Purpose: This research adopts the perspective of Personal Construct Theory (PCT) to conceptualise employability. The study explores differences in the implicit employability theories of those involved in developing employability (educators) and those selecting and recruiting HE students and graduates (employers).

Design/methodology/approach: A repertory grid technique (RGT) was employed to uncover the implicit theories of 22 employers and 14 educators across the UK.

Findings: A total of 717 constructs were elicited. A differential analysis of data gathered demonstrated several areas of consensus among employers and educators (including; emotional management, confidence, professionalism), as well as divergence in representations of commitment, proactivity, interpersonal competencies, and vision to the conceptualisation of employability.

Practical implications: Findings from this analysis indicate a need to integrate group process assessments within undergraduate programmes and recruitment procedures.

Originality/value: This study represents a personal construct approach to employability, utilising the unique value of RGT to further inform our understanding of employability within a HE context. This study contributes to an understanding of employability as a continually re-constructed concept. Providing insights to its nature via two information rich cases that have extensive knowledge on the topic.

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Introduction

The responsibility and function of Higher Education (HE) as a developer of employability has been strongly contested (Collini, 2012; Cramner, 2006; Lorenz, 2012; Lynch, 2015, Marginson, 2013). Those unhappy with the employability agenda argue for its juxtaposed position against traditional HE values and aims. Nevertheless, the development of employability has been high on the UK HE itinerary for some time (Dearing, 1997; Kromydas, 2017). HE is today being promoted as an employability developer through UK Government discourse, university comparison sites, league tables, and institutional marketing practices (Christie, 2017). This emphasis is compounded by a human capital rationale for the increased personal contributions of individual students to the provision of this education (Anderson, 2016; Browne Report, 2010). This context has resulted in an upsurge in discussions around students as consumers; aiming to possess a degree, rather than *be* a learner (Cain *et al.,* 2012; Molesworth *et al.,* 2009; Regan, 2012). While it can be argued that the employability agenda represents only a narrow aspect of HE provisions, an acknowledgment of positioning HE in this way enables progress towards an ethical responsibility to; 1) offer accurate information so not to mislead, and 2) provide the best possible training to all students (Bhaerman and Spill, 1988). Furthermore, one might argue it also represents a scientific responsibility to model evidence-based practice relevant to this new wave for learning.

With this standpoint in mind, the present paper turns to a consideration of the theoretical and empirical base informing employability development in HE. Firstly, the lack of consistency around the conceptual definition of employability has resulted in various conceptualisations of employability, differing in their focus, breadth, depth, and links to stakeholder data (Clarke, 2017; Holmes, 2013; Thijssen *et al.,* 2008; Williams *et al.,* 2016). Such diversity of information may in part explain paralleling variability in approaches to employability development within HE (Pond and Harrington, 2013).

A consideration of stakeholder's perspectives, particularly those who offer insight into the allocation of employment outcomes (i.e. employment and promotions), has an important place in our understanding of employability (Hogan *et al.,* 2013; Wilton, 2014). Numerous reports evidence employer's dissatisfaction with current UK graduates, who they purport to be lacking in necessary requirements for employability (see, AGR, 2016; CBI, 2016 for recent publications). While the accuracy of these accounts is contested (Hesketh, 2000; Mason *et al.,* 2003; Rosenbaum and Binder,

1997; Stasz, 1997), studies exploring employer's perspectives are limited. Considering the wider international research relating to employer's perspectives, investigations are frequently constrained by pre-established lists of relevant components (e.g. El Mansour and Dean, 2016; Finch *et al.,* 2013; Harun *et al.,* 2017; Tsitskari *et al.,* 2017). Chhinzer and Russo (2018) sort to remedy this narrow examination of employability through the sampling of evaluation forms received from employers offering postgraduate work placements. Results identified content considered in employer's assessments but excluded from university derived assessment forms. These findings illustrate the constraining nature of closed questions in offering a complete account of employer's perceptions of employability.

Studies into employers' perspectives on employability have largely focused on specific occupations or subject areas (El Mansour and Dean, 2016; Harun *et al.,* 2017; Tsitskari *et al.,* 2017). A consideration of contextual influences on capital demand raise concerns as to whether an occupation-specific focus on employer requirements is more prone to contextual changes in roles and functions (DeGrip *et al.,* 2004). Furthermore, with the increase in institution-wide employability strategies, offering direction to diverse subject areas, there is a need to explore common language which may exist, to focus these policies. It is proposed that a consideration of employability across a range of occupations and settings could present a durable and widely applicable framework for employability development. Such an expanded focus would enable progression beyond technical skills and subject-specific knowledge, contributing to a common foundation of employability.

The extent to which skills are perceived as a holistic account of employability is disputed. A consideration of the wider concept of employability suggests that studies offering understanding into generic skills requirements represent only part of the story around employability (Holmes, 2013, Suleman, 2017). The plethora of skill and attribute lists produced by surveyors of employers advance little insight into employers understanding of employability, beyond possession of individual applicants (Holmes, 2013). This is at odds with existing holistic models of employability. A systematic review of such conceptualisation indicates additional negotiating factors in the application of employability skills, as well as contextual factors which limit the transformation of skills into employment outcomes (Williams *et al.,* 2016). Conceptualisations published since this review further reinforce this positioning (Sumanasiri *et al.,* 2015; Tomlinson, 2017).

Employer educator consensus

Further to the potentially constrained investigations into employers' perception of employability, consistency between what employers see as employability, and the views of those implementing employability interventions in HE, is undetermined. Any discrepancy between these views may contribute to employers' continued dissatisfaction with graduates. Singh *et al.,* (2014) found that employers and educators agreed on communication skills as the most important generic skill for employability. But they disagreed on the value of other skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving. Findings of research by El Mansour and Dean (2016) exploring an additional 11 skills, suggested a partial consensus across employers and educators in terms of the importance of communication and IT skills. Research conducted in Syria, by Ayoubi *et al.,* (2017) offered a less bounded investigation of what employers and educators see as important. Results of this research again focused on skills categories and suggested diversity in the way employers and HE policy makers construed employability. The extent to which these conclusions are applicable to a UK educational context and workplace environment remains unclear.

A personal construct perspective

The present study takes a Personal Construct Theory (PCT) approach to understanding employability. PCT presents individuals as scientists, intent on understanding and predicting the events around them (Kelly, 1955). They do this via the development and testing of personal theories. These theories are informed by experience; the more direct experience one has with an event or phenomenon, the more detailed their personal theory.

PCT assumes that we can better understand individuals by considering the impact of their accumulative experiences on the way they construe the world. These personal theories would consequently inform that individuals behaviours, in the case of employers this would include training practices, and/or employment decisions. Taking this view, employability is conceptualised as a continually reconstructed concept. In accordance with PCT, a shared knowledge is expected to exist among those applying a common practice, bringing hope beyond the view that the diversity of terminology used across these occupations reflects a lack of shared meaning (Collet *et al.,* 2015).

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Dominant interview approaches to accessing implicit theories, rely on stakeholders becoming consciously aware of their viewpoint (Ayoubi *et al.,* 2017). Another technique that benefits the pursuit of implicit theories is the repertory grid technique (RGT). Originating from PCT, this technique seems to provide a greater depth of construct elicitation than semi-structured questioning alone (Goffin *et al.,* 2012; Lemke *et al.,* 2011). Utilising such an approach offers benefits beyond open-ended surveys proceeding closed items (e.g. Chhinzer and Russo, 2018), minimising bias produced via item content and clarification of responses.

Adding to this existing literature, the present study aims to utilise RGT to produce a holistic approach to understand the nature of employability, as viewed by a wide range of UK employers and educators. This study aims to offer a detailed description of employability, acknowledging both personal accounts and shared meaning.

Method

Participants

A purposive snowball sample of 22 employers and 14 educators in the UK, were recruited for this study. Initial participants were recruited via advertisement on an employability-related mailing list, thus indicating their interest and potential involvement in this topic area. These participants were then asked to promote the study to their contacts within HE and employment. Inclusion criterion required individuals to identify employability as a concept of continued relevance in their daily functioning.

Initial sample size was informed by saturation levels reported within previous research. Moynihan (1996) suggested little is added to the richness of RGT data from a sample size greater than ten. Alternatively, works by Goffin *et al.* (2012); Blundell *et al.* (2012); Sharma *et al.* (2013); Tan and Hunter (2002); Lemke *et al.* (2011), recruited 39 -33, 17, 25, 15-25, and 40 respondents respectively, reporting varying saturation levels. For this reason, a minimum sample size of 26 was targeted. The appropriateness of the present sample size was subsequently informed by a consideration of new categories emerging from each respective participant within the sample (see figure one). New

categories were established when two or more instances of a construct were perceived as reflecting the same semantic meaning.

Figure 1. The number of new categories produced with each new grid
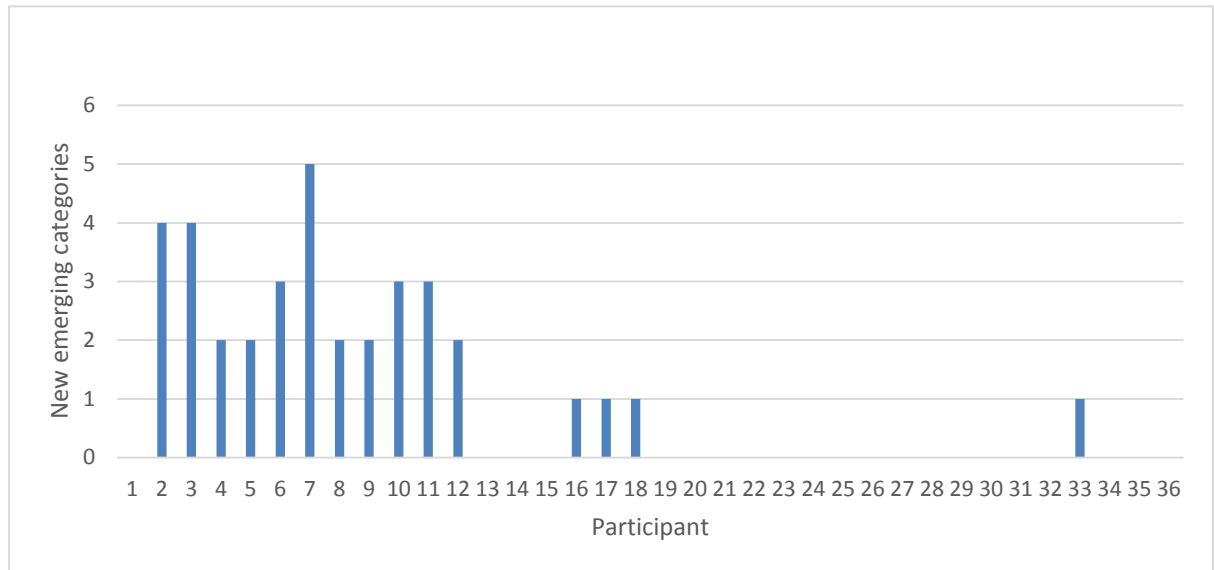

Figure 1. Bar graph representing the number of new categories presented within each subsequent participants data.

The present sample represented decades of experience in relation to the chosen subject area. This expertise offers further justification of the sample size presented herein, for drawing meaningful conclusions (Jette *et al.,* 2003). The employers sample consisted of individuals involved in the recruitment or selection of graduates and/or HE students. Job titles included; Group human resources manager, Assistant supervisor, Directorate manager, Human resources advisor, Head teacher, and firm Director. This sample involved those within retail, marketing, education, childcare, law, and health. The educators sample consisted of those self-defined as involved in the development of employability within a HE setting. This sample comprised a range of positions, including Placement tutors, Heads of careers services, and Employability lecturers. Average interview length was 55 minutes 32 seconds.

Data collection approach

A combination of face-to-face and telephone interviews, were performed to complete the repertory grids (RGs).

Element elicitation

Elements refer to *''the things or events which are abstracted by a construct''* (Kelly, 1991 p.95). In this study, elements represented observations of employees or students that participants had interviewed, recruited, managed (employers), or taught (educators). To ensure a wide employability spectrum, participants were asked to name a range of individuals perceived as representing high, moderate, and low levels of employability. As the perspective of employability beyond the narrow focus of initial recruitment was sort, interviewees were invited to select employees of any tenure, and thus may not have been involved in their initial recruitment.
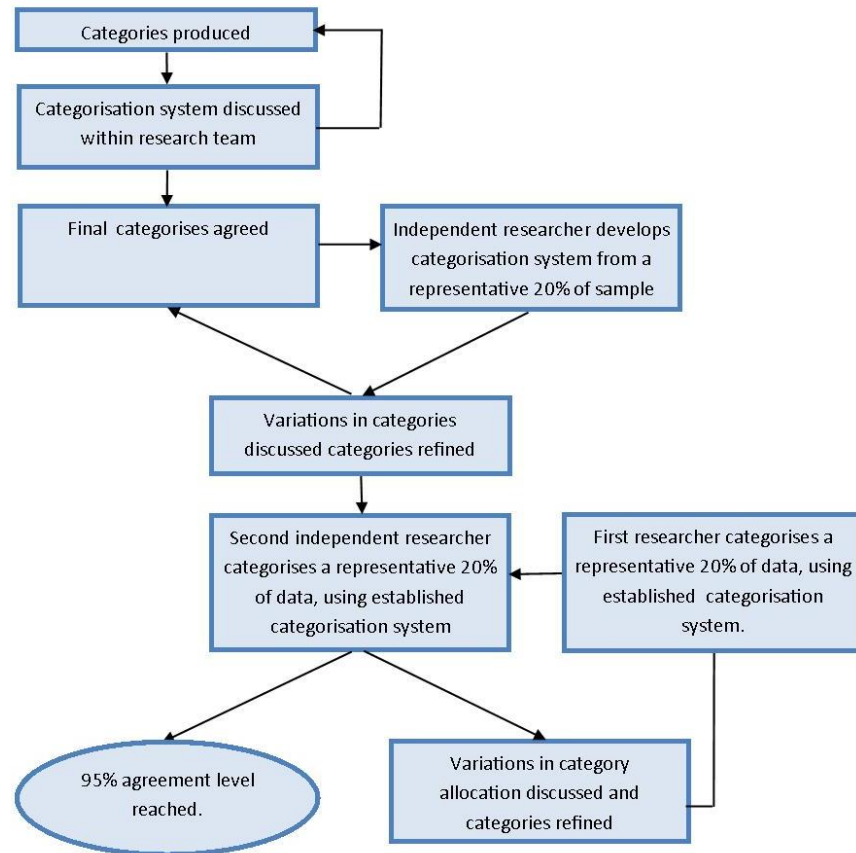
Construct elicitation

Constructs represent bipolar dimensions on which individual's position their understanding of a phenomenon (Kelly, 1991). For example, an individual may understand love in terms of affection-distance, and tolerance-conflict. To elicit participants' constructs relating to employability, a dyad form of construct elicitation was employed. Participants selected two individuals, for example, Caleb and Quinn, and were asked *'in what ways are these two people similar in terms of their employability?'* For each construct, participants were then asked to state the opposite pole, providing a bipolar construct (for instance, both individuals may be viewed as hardworking. The opposite of hardworking may be lazy, uninterested). Participants were then asked to make these comparisons until no new constructs were identified.

Analytical approach

A bootstrapping content analysis was performed to aggregate the whole dataset. Meaning, constructs were grouped into categories based on the communication of similar meanings, rather than based on a pre-existing categorisation system. This was conducted via the procedure outlined within Jankowicz (2004), in which individual constructs are compared to existing categories, and new meaning elicited the development of a new category. The reliability of the classification system was assessed through triangulation of several reliability processes (see figure two).

Figure 2. A flowchart illustrating the inter-rater reliability process

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                    │   Categories produced     │◄───────┐
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                              ▼                           │
                ┌──────────────────────────┐              │
                │ Categorisation system    │              │
                │ discussed within research│──────────────┘
                │ team                     │
                └──────────────────────────┘
                              │
                              ▼
        ┌──────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────────┐
        │ Final categorises    │─────▶│ Independent researcher   │
        │ agreed               │      │ develops categorisation  │
        │                      │      │ system from a            │
        │                      │      │ representative 20% of    │
        │                      │      │ sample                   │
        └──────────────────────┘      └──────────────────────────┘
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            │ Variations in categories │
            │ discussed categories     │
            │ refined                  │
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    │ Second independent       │◄─────│ First researcher         │
    │ researcher categorises a │      │ categorises a            │
    │ representative 20% of    │      │ representative 20% of    │
    │ data, using established  │      │ data, using established  │
    │ categorisation system    │      │ categorisation system.   │
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   │ 95%         │  │ Variations in category   │◄──┘
   │ agreement   │  │ allocation discussed and │
   │ level       │  │ categories refined       │
   │ reached.    │  └──────────────────────────┘
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Findings

A total of 717 constructs were elicited from the 36 participants (22 employers and 14 educators), representing an average of 20 constructs per person. All participants reported satisfaction with the data collected and no alterations to concepts, elements, or ratings, were made following the participants review of the grid.

Sixteen superordinate and thirty subordinate categories were produced through the content analysis, to represent the RG data (see figure three).

Figure 3. Thematic map illustrating location of variations in perceptions reported by stakeholder groups

Figure 3. Thematic map indicating points of divergence. Differences in proportional representation are presented in yellow; perceived variations in the nature of data linked to this category by the two samples are presented in green. Superordinate constructs are represented in red, while subordinate constructs are blue.

A thematic map of the complete dataset is presented in figure three. This map illustrates points of divergence and convergence between the two samples. Several areas were identified, in which no variations in representation were present. Both employers and those in HE highlight the contribution of self-awareness and professional development to employability. Likewise, the contribution of signalling know-how – that is to say how one communicates their strengths within recruitment processes - and preparation for interview categories, show the pivotal role of signalling theory in both samples understanding of employability. Employers and educators data illustrated a continued emphasis on the role of confidence within employability understandings. Supplementing this professionalism was recognised as an important aspect to employability conceptualisation within the present data. This is not a component of employability widely acknowledged within current employability conceptualisations, Similarly, the role of prioritising, time-management, planning, taking an evidence-based approach to work, being aware of the context of business, and general ability level, were identified as important aspects of employability understanding for both samples.

The following discussion pertains to key points of departure within the analysis of the two stakeholder groups. The discussed differences are identified as those most likely to be impacted by HE employability development initiatives.

Complimentary statistical analysis, illustrating significant differences in the proportional representation of these categories, is presented within table 1. These frequency rates were considered as a means of exploring the intensity/ saliency of each component of employability within the sample. However, it is cautioned that an over-reliance on these frequency counts as a means of identifying significant variations can lead to a disregard of context (Morgan, 1993). The impact of context in respect to the selected differences is discussed later.

Table 1. Definitions and comparisons of frequencies for two subsamples

Superordinate categories	Subordinate categories	Definition	Employer (n= 22)		Instructors (n=14)		Significance
			Frequency (%)	Participants (%)	Frequency (%)	Participants (%)	
Commitment - directed, pledged or bound to engage with the role.	Hard worker	Engagement with work rather than avoiding aspects or focusing attention elsewhere.	36 (7.42	13 (59)	14 (6.03)	8 (57)	χ^2= 2.543,p = .11
	Passion	Show a passion or interest in the area.	16 (3.29)	9 (41)	9 (3.88)	7 (50)	χ^2=.102, p = .75
	Interest in company	Possesses an interest in the company leading to commitment to a specific job.	14 (2.89)	9 (41)	1 (0.43)	1 (7)	**χ^2= 4.705, p = .03**
	Conscientiousness	A desire to perform at a high standard. Holds a consideration for quality in their output.	13 (2.68)	7 (32)	2 (.86)	2 (14)	χ^2= 2.624, p = .11
	Longevity	Committed to the role or company for the long term, rather than a temporary destination.	8 (1.65)	6 (27)	-	-	Na
	Shared company values	Considers the goals and ethos of the company above personal needs or expectations, or represents a match between their and organisational values.	7 (1.44)	7 (32)	-	-	Na
	Persistence	Committed to the completion of work activities.	5 (1.03)	4 (18)	2 (.86)	2 (14)	χ^2= .062, p = .80
	Total		99 (2.04)	19 (86)	30 (12.93)	11 (79)	χ^2= 1.699, p = .19

Table 1. continued

Superordinate categories	Subordinate categories	Definition	Employer		Instructors		Significance
			Frequency (%)	Participants (%)	Frequency (%)	Participants (%)	
Interpersonal competence - the capability to interact with others appropriately.	Rapport building	Possesses a pleasant appearance and manner, allowing for a relationship between them and other individuals or groups. Where those concerned understand each other's feelings or ideas and communicate well.	47 (9.70)	19 (91)	11 (4.74)	8 (57)	χ^2= 5.167, p = .02
	Collaboration	Joins in with others, has a positive influence on the pursuit of a common purpose, providing an open and informed whole.	36 (7.42)	14 (64)	8 (3.45)	5 (36)	χ^2= 4.370, p = .04
	Honesty	Truthful in their communications and actions.	11 (2.27)	13 (59)	-	-	na
	Total		94 (19.38)	22 (100)	19 (8.19)	9 (64)	χ^2= 15.240, p < .0001
Experience and Knowledge - knowledge and experience relevance to the attainment of and/or functioning in the role.	Relevance to the job	Job-specific knowledge and skills identified by supervisors as necessary for competent functioning within the role they are placed, which fill an existing need or add additional value.	26 (5.36)	13 (59)	8 (3.45)	5 (36)	χ^2= 3.421, p = .06
	Signalling know-how	Acts in a way that suggests an understanding of expectations within the recruitment process and the appropriate communication of signals.	17 (3.51)	10 (45)	12 (5.17)	8 (57)	χ^2=.069, p = .79
	Evidence- based practice	Has an ability to apply knowledge to relevant settings.	8 (1.65)	6 (27)	4 (1.72)	4 (28)	χ^2= .001, p = .98
	Business awareness	Is aware of the context in which they find themselves applying for the role.	4 (.82)	4 (18)	6 (2.59)	5 (36)	χ^2= 3.297, p = .07
	General ability level	Possesses the basic cognitive ability expected of the role. Not specific to particular skills but rather a general level of intelligence.	3 (.62)	3 (14)	3 (1.29)	3 (21)	χ^2= .784 p = .38
	Total		58 (11.96)	18 (82)	33 (14.22)	13 (93)	χ^2= .286, p = .59

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Table 1. continued

Superordinate categories	Subordinate categories	Definition	Employer		Instructors		Significance
			Frequency (%)	Participants (%)	Frequency (%)	Participants (%)	
Self-development - attitude towards personal growth characterised by a propensity to learn which accurate reflects ones' current situation	Openness	Openness to consider opportunities and alternative values, skills and behaviours.	26 (5.36)	17 (77)	25 (10.78)	12 (86)	χ^2= 2.152, p = .14
	Professional development	Displays an engagement with professional development opportunities.	13 (2.68)	9 (41)	8 (3.45)	7 (50)	χ^2= .247, p = .62
	Self-awareness	Aware of the reality of their own skills, knowledge, character, motives and desires, and utilises an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in these to select appropriate roles, and function optimally within their limits.	12 (2.47)	9 (41)	11 (4.74)	6 (43)	χ^2= 2.287, p = .13
	Total		51 (10.51)	18 (82)	44 (18.97)	14 (100)	χ^2= 2.137, p = .14

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Table 1. continued

Superordinate categories	Subordinate categories	Definition	Employer		Instructors		Significance
			Frequency (%)	Participants (%)	Frequency (%)	Participants (%)	
Taking responsibility -		A level of ownership which induces a feeling of accountability for something working independently without external monitoring.	30 (6.19)	14 (64)	10 (4.31)	7 (50)	χ^2= 3.296, p = .07
	Proactivity	A tendency towards action, to creating or controlling a situation for themselves, rather than requiring other people or circumstances to direct their behaviour.	10 (2.06)	8 (41)	15 (6.47)	11 (79)	**χ^2= 4.634, p = .03**
	Total		40 (8.25)	16 (73)	25 (10.78)	12 (86)	χ^2= .008, p = .93
Emotional management		The ability to control one's emotions to present a calm, consistent, rational, relaxed response within the workplace, which reflects the organisations expectations of them.	22 (4.54)	11 (50)	6 (2.59)	4 (28)	χ^2= 3.634, p = .06
Strategic thinking- can manage time effectively, prioritise tasks to achieve their goals, has a vision and effective planning skills.	Prioritising	Perceptions around the appropriate allocation of mental and other resources to a task, when considered in relation to the wider responsibilities and duties within that role.	7 (1.44)	4 (18)	3 (1.29)	3 (21)	χ^2= .340, p = .56
	Time management	Perceptions around the appropriate allocation of time to a task, when considered in relation to the wider responsibilities and duties within that role.	7 (1.44)	5 (27)	1 (.43)	1 (7)	χ^2= 2.361, p = .12
	Vision	The ability to think about or plan the future with imagination or wisdom.	4 (.83)	4 (18)	15 (6.47)	9 (64)	**χ^2= 12.745, p < .0004**
	Planning	Considering a task or activity alongside others and arrange in a manner that its goal can be achieved.	2 (.41)	1 (5)	4 (1.72)	4 (28)	χ^2= 3.076, p = .08
	Total		20 (4.12)	6 (27)	23 (9.91)	10 (71)	χ^2= 3.794, p = .05

Table 1. continued

Superordinate categories	Subordinate categories	Definition	Employer		Instructors		Significance
			Frequency (%)	Participants (%)	Frequency (%)	Participants (%)	
Confidence - a belief in one's general abilities and in relation to specific behaviours, which leads to confident behaviour.	Confident behaviour	Display a realistic/accurate level of confidence in their role related behaviours.	14 (2.89)	10 (45)	11 (4.74)	9 (64)	χ^2= .263, p = .61
	Self Confidence	A realistic belief in themselves and their abilities.	6 (1.24)	6 (27)	8 (3.45)	5 (36)	χ^2= 1.937, p = .16
	Total		20 (4.12)	12 (55)	19 (8.19)	10 (71)	χ^2= 1.548, p = .21
Professionalism - adhering to organisational regulations, goals, and expectations regarding work presentation and behaviour.	Presentation	Appropriate communication style and appearance that communicates an engagement with the role and values of the role.	9 (1.89)	7 (32)	7 (3.02)	7 (50)	χ^2= .836, p = .36
	Organisational compliance	Adhering to systems and codes of practice expected of employees.	8 (1.65)	6 (27)	2 (.86)	2 (14)	χ^2= .764, p = .38
	Total		17 (4.51)	11 (50)	9 (3.88)	8 (57)	χ^2= .210, p = .65

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Table 1. *continued*

Superordinate categories	Subordinate categories	Definition	Employer		Instructors		Significance
			Frequency (%)	Participants (%)	Frequency (%)	Participants (%)	
Adaptive - has adapted their behaviours to meet external demand.	Adaptive behaviours	Engage in behaviours evident of an adaptive nature.	6 (1.24)	4 (18)	6 (2.59)	6 (21)	χ²= 1.854, p =.17
	Relevant know-how	The relevant skills to extend above and beyond a specific job description.	5 (1.03)	4 (18)	3 (1.29)	3 (21)	χ²= .073, p = .79
	Flexible learner	Can learn new skills or information quickly.	4 (.83)	3 (14)	-	-	Na
	Total		15 (3.09)	9 (41)	9 (3.88)	7 (50)	χ²=.023, p = .88
Preparation for interview		An illustration that they have researched the role for which they are applying	8 (1.65)	7 (32)	1 (.43)	1 (7)	χ²= 2.942, p = .09
Distinctiveness		Communicates a" wow factor" within the pool of candidates.	6 (1.24)	5 (27)	-	-	na
Optimism		Positive about the future.	6 (1.24)	4 (18)	-	-	na
Creativity		The propensity to come up with novel ideas or solutions.	3 (.62)	3 (14)	2 (.86)	2 (14)	χ²= .002, p = .96
Recruitment risk		The degree to which the outcome of recruiting the individual is known.	3 (.62)	3 (14)	-	-	na
Parental support		The role of parents within the actions of individuals.	-	-	2 (.86)	2 (14)	na
Subtotal			462 (95.26)	22	222 (94.69)	14	
Miscellaneous			23 (4.74)	10 (45)	10 (4.31)	7 (50)	χ²= .1.049, p = .31
Total			485	22	232	14	

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Commitment constructs

Commitment categories referred to being directed, pledged or bound to engage with the role. As such participants reported employability as being represented on a continuum of "dedicated", to seeing the role as "just a job". This superordinate category was comprised of seven subordinate categories reflecting different patterns in the presentation of commitment, these were; Hard worker, Passion, Conscientiousness, Interest in company, Persistence, Shared company values, and Longevity.

Commitment was a prominent category within the data. Representation of the superordinate category within the two samples was not significantly different. However, constructs relating to the subcategories; Shared company values and Longevity, were absent within the educator sample. While constructs related to interest in the company were significantly higher within the employer sample.

Commitment > Shared company values

Constructs within the Shared company values category related to a similarity in the values of the individual and what was expected from someone in the role for which employers were recruiting. This was defined as consideration of the goals and ethos of the company above personal needs or expectations, or representing a match between potential employees' and organisational values. This category reflected a motivation for the specific company in which they were/ were to be placed; a motivation which may not be shared by similar roles within varying companies.

Constructs in this category referred to the organisation's ethos "fit into the ethos of the group – exaggerate", or value set "display correct value set – not the right fit". These constructs described fit compared to a detrimental impact "fit in with organisation – may ruffle people's feathers", "buy into things – a lack of understanding around the role".

Commitment > Longevity vs. stop gap

Another subordinate commitment category omitted from the educator's sample was Longevity. This subcategory was defined as being committed to the role or company for the long-term, rather than a temporary destination "committed to the post – a stop gap".

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These constructs referred to consistency "consistency of service – bouncing around", and reliability "reliable – over skilled, will leave soon". Understandings around what type of individual would be unlikely to offer longevity included skills match "good solid employee – over skilled. Will leave soon" and those exploring a new career path "testing the role out – you know what you get".

Commitment > Interest in company vs. just a job

While present within both subsamples, constructs aligned with this category were significantly more frequent within the employer's sample. This subordinate category was defined as an interest in the company leading to a commitment to a specific job. The category represented a distinction between implicit motivators to engage in the role, and more externally placed motivators, which were not unique to that company.

These constructs identified an interest in, or commitment to the company "no interest - know why that job", compared to perceptions that the company did not factor into individual's views of the suitability of the role. Individuals perceived as representing a lower level of employability were not committed to a company but required work ''just need work- want to make a contribution to institution" or were described as possessing more self-interest "committed to the company – committed to themselves". Commitment was presented as a source of motivation "doesn't participate – motivated because of company and role" to make a contribution beyond job requirements "play a role in developing the firm – do job and go away".

Taking responsibility constructs

The superordinate category Taking responsibility was defined as taking a level of ownership which induces a feeling of accountability for something working independently without external monitoring, leading individuals to be someone that can be relied on. While as a superordinate category Taking responsibility was not seen to be divergent across subsamples, the subordinate category Proactivity was variably presented.

Taking responsibility > Proactivity vs. initiative

Proactivity was represented more frequently within the educator sample. Constructs in this category were defined as showing a tendency towards action, to creating or controlling a situation for themselves, rather than requiring other people or circumstances to direct their behaviour.

The term "proactivity" and "initiative" were frequently cited within these constructs. Proactivity illustrated an extension of taking responsibility for current activities and a focus on moving things forward "take initiative – only doing things when asked". Proactivity was contrasted with passivity "passive – go getter", reactivity "reactive – proactive", even avoidance "proactive – avoid tough bits".

Further to significant differences in frequency count, there existed differences in the focus of proactivity constructs provided by employers and educators. While both samples discussed being proactive and taking the initiative, as opposed to a reactive passive response, employers referred to dealing with obstacles, which may show a connection between this category and resilience "proactive – avoid tough bits". Proactivity constructs for the employer sample focused on references to energy "going with the flow – driven". In contrast, educators focus was on direction, and the need to be independent from the direction of others.

Interpersonal competence

Constructs within the interpersonal superordinate category referred to competence in interacting appropriately with others. This category comprised three subordinate categories; Rapport building, Collaboration, and Honesty.

This category represents the largest within the dataset. The employers presented the highest proportion of interpersonal constructs for all three subordinate categories.   The content of these subordinate categories will now be discussed.

Interpersonal > Rapport building vs. egocentric

This category was defined as possessing a pleasant appearance and manner, allowing for a relationship between them and other individuals or groups. Where those concerned understand each other's feelings or ideas and communicate well.

Here an egocentric view was opposed to a personable nature "selfish – willing to be personable", impacting those around them "less personal impact – being able to build relationships", and leading to others positive feelings "things are about them - makes others feel good and shine". This also impacted perceptions of the individual's availability "warm and inviting – aloof". Variations in this component were linked to communication skills, "can't express themselves clearly – personable", as well as social skills "no social skills – can engage well with people", and an extroverted disposition "introvert – can get interactions with people", "timid – can build a relationship with people".

While the nature of the category remained the same across the two stakeholders, an assessment of how the person would fit into a team "image suits environment – clients won't ask for their help" or how a team felt about the person "not very nice to staff – engaging with members of the team", was evident in the employer sample. This suggested compatibility with the team was important. An equally strong focus was given to the caring aspect of rapport-building, once again illustrating the potential importance of an implicit motivation (passion or interest) on employees perceived employability "care about customers – dismissive". In comparison, within the educator sample a consideration of the general impact of behaviour on others was given emphasis "says what they think without thought to impact – will contribute".

Interpersonal > Collaborative vs. lone worker

The second subcategory related to interpersonal constructs was Collaborative vs. lone worker, defined as joining with others, having a positive influence on the pursuit of a common purpose, providing an open and informed whole.

This category compared those who could and could not, or who would not, work in a team "team player – solo operator" ''engaged with staff – not working as a cohesive team''. Mirroring the rapport-building category, the role of social skills ''a loner/hard to mix – good in a team'' was connected with collaboration, as were personality traits "introvert – works well with others", and communication "communicate with those involved – not good at forming working relationships".

This category of constructs incorporated the importance of compromise, "achieving only your goals – willing to compromise", prioritising team needs or approaches over one's own preferences and desires "out for themselves – a team player", openness "know better than everyone else – will get views and discuss with people", and avoidance of conflict "good team player – clash with others".

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There was no clear qualitative difference in the content of the two samples for this category, however, the quantity of references is starkly different, suggesting an enhanced focus by employers.

Interpersonal > Honesty vs. Deceptive

Another category of constructs was Honesty vs. deceptive. This category was absent from educators constructs of employability and was defined as truthful in communications and actions

Honesty constructs referred to the approach taken to mistakes "hide mistakes – honest about mistakes", being open "open – dishonest", "trustworthy – a risk", and how they present themselves "[they] are really the person they put forward – over-exaggerate", thus reflecting the role of honesty in recruitment as well as day-to-day functioning within the workplace.

Strategic constructs

Finally, Strategic constructs were defined as managing time effectively, prioritise tasks to achieve goals, having a vision and possessing effective planning skills. This superordinate category was made up of Planning, Time-management, Prioritising, and Vison categories. Vision was the only subordinate category to present variations across the two samples, with educators presenting significantly more vision constructs.

Strategic > Vision

Vision constructs were defined as evidencing the ability to think about the future with imagination or wisdom. This category focused on the future "thinking of the future – no forward planning" "future-focused – focus on self and pleasures". The contrast to future-focus given by the was giving no consideration to the future "doesn't know what to do – focused on what want to achieve", or directionality, "no direction – clear career path", and lacking forward planning "exploring options left till last minute – thought about what they want to do". There were no clear qualitative differences between the representation of this category within the sample; both samples referred to this construct as an important element of employability.

Discussion

The present findings illustrate some disparity between educator's and employer's implicit theories of employability. These discrepancies will now be considered in the context of wider employability literature and these stakeholders' external environment.

Commitment constructs

The presence of the categories Interest in the company, and Shared company values support previous evidence for the importance of passion, dedication, and commitment within specific occupations (Harun *et al.,* 2017; Norwood and Henneberry, 2006) and the value of interest communicated by more diverse samples of employers (Chhinzer and Russo, 2018)**.** These discussions appear to reflect an important contextual component in the assessment of employability, i.e. assessments of employability are made within the context of the role being applied for, and the company seeking a new employee. The importance of organisational climate in the assessment of employability has previously been cited by Wilton (2014) whose investigation of employer's perceptions highlighted the relevance of person – organisation fit.

Nevertheless, a consideration of current holistic models of employability suggests limited integration of this issue, with two exceptions. Heijde and Van Der Heijden's (2006) component of "balance" refers to the equilibrium between company focus and opposing self-interest, an aspect of employability communicated by this sample. Furthermore, their "corporate sense" component explicitly named sharing of company values as an important aspect of this team working component. Corporate sense was identified within an empirical assessment of their model as the largest contributor to career success. This mirrors the value of shared company values, and collaboration highlighted within the present samples' implicit theories. Such an emphasis on shared values is further supported in research by Haslam *et al.* (2014) into the development of social identities at work. Overlap between commitment and interpersonal categories is evident through such an accumulation of findings. A consideration of the inter-face between employer and employee in understanding employability was also presented within Hogan *et al.*'s (2013) conceptualisations of employability, who considered employability to be a socially desirable behaviour. As such these findings support the importance of reintegrating this contextual issue into employability understanding.

The Longevity category further supports the role of commitment in reflecting loyalty, and thus reducing the cost to company of re-advertising, recruiting and training new employees. Voluntary turnover literature displays the importance of this issue for employers, with commitment playing a crucial role in the understanding of this behaviour (Ahmad and Rainyee, 2014; Aluwihare-Samaranayake *et al.,* 2018). Nevertheless, the well documented shift from jobs-for-life to protean and boundaryless careers emphasise the lack of long-term commitment on the part of the employer, with workers often being made to feel disposable (Drago, 1996; Horváth, 2017). Thus, the present data suggests employees must demonstrate their commitment regardless of a context which may not be prepared for this to be reciprocated.

Theorising around commitment in general has long connected this aspect of employees/candidates, to desirable behaviour such as acceptance of company goals, being hardworking, and longevity within the company (Porter *et al.,* 1974) as well as conscientious work behaviour (Foote *et al.,* 2005), work performance, and interpersonal helping (Ho *et al.,* 2018). Given the complexity of companies, and the distance between their overarching structure and day-to-day functioning of employee's, it is possible that the emphasis on general passion and interest – beyond interest in a company itself - could offer a more realistic assessment of commitment by employers to a job (Foote *et al.,* 2005).

Existing research comparing perspectives of employers and educators does not appear to identify this component of employability. As such, current findings offer a significant contribution to comparative data across these two stakeholder groups. Educators likely lack awareness of the companies an individual student has/will target, and thus specific alignment with company focus or interest cannot feasible be part of their employability assessment. Nevertheless, the general lack of attention to values and interests communicated within this sample offers a potential area of neglect in HE employability discussions. This may reflect the emphasis on measuring employability outcomes through objective measures as opposed to subjective assessments. In contrast, it is expected that subjective assessments, such as indicators of career satisfaction, would more noticeable be enhanced by alignment of individual and company interests and values.

Proactivity vs. Initiative

Proactivity has received substantial attention within the employability, and career development literature. Indeed, some employability conceptualisations centre on an understanding of this

construct as proactive adaptability (Fugate *et al.,* 2004). Previous research supports a positive correlation between proactivity and career success (Fuller and Marler, 2009), reduced career-related stress (Creed *et al.,* 2017), and increased engagement with professional development (Heijden *et al.,* 2015). However, negative effects of proactivity have been noted (Ghitulescu, 2018; Urbach and Fay, 2018), as well as complex links between proactivity, collaboration, and commitment (Ghitulescu, 2018). From the perspective of academics, value has been seen in improving academic performance when proactive personality and situational initiative are both high (Tymon and Batistic, 2016). Nevertheless, considerations of employer's perspectives on employability frequently do not appear to include this trait or situational aspect. Such an absence may reflect variation in the language used by different stakeholders (Collet *et al.,* 2015; Suarta *et al.,* 2017). It is possible that the emphasis on proactivity within the HE sample could reflect the prevalence of this term in academic circles, rather than a real variation in behaviours which could be aligned with proactivity..

Vision

Variations in both Proactivity and the Vision category may indicate a career management element to individuals' understanding of employability. Career management aspects of employability were emphasised by Bridgstock (2009) as often overlooked. Current data may be understood as offering support for the management of careers in educators' personal theories. It is unlikely that employers' interest in the individuals they recruit would span beyond their career following departure from the employers' organisation. As such this time-limited investment may account for some variation in future focused categories. Nevertheless, given the fluctuating nature of employment demands, it is surprising that categories which consider future events and the achievement of goals within future contexts are not more frequently considered within employers' constructs. However, discussions of Proactivity, Vision, and categories in which consensus is seen between stakeholders (Planning, Time-management and Prioritising), may also indicate the importance of issues of time perspective/style/personality within perceptions of employability. This is an unrepresented issue within existing employability conceptualisations (Williams *et al.,* 2016), although connections have been made between time personalities and employees wellbeing (Francis-Smyth and Robertson, 1999). Indeed, taking account of Proactivity in the context of its superordinate category of Taking responsibility, which does not have a future focus, eliminates any discrepancy between these two groups.

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Interpersonal constructs

The value of Rapport building and Collaboration in understanding employers concept of employability, supports several previous findings emphasising; character (Norwood and Henneberry, 2006), interpersonal skills (Heath and Mills, 2000; Yusof *et al.,* 2010), personal quality (Yusof *et al.,* 2010), emotional intelligence (Aziz and Pangil, 2017), and sub-factors of these qualities such as teamwork, handling people, help seeking, reliability, and a cheerful bright personality (Heath and Mills, 2000), reported to be the most important to employers. Indeed, literature in relation to teamwork and employability is rife with discussions of the value of teamwork as an important employability skill (Small *et al.,* 2018) and the effective integration of this skill within HE (e.g. Bravo *et al.,* 2018; Donia *et al.,* 2018). This finding also fit with a range of components integrated into holistic employability theories such as; team working (Hillage and Pollard, 1998), social networking (Kluytmans and Ott, 1999), Corporate sense (Heijde and Van Der Heijden, 2006), building professional relationships (Bridgstock, 2009), and team performance/functioning (Hogan *et al.,* 2013), which are all illustrative of how interpersonal skills inform our understanding of employability.

The emphasis placed on interpersonal components within this sample is supportive of a review of pre-existing skills lists reported to affect undergraduate employability (Finch *et al.,* 2013). Within Finch *et al.*'s review interpersonal skills appear second in the list of important skills. This is further reinforced by a systematic review of global employability skills which ranked these as the top priority for employers (Small *et al.,* 2018). Again, interpersonal skills were represented in second place, as part of their "soft skills" responses. The value given to collaboration by employers has also been strongly emphasised within recent research (e.g. Ayoubi *et al.,* 2017; Harun *et al.,* 2017). Furthermore, links have been consistently made between interpersonal components and work readiness (Dunne and Rawlins, 2000), as well as productivity (McInnes *et al.,* 2015; Wagner and Ruhe, 2018).

A consideration of the role of collaboration and interpersonal components in understanding employability offers yet another contextual element to employability's assessment. Cumming (2010) emphasised the role of those around us in the enactment of skills present within taxonomies. Such an acknowledgement illustrates the overarching role of collaboration and interaction with others as part of the performance of other skills. This may explain the emphasis placed on collaboration by employers who are assessing generic skills within a collaborative context. Indeed,

collaboration has been linked to several generic skills which can be seen within the present collaboration data such as; assisting one another, managing conflict, taking responsibility, time management, organisation, record keeping, planning, ability to lead, making decisions, communication, emotional intelligence, and personality traits (Oakley *et al.,* 2004; Ali *et al.,* 2017; Dunaway, 2013), to name just a handful. As such this category may not reflect a pure focus on interpersonal elements, better attributed to the rapport-building category, but rather exposes an array of generic skills requirements enacted within the collaborative work context. This would account for the contrast with previous deductive research which has shown little discrepancy regarding the value of interpersonal skills (e.g. Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010). By offering pre-established skills list, communication of links between generic skills and the context of collaboration is prevented. In comparison, inductive approaches to exploring employers' requirements illustrate the increased reference to the collaborative context when identifying skills. For example, Chhinzer and Russo (2018) found employers added teamwork in addition to soliciting and responding to feedback (integrated within the present collaboration constructs) to the existing list of employability components derived by a university.

An alternative explanation for diversity in the presentation of rapport building and collaborative categories is that educators may perceive these aspects as stable in nature. Connotations with character or personality may prevent a consideration of their development for educators. It is suggested that people disagree as to whether these elements can and should be manipulated by HE (Bridgstock, 2009). While group work is a benchmark of assessment for many degree subject areas, appraisals of group work are often focused on the final product as opposed to the collaborative process (Riebe *et al.,* 2010). Given this concentration, information relating to group process issues may not be as readily available for educators to reflect on.

Finally, the isolated focus of honesty on the part of employers may indicate the important process of signalling in recruitment processes (Spence, 1973). With the expected imbalance in information, honesty would be essential for effective recruitment.

While there are several statistically significant differences in the proportional representation of these stages across, these stakeholders operate within a differing range of convenience. Variations in the language, available information, and application of this information, may affect the

prominence of certain employability aspects, as well as how these are communicated. What is concerning is the potential translation of these personal theories into employability development initiatives. This translation would systematically neglect important aspects of employability development. Given the exploratory nature of this research, further investigation is needed to examine the generalisability of these viewpoints to these stakeholder populations.

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to explore employers and educator's personal theories of employability, offering a comprehensive data-driven picture of employability, as based on an expert sample with extensive experience with the domain of focus. The nature of employability, as understood from these two perspectives, appears to be similar. However, there are some areas of omission within the educator's sample, and further variations in terms of focus. The present findings support the heavily contextualised and subjective way skills are considered in employer's assessment of employability. The role of compatibility between employers and candidates/employees illustrates the great divide between considerations of skills that can be developed within HE, and the present assessment of HE in terms of employment outcomes.

Research limitations/implications

In offering a reliable taxonomy for the classification of constructs, it was not possible to manipulate data to allow for a comparable level of theorising across all categories. As such, some categories represent unidimensional components, while others might be better described as roles (Woodruffe, 1993). Follow-up research is needed in which stakeholders are explicitly asked about components, to ensure that differences in proportional representation are not the result of presentation of that component as a lower or higher-order construct, rather than a perceived lack of value of that component by the stakeholder.

It should also be noted that individuals were sampled from the same employability-related mailing list, as well as through personal contacts of those recruited; this may have implications for the views presented. Given the social contact between participants, a degree of homogeneity which may not reflect broader views of eligible participants is expected.

Finally, while statistical analysis was utilised to explore differences, this was a further point of triangulation against the dominant qualitative interpretations. Consequently consideration of these statistics in isolation should be viewed with caution as a result of the small sample size and disregard of context.

Practical implications

These results present several practical implications around the development of employability within HE. Support is given for the importance of involving employers in the development of HE content, informing understanding of employability as viewed by employers. The present results illustrate the importance of educators remaining vigilant to the expectations placed on their graduates, and the contextual aspects in which they will be considered. This may be achieved by involving employers in programme development. Moreover, educators need to be able to reflect on how these employability components would be integrated into programme delivery. For example, further investigation is needed to explore how interpersonal skills could be enhanced or assessed within the university setting. Viewed as a pedagogical conundrum (Riebe *et al.,* 2017) the teaching and assessment of collaboration raises several challenges (Volkov and Volkov, 2007; Wilson *et al.,* 2017); nevertheless, the importance of contextualising generic skills within proficient collaboration is paramount. It is also suggested that reflection on implicit motivations to engage in working roles, and personal values students wish to uphold within their working life, are important aspects of employability that need to be considered within employment development initiatives. Moreover, the value of aligning these with job roles and locations should be emphasised to students.

From a work perspective, assessments of potential candidates should be adequately diverse as to capture relevant information around the candidate's performance and fit within the diverse areas of employability. Furthermore, these commonalities across employer's perspectives offer a starting point from which employers can engage in relevant discussions around the embedding of employability/ professional development in terms of appraisals and training requirements.

Practical suggestions;

1) Assessment of group processes be introduced into undergraduate programmes to enhance awareness of the importance of processes, and develop competencies linked to enhanced cooperation;

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2) Employers are offered unconstrained opportunities to identify their understanding of employability as part of the process of informing programme development, as opposed to feeding back based on pre-determined employability requirements.

Originality/value

This research offers the first RGT approach to comparing implicit employability theories of educators and employers. This research offers an understanding of this continually reconstructed concept within both education and work contexts. Rather than imposing the authors own perspective, or a formulation of employability based on dominant, room is given to the participant to consider the full range of employability information.

Given the present focus on similarities in employability theories across a wide range of occupational fields, this research offers an understanding of employability which is expected to be more robust than that of an occupational specific outlook. Occupational outlooks may become too focused on job-specific competencies which are subject to drastic changes from frequent contextual changes such as fluctuations in software/ technology, policies and practices.

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