basis of such a study. In connection to students' conceptions of employability, it would be beneficial to gauge student's understanding of career planning and their attitude towards it. This thesis would have benefitted from such a line of questioning being included in the interviews with participants. A greater emphasis on career planning can help clarify students' understanding of employability and attitude towards employability development, such as career planning. Inquiries about career planning can also be part of studies involving the Career Centre, for example in support of fostering psychological and identity capital, and revolve around practical issues of engaging in career planning in relation to students' already busy study schedules.

Due to the national importance of graduate employability and student mobility (to be considered in the context of internationalisation), a more ideologically oriented research path would be to explore the connection between employability and citizenship. In this thesis, neoliberalism acted as a frame to highlight the fact that employability is a matter of public policy. Similarly, future research can approach employability and citizenship from a policy perspective, but can also deal with broader topics like human rights, social stability, and sustainable development.

Finally, this thesis focussed exclusively on student perspectives. For a more representative picture of the context to which graduate employability belongs, the views of employers should also be included. Such research would allow results from student-centred studies to extend beyond the confines of the university and be tested against assessments from local employers. Given its connection to the world of work, the Career Centre could also be the subject of such analysis.

6.4 Research validity and ethical considerations

Addressing the validity of research and ethical considerations is an important part of the research process. The purpose is to evaluate whether the research accurately represents reality, i.e., whether the results are true and credible, by ensuring the research process is transparent and open to scrutiny. Matters of validity and ethics have been discussed throughout the methodology chapter, but are included in this section to cover the whole research process.

Research validity has been covered extensively in the literature. Originating in quantitative research, the implementation of validity checks in qualitative research is subject to debate as different paradigmatic viewpoints propose different approaches to validity (Whittemore et al., 2001). The result is a collection of different conceptions of validity and guidelines for performing validity checks (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Thus, there is no single correct way of testing research validity. Rather than trusting in theorised conceptions of validity, Whittemore et al. (2001) propose developing validity criteria that are "reflective of the tenets of the interpretive perspective" (p.527). Similarly, Åkerlind (2005) states that measures of validity should be formulated relative to the ontological and epistemological foundation of the research in question. Given the non-dualistic ontological basis of phenomenography and the dialogue between the research data and the theoretical framework, the validity checks applied in this thesis are comprised of a custom mix of criteria based on both positivistic assumptions and constructivism.

The two main validity procedures for this thesis are based on a framework developed by Creswell and Miller (2000), whereby the validity check of choice is dependent on the adopted lens and paradigm. The framework offers three types of lenses and three paradigmatic assumptions, with the lens referring to the actor who establishes measures of validity. In accordance with the constructivist paradigm, the main type of validity check performed in this thesis is referred to as *disconfirming evidence*. After having established the categories of description and corresponding pools of meaning, I worked my way back down to the data to either find evidence to disprove or confirm the established categories. Such a procedure is consistent with the approach to *phenomenological reduction*, proposed by Sandbergh (1997), as a means to 'bracket' the researchers' prejudices. In essence, this process was about allowing the data to speak for itself and to minimise interference on the part of the researcher.

The outcome space of phenomenographic research represents a collective view which is removed from each individual participant's account. The results from the outcome space are

meant to be generalisable to an extent, which indicates a degree of objectivism. Also, one part of the research focused on conceptual understandings. Being context-related, interpreting the research findings required a degree of generalisation which was acquired by connecting the findings to a theoretical framework. As such, the second validity check involves *triangulation*. Creswell and Miller (2000) describe triangulation as a method where "researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study". As mentioned above, this was achieved through the dialogue between theory and data.

The reliance on established research for the interpretation of the findings in this thesis means the process was not entirely free from bias. Theoretical input shaped my own understanding of employability and adapting the interview questions from a previous study also likely shaped my point of view. As such, as a researcher, I acknowledge my own subjectivity as part of the limitations of this study. Just as the study of student conceptions of employability assumes both subjective and objective dimensions, this thesis, as the object of scrutiny, also involves a degree of subjectivity. To enhance the reliability of the findings, Åkerlind (2005) encourages the researcher to make the research process visible. Given the lack of clear guidelines on how to conduct phenomenographic analysis, I adopted the analytical steps from thematic analysis as presented by Braun and Clarke (2006).

As stated in the introduction, I am ethically compelled to disclose that I was employed at the University of Oulu Career Centre in 2022. It is not my intent to promote the Career Centre in any way through this thesis. The research findings represent the views of the participants, which I have strived to report as objectively as possible by bracketing my personal opinions and knowledge. During the interviews, I refrained from asking questions which mention the Career Centre specifically, only inquiring about the topic when students mentioned it first and if deemed relevant. Also, striving to render the research process transparent by using thematic analysis so it can be verified was aimed at supporting the ethicality of this study.

In my interactions with the research participants, I adhered to the ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity. As stated in section 5.2 all participants were provided with a consent form prior to the interview. The form explained their rights as research participants in accordance with EU General Data Protection Regulation and Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK guidelines. Prior to the interview, these rights were repeated verbally to avoid misunderstandings. The research participants were told that participation is entirely

voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time and even demand a retraction of their statements after having done the interview. Also, the participants were guaranteed that any opinion they disclose is confidential and that any and all information shared will be anonymised. As such, participants' participatory freedom also extended to answering the questions. This means that it was entirely up to them if and how they wanted to answer a question. Throughout the interview, as well as when contacting participants, I endeavoured to establish a relationship of trust and honesty between myself as the researcher and the participants.

7 Conclusion

This thesis responds to a lack of student perspectives on the significance of employability development in Finnish higher education and calls for more comprehensive approaches to student employability. Student employability has to be understood in the context of internationalisation. Motivated by an ageing and decreasing population, Finnish policy for internationalisation has, for the past two decades, focussed on increasing work-based migration. The more recent policy prescribes a more prevalent role for higher education in raising the number of incoming international students, while also promoting efforts to improve retention rates. While attraction is still the name of the game, it should not remove attention from the needs of students who are already in the country. Higher education has a responsibility towards its students, which now includes helping them make the transition to the world of work. It is therefore imperative to extend them the tools to provide feedback.

The inquiry into student perspectives reaffirms the premise of employability as a multifaceted concept and employability development in higher education as an equally complex issue to which there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The key takeaway from the research is that there is a correlation between students' conceptual understanding of employability and their perceptions of the employability development opportunities provided by the University of Oulu, and how they engage with their employability. Across the board, students view employability as a possession. The corresponding instrumental approach to employability development consists of increasing job opportunities and acquiring a skill set that makes them desirable in the eyes of employers. Such conceptions equate to the employer-driven skills discourse inspired by human capital theory and are incorporated into the knowledge economy. Consequently, the increased economic stimulus bestowed on higher education positions employability as a measure of educational outcome. The skills discourse serves as central to European higher education policy, to which Finnish policy is attuned. As such, the skills discourse not only serves as a template for student conceptions but also plays a role in shaping the employability agenda of the University of Oulu.

With career progression becoming less linear due to the need for adaptability in a competitive labour market and students expecting more value from their degrees, a more comprehensive approach to employability development may better equip students to face the uncertainties of today's labour market. Given the relationship between students' conceptual understanding and their engagement with employability, adopting a comprehensive approach at the University of

Oulu requires overcoming the conception of employability as a possession since such a conception does not encourage them to actively engage with employability development. Such effort should be paired with practical measures to ensure that employability development opportunities reach students. This involves addressing matters of accessibility and accuracy.

Despite a primary orientation towards short-term employability goals, students indicated a readiness for career education. Lessons drawn from the research data in conjunction with the theory reveal three contextually relevant and interrelated considerations for a paradigmatic shift for enhancing student employability at the University of Oulu. First, Tomlinson's model of graduate capital offers a customisable framework through which students' development needs can be understood and targeted. The elements of psychological and identity capital in particular show promise with regard to helping students make informed career decisions that lead to sustainable employment. Also, the model does not conflict with or challenge the position of skills as part of employability development. Second, fostering students' psychological and identity capital can be achieved by enhancing students' sense of belonging which manifests through an inclusive campus community. With the aim of improving students' engagement with employability, a campus community is characterised by an integration of international students with the Finnish student body as well as a greater involvement of and cooperation between faculties and career services. Subsequently, the third consideration pertains to the role of the Career Centre. The Career Centre can fulfil a major role in fostering psychological and identity capital through its capacity for community-building. Student perceptions present the Career Centre as a trustworthy and neutral space that is invested in supporting their employability, while the theory describes establishing relationships as one of the main activities of modern career centres. As such, the Career Centre will likely see its role in enhancing student employability grow in the future.

Ultimately, enhancing student employability constitutes both a retention and attraction strategy. A comprehensive model for employability development not only benefits the individual student but can also have a spillover effect on Finland as a whole. Students who are better equipped for the challenges of the labour market are more likely to forge a satisfying career path, decide to settle in Finland and participate in society. Thus, by investing in the employability of its students, the University of Oulu can simultaneously help students stay in Finland and attract more students to its campuses. In doing so, the University of Oulu can fulfil its responsibility towards society, and its Finnish and international student body.

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Appendix 1 – Interview questions

1. **What is your main motivation for choosing to study?**
    a. **Why did you chose the University of Oulu or your degree programme?**

2. **What kind of career plans do you have for the future?**

3. **What does 'employability' mean to you?**

4. **What kind of skills do you need to be employable?**

5. **How do you think that your employability can be improved?**
    a. **Whose responsibility is it to improve your employability?**

6. **How do you expect your degree programme to improve your employability?**

7. **What services that help you improve your employability do you expect the university provide?**

8. **What does the university do to improve your employability?**

9. **What is your opinion on the services that the university provides to improve your employability?**

10. **How can the university improve its services regarding the employability of students?**

11. **To what extent does employability matter to you?**

Appendix 2 – Research consent form

Consent to take part in research

I, Johan Estiévenart, am hereby asking for your consent in participating in a research study as part of my Masters' thesis on the *perceptions of employability of international degree students at the University of Oulu*. The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of how international degree students (MA) perceive the concept of employability and to gauge to what extent they believe the University of Oulu is providing opportunities to develop their employability. This kind of student feedback may contribute to efforts to improve the university's career services and employability development opportunities.

Your participation in this study would be in the form of an interview which will be recorded for the purpose of analysis. Any information you provide will be treated anonymously and analysed solely by the researcher. Any information that enables you to be identified will be deleted after the final thesis has been published, following evaluation and approval by the Faculty of Education.

This study accords to the EU General Data Protection Regulation and the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK guidelines. As a participant, you have the following rights:

- to voluntarily accept participation or to refuse participation
- to withdraw from participation, temporarily or permanently, without suffering any negative consequences
- to withdraw from participation at any time
- to receive information about the content, methodology, time frame, stage, and purpose of the research

You can contact the researcher, Johan Estiévenart (MA Education and Globalisation), at any time via: johan.estievenart@student.oulu.fi

This thesis research is supervised by Elina Lehtomäki, professor of global education.

Statement of consent

I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked.

This agreement is made in duplicate, with each party, researcher and participant, holding one original.

Please select the statements that apply to you.

☐ I am willing to participate in the research.

☐ I accept that the interview will be recorded and used for research purposes.

☐ I allow the information that I have provided to be stored for use in future research.

☐ I do not allow the information that I have provided to be stored for use in future research.

Name and signature:

_____

Date:

_____

Email:

_____