

## **‘FROM LEARNING TO EARNING’**

*A qualitative investigation analysing the relevance, presence and possible interactions between the possession, position and process theories through the perspectives of graduates of the IT sector based on their own experience of achieving employment.*

A Dissertation for the award of:

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## **Abstract**

This research paper is a qualitative study analysing the perception that graduates have regarding the achievement of employment based on their own experience who have graduated between one to four years ago. This paper taking into consideration several factors, attempts to set a path as a means to integrate the three main theoretical approaches of graduates’ employability which include Position theory (constructed from socioeconomic inequalities), Possession theory (possession of knowledge and social skills) and Process theory (constructed from career self-management and pre-professional identity). Furthermore, employment is measured through three key aspects, the objective (e.g. employment status, job offer rejection), subjective (internal perception) and quality or fulfilling employment (e.g. application of knowledge, salary, growth opportunities), recognising that as the understanding of employability continues to evolve, then as a direct consequence its measurement cannot be accurate without considering the diverse factors influencing it. The results gathered from this research paper support the great importance of both the process and possession theories making further advancements in this field by possibly discovering an important interaction between both theories, where technical knowledge and soft skills together with proactive actions such as career exploration, guidance, the building of a professional network and development of pre-professional identity can have a major impact on a graduate’s obtainment of fulfilling employment. Academically, this paper notes the overall picture surrounding the concept of employment focusing on the study of graduates’ employability and thus drawing together, from throughout the years, the diverse perspectives in this area, while also drawing from the current key approaches, and considering the implications for the diverse stakeholders involved which include graduate students, academic institutes, government and policy-makers.

Keywords: graduates, graduates, employability, career self-management, pre-professional identity, networking.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

- BSc – Bachelor’s in Science
- CIPD- Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
- IT – Information Technology
- MSc – Master’s in Science
- NCI – National College of Ireland
- UK – United Kingdom
- DCU – Dublin City University

# 1. Introduction

Whilst the notion of employability is still not completely defined and keeps evolving due to the labour market's transition from an industrial to a knowledge economy (Hippe & Fouquet, 2018; Warhurst, 2008; Brown, et al., 2003), the need for employability theories to better explain and integrate all the variables that underpin a graduate's attainment of employment becomes widely desired (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013). This study shaped by the previous work of Okay-Somerville & Scholarios (2015) and Holmes (2013) is aiming to integrate the most relevant theories of: Position (constructed from socioeconomic inequalities), Possession (of knowledge and social skills) and Process (constructed from career self-management and pre-professional identity outlooks).

Research on possession and position theories have received the greatest interest from scholars highlighting the relevance of possessing the adequate knowledge and skills (Suleman, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Barrie, 2006), as well as pointing out the socioeconomic barriers among individuals such as their limited access to education (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; Cranmer, 2006; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Whilst, in contrast, the process theory has received little attention, still being a scarcely researched and seldomly integrated theory, the key elements of this theory however have been studied individually and proven its positive effect on the achievement of employment with regards to factors such as career self-management, guidance and exploration, development of a professional and graduate identity and the building of a professional network (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Pollard, et al., 2015; Holmes, 2013; Watts, 2013).

It should also be noted that this study's aim is not only to bring together the three main approaches regarding graduates' employability but to also contribute to the further development of the scarcely researched process theory in hopes to provide the main stakeholders involved better resources to improve a graduate's search for employability.

Moreover, it is relevant to acknowledge the importance of a more complete measurement of employment, where this research is based on studies such as Okay-Somerville & Scholarios (2015), Holmes (2013), Tomlinson (2012) and Wilton (2011) and thus suggest that the measurement of employment shall be done on the objective, how it is perceived and the quality of employment. This follows the rationale of the evolving concept of employability being underpinned by several factors and therefore employment as an outcome cannot be accurately measured without taking into consideration the diverse factors present in an individual's achievement, acceptance or rejection of a job. Within this framework, the purpose of this paper is to explore the presence, relevance and existence of any interactions between the three main theories regarding a graduate's employability. In addition, to also investigate the presence of other factors outside the reach of such theories and thus the contribution of this paper relies on the integration of the main elements from the diverse theories in order to aid a graduate's employability outcome which are in contrast with the focus of several kinds of research in this area, trying to favour one theory over others.

To achieve the aforementioned purposes, this paper investigates the perception which graduates, after one to four years of graduation, have regarding their achievement of employment through their rich experiences. This period of over one year and up to four years since graduating has been suggested by similar studies to make a good contribution, stating that most of the research carried out concerning graduate employability are based on individuals who have only graduated between six and twelve months ago and thus deemed to be insufficient to meaningfully explore their transition from studying to working (Teichler, 2007). Furthermore, the focus on a graduate's perception is deemed to be enriching as they have directly experienced the subject of the research (Tymon, 2013; Landrum, et al., 2010; Shah, et al., 2004).

Based on core literature such as Jackson (2016), Okay-Somerville & Scholarios (2015), Holmes (2013), Bridgstock (2009) and Tomlinson (2008) a qualitative semi-structured questionnaire was developed to obtain the relevant data in order to answer the research question of the extent to which theories are realized in a participant's achievement of employment, where findings support the presence of the three theories and highlighting the greater relevance of the possession and process theories.

It was also found that both theories interact positively with each other during a graduate's attainment of employment. Furthermore, limitations to gather further information on the position theory are discussed as well as the need for consideration of contextual factors outside the content of the three theories focused on in this study. Additionally, the conclusions and recommendations will address further implications for the diverse stakeholders in accordance with the findings of this research paper.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

This paper has drawn together relevant literature regarding the evolution of the concept of employability through the changes of a knowledge economy and implications to consider when measuring it, with the purpose to better understand and be introduced to the concept and theories concerning a graduate's employability. Within the principal themes reviewed regarding graduates' employability, there are two main theories which are known as supply/individual side and demand/context side, which are further discussed and bring into the argument three main approaches within a graduate's employability: possession, position and process, and are briefly discussed in this introduction. Furthermore, within the flow of this literature, key themes are debated, such as the skill gap and the relevance of work experience for obtaining employment. In addition, the different outlooks regarding the greater supply of graduates are also debated as a logical response to the claim of an increase of knowledge jobs and also to the contradictory claim, of there being too few jobs to accommodate the excessive supply of graduates.

### **2.2. The undefined concept of employability and the bigger picture**

The concept of employability although widely used does not hold a fixed definition, which continues to evolve as a response to the changes and needs of the employers and the labour market (McQuaid, et al., 2005; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Where at first, was used as a mere category to distinguish those employed from those who were not, its definition shifted to address the mismatch between the characteristics

possessed by an individual and those which the employers seek, and finally reached a definition that applies to an individual's working status and also an individual's likelihood to gain employment when seeking it (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005), where the influence of supply (Individual) and demand (Context) sides factors within the concept are debated (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; Tholen, 2015).

The supply side or agency-side factors places the responsibility on the individual, who is accountable for its own employability, where the notion implies the features of the individual that makes them employable or not (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; Wilton, 2014; Fugate, et al., 2004), therefore, following this position, employability is often described as a set of competencies and skills possessed by an individual that allows them to obtain and maintain employment (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Jackson, 2016; Bridgstock, 2009; Cranmer, 2006).

While this approach has been extensively researched and widely accepted, it also holds strong criticism where authors and policymakers pointed it out as a narrowed perspective that does not take into account other factors underpinning an individual's employability (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Wilton, 2011; Teichler, 2007; Barrie, 2006; McQuaid, et al., 2005; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005), such as demand or structure side factors, which refer to the context and its effects on the individual's chances of employability, such as the condition of the labour market, the social and economic environment and other factors that may present barriers or obstacles for an individual to obtain employment (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Tholen, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Cranmer, 2006; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Brown, 2000). In this regard, the excessive attention that has been given to the skills, knowledge and capabilities of the individual is also criticized (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Singh, et al., 2014; Wilton, 2011; Warhurst, 2008), where there are numerous researches trying to define the key competencies and generic skills that individuals must poses in order to gain employability (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Ferguson, 2016; Suleman, 2016; Singh, et al., 2014; Barrie, 2006; Cranmer, 2006).

Generic skills such as communication and social abilities have been proven to have a positive effect on obtaining and maintaining employment (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Pollard, et al., 2015; Singh, et al., 2014; McQuaid, et al., 2005), however, criticism to this competency approach has been made arguing that it can be over-generalised or over-specific, consequently not being able to meet the various needs of different employers and employees, and also being static, hindering their ability to respond to further needs or change (CIPD, 2017; Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Watts, 2013; Harrison, 2009; Antonacopoulou & FitzGerald, 1996). This position focuses on the individual's responsibility to achieve and maintain employment, while implying the understanding of employability as something that an individual needs to possess (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; Suleman, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Barrie, 2006; Fugate, et al., 2004), being further criticised for overseeing personal circumstances and the individual's attitude and management of their own assets that affects their attainment of employment (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; Hooley, et al., 2011; Bridgstock, 2009; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Where, under this discussion, several authors have brought a different outlook that views employability as a process rather than a condition, thus pathways can be devised to achieve it (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Jackson, 2016; Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; Reid, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Watts, 2013; Hooley, et al., 2011).

Moreover, broader definitions have come across as an effort to address the complexity and implications of the employment that does not solely obey the control of an individual but is influenced by the complex social and economic situation of the labour market, also known as the demand or structure side factors (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Soulé & Warrick, 2015; Tholen, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Brown, et al., 2003; Brown, 2000).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the influence of both supply and demand factors on the complex concept of employment rather than focusing only on one viewpoint, this is required in order to obtain an overall picture of employability that

depends on both viewpoints (Jackson, 2016; Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; Tholen, 2015; McQuaid, et al., 2005; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005).

### **2.3. Measuring Employability**

Another implication to consider as the concept of employability has evolved, is the continuous debate on how it should be measured, as the simplification has quantified it as whether the person is employed or not without considering further implications or circumstances, this in turn, is highly criticised (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015). Within this debate, there are two main approaches, one that considers the objective measurement of the concept and another which marks on the importance of its subjective element (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015).

On the objective side, academics highlight the need to account for external factors such as the individuals rejection of a job for various reasons which may comprise salary expectations, work-life balance needs, distance, the labour market situation such as the level of demand for the individual's profession, and their hiring requirements and bias, such as educative standards and social background (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Cranmer, 2006).

On the other hand, the subjective concept of employability termed 'perceived employability', refers to the individual judgement of their own characteristics that makes them likely to gain further employment (Berntson & Marklund, 2007). This concept can be divided into internal and external perceptions of employability, where the former focuses on the skills and capabilities the individual poses which are considered to be appealing to employers, and the latter is the perception of subjective judgement made by the employers regarding the individual's potential (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Berntson & Marklund, 2007).

Also, a relevant element subject to recent research takes into consideration the quality of the employment, which consider the characteristics of the job, such as the opportunities of growth in the company, training available, payment and benefits, and application of knowledge and expertise (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2013; Wilton, 2011).

## **2.4. Employability in the knowledge economy**

As pointed out previously, the concept of employability relies on the economic, social and political context in which it exists (McQuaid, et al., 2005; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005), therefore, the way work is designed and nowadays performed has a major influence on the notion of employability (Hippe & Fouquet, 2018; Warhurst, 2008; Brown, et al., 2003). Around the late 1950s, the surge of modern technologies and its fast growth have had a severe impact on the nature of work and the development of the economy, where the notion of knowledge economy started to develop to acknowledge that business nowadays relies on the intellectual capital of its labour force rather than in their physical contribution (Hippe & Fouquet, 2018; Brown, et al., 2003; Michaels, et al., 2001).

In a knowledge economy, the emphasis in most of the businesses in the production and distribution of knowledge and data in its diverse forms (Hippe & Fouquet, 2018; Brown, et al., 2003), wheatear it is an emerging market offering a novel product or service, a company aiming to innovate in their respective industry or an organisation which core business is technology-based, their primary resource is their knowledge and intellectual capital, which is embedded in their labour force (Hippe & Fouquet, 2018; McQuaid, et al., 2005; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Brown, et al., 2003; Michaels, et al., 2001).

Therefore, significant focus is given to the role of the educative systems and credentials held by the workforce, driving the attention of governmental institutes and policymakers to provide equal opportunities and quality education to their population to encourage and raise employability levels (Hippe & Fouquet, 2018; Warhurst, 2008; Brown, et al., 2003; Brown, 2000). Having a higher education degree is not considered as an advantage anymore but as a requirement to access to the new and more competitive labour market (Wilton, 2014; Tomlinson, 2008; Warhurst, 2008; Brown, 2000), as in comparison with decades ago. Nowadays over the 60% of jobs require a more knowledgeable and skilled workforce (Michaels, et al., 2001).

Hence, this shift from an Industrial to a Knowledge Era, has had a strong influence in the new challenges and changes in the way people work and how this work is structured (Soulé & Warrick, 2015; Bridgstock, 2009), eradicating the old reality



where the loyalty of the employees in exchange for a life-long employment is coming to an end (Brown, et al., 2003; Michaels, et al., 2001).

While for some employment is merely an exchanging transaction of work for an earning (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000), many authors agree on the existence of a psychological contract that goes beyond the written contract of employment (CIPD, 2017) and implies an unspoken mutual expectation regarding the employer and employee obligations, founded on a shared perception of trust and commitment embedded in the employment relationship (CIPD, 2017; Kew & Stredwick, 2013), in which for many years loyalty was part of such an implied agreement, and employees invested their work life into a single company in expectation of job security and career progression (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; McQuaid, et al., 2005; Brown, et al., 2003; Michaels, et al., 2001).

However, as the dynamic of work has changed, it is discussed that job security and career advancement are no longer implied when acquiring a job but are now part of the evolving notion of employability, which includes not only the outcome of being employed but to remain so and it considers the likelihood of an individual to be 'employable' when seeking further job opportunities (Hippe & Fouquet, 2018; Brown, et al., 2003; Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; McQuaid, et al., 2005). Thus, instead of devoting themselves to a company, workers must navigate through different companies to acquire the knowledge and skills that will make them more appealing to further employers (Hippe & Fouquet, 2018; Fugate, et al., 2004; Brown, et al., 2003). Creating new expectations in employees based on their employers, where the transaction of work is more straightforward and while companies seek for the best talent in the workforce, such targeted talent seek not only for greater income but for the better opportunities of obtaining more expertise, knowledge, development and training to grow in their careers rather than in a company (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; Brown, et al., 2003; Michaels, et al., 2001).

This new expectations from employees also represent new challenges for organisations to attract and keep such talented employees (CIPD, 2017; Michaels, et al., 2001), a phenomenon which near the end of the 1990's obtained the popular term of 'the war for talent' after research pointed out the reality of companies in the 1980's

which struggled to fill their vacancies as there were not enough workers to meet the demands of the emerging knowledge jobs (Michaels, et al., 2001).

Within this context, employment has shifted from the idea of labour as a cost, to labour as an asset, which can be improved and used for mutual benefit (CIPD, 2017; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002). Therefore, as the economy has transitioned from an Industrial to an Information or Knowledge Era, the bargaining power of employees has strengthened (Brown, et al., 2003; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002), as companies' competitive advantage relies on the intangible asset of their human capital and therefore companies' interest in obtaining the best talented workers, as they are considered to perform better and more efficiently than average workers (Hippe & Fouquet, 2018; Brown, et al., 2003; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002; Michaels, et al., 2001).

Where the 'war for talent' is predicted to continue over the next two decades, as their underpinning variables, which are the irreversible transition to a knowledge Era and its demand of highly skilled and knowledge workers, along with the increased tendency of workers switching jobs don't seem to be over (Michaels, et al., 2001).

Moreover, to add more burden to companies social, economic and demographic factors bring their own changes to reshape the work environment, where the increasing number of younger and female employees require new and different management styles and diverse benefits schemes such as work-life balance practices, talent and development strategies, improved performance management and enhanced recruitment and retention approaches (CIPD, 2017; Ruona & Coates, 2012; Thompson & Gregory, 2012).

## **2.5. The skill -gap**

While in the Information Era workers are struggling to get the knowledge, experience and skills necessities to be more appealing to companies and the companies themselves are concerned in developing successful strategies to attract and retain the 'best' people (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; McQuaid, et al., 2005; Brown, et al., 2003; Michaels, et al., 2001), there is an emerging problem which both parties have to face, particularly referring to those new entrants to the labour force, which is the increased mismatch of the skills and capabilities possessed by individuals and the

ones required for the companies, commonly referred to as the ‘skill gap’ (Malik & Venkatraman, 2017; Ferguson, 2016; Nelson, 2016).

The skill gap has serious repercussions for companies as it makes it harder to recruit the ‘right people’ for work, pushing down the overall company’s performance and forcing investment in training to address employee’s skill shortages (Ferguson, 2016; Nelson, 2016; Cappelli, 2015). Furthermore, it represents arisen concern for individuals as having a degree does not necessarily guarantee having a well-paid job anymore, which is evidenced by a large number of individuals holding a Bachelor’s degree who are employed in low paid jobs and facing extended periods of unemployment (Osborne, 2017; Ferguson, 2016; Cappelli, 2015).

This has also a negative effect on people by lowering their career expectations (Udemy, 2017). Moreover, the pressure has driven professionals to engage in self-development to update their knowledge and capabilities to meet the job-market demands and access to better jobs (Nelson, 2016).

While it may be argued that this skill shortage is due to inappropriate education (Cappelli, 2015; Soulé & Warrick, 2015), the truth behind it may be more complex, as the business world today is ever-changing and yesterday’s skills are not sufficient enough to fulfil today’s company needs, where companies are expected to keep redefining their skill requirements over the coming years (Udemy, 2017; Ferguson, 2016; Landrum, et al., 2010).

This situation has escalated to not only involving companies and individuals to address this concern, but has also won the attention of the government, participating through improved educative systems and policies to aid the adequate development of the workforce (Cappelli, 2015; McNamara, 2009), as its main interest consists in ensuring sufficient human capital to enter in the workforce to sustain a stable economy (Reid, 2016; Bridgstock, 2009).

### **1.1.1. Skill gap: the roles of the main stakeholders**

The role of the different parties is still debated when addressing the issue, where it is pointed out that each stakeholder holds a different level of accountability (Reid, 2016; Tymon, 2013). On the one hand, the pressure is put towards the government and the

educative institutions to recognise their duty on the delivery of work-ready graduates and to paying greater interest in the assessment and development of skills and knowledge to guarantee the success of their students in the workplace (Reid, 2016; Bridgstock, 2009). While, on the other hand, it is argued that companies are responsible for the skill development of their employees, recognising their evolving nature and recognising their ability to forecast their own needs and future expectations, as a better system to develop their workforce and offer relevant job-experience and on-the-job training (Ferguson, 2016; Cappelli, 2015).

Nonetheless, a mutual interest has brought together colleges and companies to bridge the skill gap resulting in the college program to be closer to the company's request and the implementation of internships and similar programs to ensure students develop the required skills through a first work-experience (Malik & Venkatraman, 2017; Ferguson, 2016; Cappelli, 2015; Pollard, et al., 2015). Whereas leaving the entire responsibility to the individuals themselves on the matter is profoundly argued, as putting the pressure solely on students, reveals their vulnerability, due to their access to better education and training for their career development can be limited depending on their own wealth (Tomlinson, 2012; Wilton, 2011; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Brown, 2000). This can lead to risking self-investment as a means to warrant a better job that may or may not exist (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Reid, 2016; Cappelli, 2015; Holmes, 2013).

Although there is no agreement regarding a solution to tackle the skill gap, the role and input of each stakeholder is nonetheless recognised in the matter, where at various levels each one can collaborate to reduce the skill gap (Cappelli, 2015). Additionally, the consequences and the root of this issue brings the focus on the employability of the coming labour force and plays an influential factor on the current focus on skills to define employability (Tymon, 2013).

## **2.6. Graduate's employability**

The evolving challenges and demands in the knowledge economy have certainly affected the concept and interest of an individual's employability, moreover, it has brought the focus on the employability of graduates, those individuals finishing their

education and entering for the first time into the labour market (Pollard, et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Teichler, 2007; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Graduates' employability, often understood as a graduate's work-readiness (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017), also implies to the likelihood of a successful transition from student to working life and is a shared interest among different stakeholders such as the government, educative institutions, organisations and individuals, although their different level of participation and responsibility is still debated (Reid, 2016; Tymon, 2013).

Several policymakers and a large number of researchers have focused on the role played by educative institutions in developing 'employable graduates' (Cappelli, 2015; Soulé & Warrick, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Teichler, 2007; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Where the link between higher education and employability outcomes is interpreted within two different outlooks, the human capital and the positional conflict (Tomlinson, 2008).

The human capital viewpoint commonly accepted within the government perspective, acknowledges that the supply of highly educated graduates is vital to the growth of the economy, arguing that in an evolving knowledge economy a greater source of highly educated and skilled workforce is needed (Reid, 2016; Bridgstock, 2009; Tomlinson, 2008; Warhurst, 2008; Teichler, 2007; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Within this outlook it is implied that access to higher education is a choice of investment that each person must take, and it offers a mutual benefit for society and individuals as it helps the social economic growth and enhances the individual's opportunities of promotion and higher income (Tomlinson, 2008; Teichler, 2007; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

In stark contrast, the positional conflict outlook disregards the rocketed needs of highly skilled individuals for certain jobs, claiming that the fuel for the increased demand of high education credentials is due to middle-class growth, where holding credentials is seen more as an 'access requirement' that fosters positional competition and inequalities rather than an actual need (Wilton, 2011; Tomlinson, 2008; Warhurst, 2008; Brown, 2000). Supporting this viewpoint, some research points out

an increased number of positions mislabelled to require graduate qualifications when not actually required, hence many graduates acquiring these jobs are not fully utilising their knowledge and expertise, finding themselves overqualified for these positions, which at the same time are not as well paid nor fulfilling as genuine graduate positions (Pollard, et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Wilton, 2011; Warhurst, 2008; Teichler, 2007).

Another major point made regarding educative institutions is that it is not sufficient to merely provide students with the best academic knowledge but in addition to also nurture and develop their students' 'employability skills' which are understood as the set of skills expected from companies which will help students to better perform and adapt to the working life (Tomlinson, 2012; Barrie, 2006; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

However, despite the considerable number of research in the area of skill sets, its outcomes and relevance have been strongly criticised for being too widely defined to a point where all the different stakeholders have a different idea and definition of such 'employability skills' (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Singh, et al., 2014; Wilton, 2011; Warhurst, 2008). Moreover, different studies have reached a diverse and extensive list of skills deemed to be desired by different companies, where the strong focus on reducing and defining the long list of desired skills have taken attention away from the real problem of helping graduates gain employment (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Ferguson, 2016; Suleman, 2016; Singh, et al., 2014; Barrie, 2006; Cranmer, 2006).

Contrasting this debate on the supply side, the demand side is evident on the contextual inequalities that graduates must face when seeking employment, characterised by the competition among graduates either for obtaining access to better educative institutions or to attain better jobs (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; Hooley, et al., 2011; Bridgstock, 2009; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). In this regard, education is seen as an investment, where higher education levels and more recognised and rated institutions represent a greater chance of obtaining a better-paid job (Reid, 2016; Tomlinson, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Therefore, social and economic differences can represent an advantage or an obstacle for graduates to achieve a rewarding and well-paid employment (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Tholen, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Cranmer, 2006; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Brown, 2000) as their economic and social background has a strong influence not just in the way graduates face the seeking of employment but in the general resources they can count on to achieve employment (Tomlinson, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Brown, 2000).

In the middle of both outlooks, there is an increased number of research which attempts to go beyond a set of skills desirable for individuals to obtain employment and places the individual as an active entity that can overcome contextual barriers by analysing the ever-changing labour environment and taking decisions and actions to build their employability (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Jackson, 2016; Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; Reid, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Watts, 2013; Hooley, et al., 2011).

Although there is a need for further research and agreement regarding what constitutes the key aspects of this outlook that views a graduate's employability as a process. vital elements include the ability and awareness of the individual to better understand the changes, challenges and needs of the evolving labour market to be able to take better and informed decisions about their career future (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Jackson, 2016; Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; Reid, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Watts, 2013; Hooley, et al., 2011). It also highlights the importance of their confidence and commitment with their career, developing a career identity that guides their professional behaviour and influences their decision making (Jackson, 2016; Reid, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013). Furthermore, it recognises the importance of being able to effectively promote themselves to the job market not only by their confident and professional attitude but with sufficient skills that enables them to do well in interviews and represent themselves successfully in CV and job applications, where the value of guidance to succeed in all those mentioned aspects is also crucial (Taylor & Hooley, 2014; Wilton, 2014).

Overall, as one thorough research in the UK reveals (Pollard, et al., 2015), both supply and demand side factors influence the employer's decisions on hiring graduates, such as specific subjects of study and degrees, work experience, personal traits, attitudes and values, technical and generic skills. While also suggesting the importance of career management and seeking of career advice or guidance to be able to better manage their employment opportunities, highlighting that nowadays graduates need to be prepared and adapt to an environment of continuous change and uncertainty (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Pollard, et al., 2015).

## **2.7. The 'Three Ps' for graduate's employability: Possession, Position and Process**

Under the several studies of graduate's employability, three main approaches can be identified attempting to frame and understand the variables underpinning it: Possession, Position and Process (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013).

While the 'Possession' outlook is the most largely studied and widely accepted (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013), there are an increased number of criticism towards the validity of its research and narrowed outlook (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Parry, 1998; Antonacopoulou & FitzGerald, 1996). The concept under this line acknowledges the vital role of competencies defined as a set of skills and capabilities possessed by an individual which have a direct impact on one's employability (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Barrie, 2006).

On the other hand, the positioning approach, which can be closely linked to the possession viewpoint (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015), refers to the influence of social and economic position in the gaining of employment, accentuating the differences in opportunities available for individuals depending on their backgrounds to obtain employment (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013).

The Processing viewpoint outlines the active play of the individual in seeking employment through an interactive journey from learning to earning (Reid, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015). Recent research in this theoretical approach



has supported its validity and relevance in the employability of graduates, focusing on concepts such as career self-management, pre-professional identity, environment exploration, networking and guidance seeking (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013).

### **1.1.2. Employability as a ‘possession’**

The elevated level of responsibility given to educative institutions in the development of employable graduates has given rise to the possession outlook, where employability is considered to be owned or possessed by a student through the path of education which is expected to develop into them a set of employable skills and attributes (Suleman, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Barrie, 2006).

This approach is aimed to address the gap between study and work, bringing together the concepts of knowledge and skills as combined tools to transit from learning to working, as developing certain skills such as leadership or effective communication will help to link the knowledge possessed by the individual with the demands faced in the workplace (Suleman, 2016; Singh, et al., 2014).

Numerous research in this area has shown the crucial role of technical and soft skills to better appeal to the job market (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Suleman, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Pollard, et al., 2015; Singh, et al., 2014). Where it is mostly highlighted the influence of generic or soft skills, which refers to relational skills and skills that facilitates the process of learning to obtain and maintain employment (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Pollard, et al., 2015; Singh, et al., 2014; Barrie, 2006). However, major criticism have risen from this approach as there is little agreement regarding a set of skills or attributes to enhance employability, where discussion also points out pitfalls of this approach such as lacking a clear and shared definition, falling on over-generalisation or over-specification, and having a controlling and restricting influence (Holmes, 2013; Parry, 1998; Antonacopoulou & FitzGerald, 1996) .

Being discussed among several authors that the long and non-agreed list of employable skills is a consequence of its unset concept, reflected in a wide variety of

methods to measure them through different researches and its lack of consideration to other influencing variables, leading to increase the disagreement and confusion around the approach (Holmes, 2013; Antonacopoulou & FitzGerald, 1996). It is also criticised for its inability to explain different results in the employability of individuals coming from different social and demographic backgrounds (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013).

Finally, the most accountable criticism to this approach is that it is static, unable to face the needs for a flexible and adaptable labour force to meet the evolving demands of an unpredicted labour market, where possessing knowledge and skills does not suffice the attainment of employment (Wilton, 2011; Teichler, 2007; Barrie, 2006; McQuaid, et al., 2005; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005),.

### **1.1.3. Employability as a ‘position’**

The positional approach highlights the demand side factors, accentuating the contextual disparities that each individual face in their seeking and obtaining of employment. Arguing that the burden on the individual to achieve employment neglects the social and economic inequalities that are beyond their control (Tomlinson, 2012; Wilton, 2011). Acknowledging the pursuing of employment as a fierce competence among graduates, who try to situate themselves in a better position than their peers to ensure an advantage towards the obtaining of a well-rewarded job (Reid, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Wilton, 2011; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Supporting the above viewpoint, several studies have shown less favourable employment results from minorities and other disadvantaged groups (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2008; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Recognising that social and economic backgrounds provide individuals with advantages and disadvantages in attaining employability, which is reinforced by the practices of society (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Brown, 2000).

These differences influence, directly and indirectly, an individual’s employability, where the first refers to the perception of the knowledge and skills possessed by an

individual and their social and economic resources that provides them with different opportunities, and the second to the quality and prestige of the universities to appeal to employers (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; Cranmer, 2006; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

For some authors, this recognised competition has also triggered the shift from universities' interest of knowledge in its pure nature to a path towards employability and economic success, representing an investment for students in their chase for employment (Reid, 2016; Tomlinson, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Reinforced by an increased number of students undertaking further higher education and training in order to access better job opportunities (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Reid, 2016; Shah, et al., 2004) as research has revealed a positive correlation between employment and educative credentials (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Reid, 2016).

Although some research has revealed the competitive pressure on graduates in their quest for employment, some authors argue that each individual has a subjective reaction to such challenges, whereas some decide not to compete and believe their current credentials and self-value are enough to gain employment, some others follow a path of continuing development and competition in order to become more attractive to potential employers (Tomlinson, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). However, despite the individual's decision to compete or not for a positional advantage over their peers, studies have shown that graduates with a middle or higher-class background have a greater advantage than their low-class fellows to access resources that will enhance their chances of obtaining the desired job. Such resources range from access to more prestigious academic institutes to a network of well-positioned contacts and subsequent opportunities (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

#### **1.1.4. Employability as a 'process'**

While this approach focusses on the supply side of employment, it acknowledges the existence of demand factors that affect employability, sustaining that the individual must be proactive towards such obstacles and take actions to overcome them (Reid, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Bridgstock, 2009).

The input of this emerging position relies in deviating the attention from the employability skills and competencies debate and instead on recognising that the individuals face a constantly changing and challenging situation when approaching the labour market for the first time and have a need for diverse tools and course of actions in order to succeed (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Watts, 2013). Therefore, some authors have labelled it as a process approach, reinforcing the idea that employability does not come alone after graduating and having all the required credentials, but it needs the wise analysis, decision making and actions to achieve it (Reid, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013).

In the current labour market, several students and investigations are witnessing that holding a degree is not always enough to ensure employment, because of that many graduates are taking diverse strategies to appeal more to potential employers, such as training and further studies, internships, and similar extra-curricular activities that add more value to their current credentials (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Wilton, 2014; Tomlinson, 2008; Teichler, 2007).

In this regard, numerous research have spotted that graduates with diverse kinds of work exposure, such as job experience, work-placements or internships have higher possibilities of employment compared with those graduates who do not have it (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Pollard, et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Taylor & Hooley, 2014; Cranmer, 2006). To reinforce this statement, several interviews have proven that most of the graduates doing internships or work-placements have obtained employment because of it, as many companies use them as a pre-recruitment strategy (Pollard, et al., 2015; Taylor & Hooley, 2014). Whereas this option has come as a mutual effort by companies and educative institutions to bridge the gap between the skills and competencies built by the institution and those required for the companies, the reasons behind its success it is still debated through the different supply and demand side positions (Taylor & Hooley, 2014; Wilton, 2014).

On the one hand, the possession outlook research confirms that work experience or work placements help to enhance a student's soft and hard skills, while on the other

hand, several studies point out key elements of the process approach, such as building up of professional identity, confidence, and creating or improving their professional network (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Taylor & Hooley, 2014). Also, within the demand side outlook, access to job placements, internships and similar schemes are not of equal access for the entire population as there is a higher demand from graduates than offers from the companies, where partnerships with elite academic institutes and factors such as location and distance tend to impair those graduates of the low-class (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Pollard, et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2012).

However, as many studies evidence, this kind of proactive attitude it is not uniform in all graduates, where everyone has their own mindset, custom and values which shapes the way in which they pursue employment (Tomlinson, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Therefore, the driver of the process approach is to create awareness and provide guidance in the steps and actions needed to enhance the possibilities of graduates to obtain employment (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Watts, 2013; Holmes, 2013; Bridgstock, 2009).

Within this outlook, academics have emphasised the role of self-career management and pre-professional identity as key elements of the process to achieve employability, which comprise the awareness and understanding of the changing labour market to make informed career decisions and take actions, linked with the development of a professional identity which would guide this strategies (Jackson, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Bridgstock, 2009).

#### **1.1.5. Self-career management**

Self-career management refers to the ability of the individual to self-direct their own career development through continuous learning and adaptability, displayed in the professional goal setting, decision-making, and search of opportunities (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Bridgstock, 2009), which involves analysing and understanding their external context or career exploration, ability to establish a professional network and seeking guidance and support (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015). Which is recognised to have a positive effect on the individual's employability and lowering job-seek times and employment turnover while enhancing productivity (Taylor & Hooley, 2014; Bridgstock, 2009).

Career exploration refers to the ability to the individual to gain career understanding and insight through introspection and the planning and gathering of information of the external context and opportunities available for their career (Pitan & Atiku, 2017) (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Being the foundation for developing a pre-professional identity and thus adaptability for a better transition to the work environment (Jackson, 2016; Holmes, 2013).

Likewise, guidance seeking nurtures adaptability, as individuals develop a stronger commitment with their career and gain confidence that reduces their career distress increasing the chances of more positive results in the labour market, easing the transition from school to work, promoting academic achievement and retention and fostering social equality (Holmes, 2013; Hooley, et al., 2011).

Career guidance aims to support individuals to make the right career decisions and to manage their careers by providing the appropriate information regarding the labour market, opportunities available and assisting them in their assimilation, career management and decision making according to their needs (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Watts, 2013). Supporting the rationale of this outlook, numerous academics highlight that there is little point in having the knowledge, skills and qualities desired for employers if the individual is not able to promote themselves in the labour market to attain a fulfilling employment, where such skills can be developed through the assistance of career guidance (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Taylor & Hooley, 2014; Watts, 2013; Wilton, 2014).

Moreover, it is agreed among several authors the importance of the individual's decision making and course of actions in their achievement of fulfilling employment, as they will shape the future of their career (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; Hooley, et al., 2011; Bridgstock, 2009). Whilst for some authors these pivotal decisions are set since early ages when deciding the subject of study (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Hooley, et al., 2011), for others key decisions are made through the course of the individual life who continues to redefine their career, aligning the importance of long-life career guidance with the emerging concept of continuous learning (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Watts, 2013).

Finally, the management and development of networking consist of developing a strong network with others as a means to obtain career advice and job introductions (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; de Janasz & Forret, 2007), this practice accounts for a strong advantage towards employability as it holds large and relevant job information, social support and guidance, having important effects on attaining employment (de Janasz & Forret, 2007).

#### **1.1.6. Pre-professional identity**

Meanwhile, pre-professional identity consists of the engagement of the individual to their career, which involves the understanding and shaping of the individual's attitude and behaviour towards the characteristics contained in a particular profession (Jackson, 2016; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011), such as the particular knowledge and expertise, context and responsibilities that will provide the person a sense of purpose and direction, helping to develop their confidence and motivation (Trede, et al., 2012). Moreover, this approach can be linked to Cappelli's (2015) acknowledgement of the need for more 'mature', motivated and responsible applicants, which is often seen as the qualities of 'growing up' rather than attributes of pre-professional identity.

Likewise, some research on the concept of pre-professional identity has highlighted the importance of graduate identity, arguing that there is a link between the internalisation of an identity and the deployed behaviour or performance, hence as companies are concerned with assessing the potential performance of candidates, developing a career identity will improve the individual's employment outcomes (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2001). Remarking that such identity acquired is malleable, fragile, socially constructed and nurtured through personal and social confirmation, where part of the aim of developing a career identity is to empower the individual to go beyond a set of skills or attributes he/she possess (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

Another key area associated with the development of pre-professional identity is work experience, which numerous research has shown to have a positive effect on the employability of graduates (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Pollard, et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Cranmer, 2006). Whilst it is not only recognised to help the progression towards a professional identity, it can

also help to develop work-related skills, confidence, a consistent networking and thus better adaptability regarding the transition process from learning to working (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Jackson, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012);

While there is still a need for further research on areas such as career management and pre-professional identity as factors underpinning a graduate's employability (Jackson, 2016; Bridgstock, 2009), the need is also evidenced for an integrated approach to improve the chances of employment for graduates that evaluate all the different theories and variables available (Jackson, 2016).

## **2.8. Conclusion**

The graduates' employability is a complex subject that requires a profound understanding of the diverse elements which intervene during their quest for employment as well as the continuous evolution of the concept of employability in the information era where most of the controversy is dualized into two main problems, the first, a widespread concern that graduates are not meeting the employers' demands regarding skills and performance, and the second, an increasing worry in the greater production of graduates that compete amongst themselves to obtain rewarding jobs which are in scarce supply. This, as a result, is indicative of the pitfalls of the different stakeholders involved, such as educative institutions, and also governments and society, where the common aim is to prepare graduates to successfully integrate into the labour force.

Whether it is the insufficient preparation of graduates or the increased competition to obtain the desired employment, recent research has shown a rise in the actions graduates are taking to appeal more to potential employers, such as acquiring further educative credentials, entering work placements such as internships and similar. This proactive initiative of graduates illustrates the widely researched supply-side theory which places the main burden of obtaining employment on the individual, however, as stated earlier, there are several factors outside an individual's control that affect the conditions of the labour market and as a result their employment, such as the economic status to access education and other opportunities which accentuate social inequalities and receives the name of demand-side factors.



Within this outlook, the approach of this study is also driven by the identified need for even more empowered individuals that can take actions and make decisions to overcome contextual barriers to a certain extent, as current research shows that it is not sufficient to only possess the knowledge and qualities desired by employers anymore, but also to be able to leverage them in their favour when seeking employment in an increasingly competitive context. Where it is also relevant to note, that the process theory as an emerging approach is part of the results of an increased number of researches trying to offer an alternative to the widely studied possession theory that focuses on the relevance of knowledge and relation skills to attain employment. Although limited research has not fully defined the process theory, we know however that it comprises key elements such as career exploration, career management and guidance, professional identity and network building, which are also found individually as alternative approaches that have proven their positive link to the achievement of a graduate's employment.

Overall, the clear highlights of the diverse theories regarding the employability of graduates evidence the need for a more holistic approach, one that can lead to practical actions to improve the employability of graduates as the labour market faces an unprecedented change of its context. Hence, the aim of this paper focuses on setting up a path to bring together the main theories regarding graduates' employability which have been classified by some authors as possession, position and process theories and comprise of both supply and demand side outlooks. With this purpose, this paper will explore the relevance and presence of the different theories mentioned and will also look for the existence of any interactions between them that can lead to the development of a more complete and cohesive theory.

### **3. Research statement and questions**

This research paper is a phenomenological research aimed to explore graduates' perception of their employability through their own experience by analysing the presence or absence and possible interaction of key elements from the three main graduate employability theories: possession, position and process.

### **3.1. Central question**

From the three different employability theories, to what extent are theories realized in regards to graduates achieving employment?

### **3.2. Associated sub-question**

- Are all the three different theories equally relevant for graduates to obtain employment? If not, which ones are the most relevant?
- Do the three different theories interact with each other in the achievement of a graduate's employment? If so, how is that interaction?
- Are there any other variables/factors not embedded within the three main employability theories that affect the employability of graduates?
- Are all the employability theories always present in the achievement of employment by a graduate?

## **4. Research methodology and method**

### **4.1. The aim of the study**

The focus of this paper addresses the identified need to bring together the main theories regarding a graduate's employability (Jackson, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015) and explore, their contributions for the attainment of employment by graduates, the existence of other factors underpinning graduate employment not considered within such theories and discover any interrelation between theories in the achievement of employment, which have not yet been explored (Holmes, 2013; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015). Furthermore, it aims to contribute to the area of the emerging and minimally studied process theory (Holmes, 2013; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015), while relying on the valuable input and often overlooked perspective of the graduates who are experiencing the issue first-hand (Tymon, 2013; Landrum, et al., 2010; Shah, et al., 2004).

## **4.2. Philosophical and epistemological foundation**

Due to the subjective concept of ‘employability’ being a social construct, the constructivist outlook has been considered as the best approach, as it recognises the individual’s need to understand their own world through a self-constructed reality within their subjective perception of the world and own experiences framed by the social interaction and the individual’s context (Creswell, 2014).

This interpretivism philosophy allows one to analyse the complexity of the research subject through an inductive method, moving from evidence and information towards an intellectual outcome, enabling some flexibility to better understand the people’s perception on the matter and context involved (Bryman, 2015; Saunders, et al., 2015; Creswell, 2014).

This qualitative approach has also been the chosen method for several researches in this topic such as Tymon (2013), Landrum et al. (2010) and Shah et al. (2004), focusing on a phenomenological strategy to study the perception of graduates on their employability, as this paper aims to follow, with the purpose of acquiring a broader understanding and knowledge of the subject studied from their own perception and experience (Bryman, 2015; Quinlan, 2011).

While the sources of conducting a qualitative research are vast (Creswell, 2014), the research strategy selected to carry the proposed study is a semi-structured interview, as the aim of the research is to widely understand the factors affecting the employability of graduates who have graduated over a year ago through their perception of their achievement of employment drawn from their own experience.

Also, a semi-structured interview script will enable the exploration of an individual’s opinions of their employability. Its flexible re-structuration permits the obtainment of in-depth and rich information through the formulation of further questions in order to explore the research objectives and guide the flow of the conversation towards the main points and arguments relevant to the research (Saunders, et al., 2015; Flick, 2014; Quinlan, 2011; Fisher, et al., 2010). The use of group interviews was carefully considered but finally rejected as although they promote a group dynamic insight, the objective of this study is the individual’s perception of their employability based on

their own experience, therefore a focus on the individual and in-depth approach is preferred over the collective response of a group interview, which otherwise would prevent the free expression by individuals and bias their responses (Quinlan, 2011).

The semi-structured interview methodology was carried face to face and audio recorded under the participants consent with the purpose of further analysis where the ethical implication will be discussed later in this chapter, moreover, notes were taken for each participant regarding their answers on each question and complimented with demographic information, such as age, gender, nationality and years since graduation.

### **4.3. Sample**

Following the purpose of the research, a non-probabilistic snowball sampling was applied to reach relevant participants, where the first participant interviewed also connected the investigator with his peers (Quinlan, 2011), hence enabling the researcher to reach relevant post-graduate students who have graduated between one and four years ago.

Incidentally, the first person in the snowball sampling that the researcher had access to was an IT graduate, all of the recommended participants were in the same area of study. In this regard, the sample consisted of one female and ten male graduates, ranging from 23 to 37 years of age, who have graduated one and a half to four years ago with either, or in some cases both, a BSc or MSc degree in the field of Information Technology. It should be further noted that the majority of participants are Irish, with ten of the eleven holding European citizenship with diverse nationality backgrounds such as Brazilian, Kazakh, Congolese, Armenian and also one non-European who is a Chinese national.

Regardless of the fact that in qualitative research there is no concrete agreement regarding the exact required size of sampling, given that it varies depending on the purpose, scope and type of research, it is however widely accepted that a quota may be reached through data saturation. This refers to the understanding, that after a certain number of people have been interviewed there comes a stage where no more novel information can be added or discovered (Saunders, et al., 2015; Quinlan, 2011).

Under this guideline, the number of participants interviewed for this research was of eleven people, the data saturation was reached, and no new relevant information was added.

The reason behind the interest on individuals with over one year since graduating stems from the rationale that most of the studies conducted regarding a graduate's employability are focused on a timeline which stretches from six months to one year since graduating and thus does not allow sufficient time to analyse the transition process from college to work which is deemed to take longer than a year (Teichler, 2007). Moreover, similar studies have embraced the relevance of conducting a longitudinal study to better understand the school to work transition (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015), however, as cost and time are boundaries of this research, this option had to be refused.

The inclusion criteria of the participants consisted in them having completed their studies, currently working in Ireland, and having graduated over one year to up to four years ago, the aforementioned conditions are based on Teichler's (2007) study suggestions. The average time of interviews ranged between 40 and 70 minutes and comprised the main themes of graduate theories, which are; possession, position and process, and the three categories of employability measures comprising of objective, subjective and fulfilling employment. The interviews were audio recorded for further analyses and are comprised of the participants perspective of their employability based on their own experience to date.

#### **4.4. Data collection tools / Research instrument**

Following the literature reviewed the research instrument has been developed through the main themes of graduate employability theories which are possession (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Jackson, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Bridgstock, 2009; Cranmer, 2006), position (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Tholen, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; Cranmer, 2006; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Landrum, et al., 2010; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Brown, et al., 2003; Brown, 2000) and process (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Jackson, 2016; Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; Reid, 2016; Okay-Somerville &

Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Watts, 2013; Hooley, et al., 2011), which are summarised in Table1.

*Table 1 - Graduate's main employability theories*

<b>Graduates' main employability theories</b>	
<b>Theory</b>	<b>Definition and comprised elements</b>
Possession theory	<p>A set of competencies and skills possessed by an individual that makes them obtain and maintain employment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge, skills and attributes developed</li> <li>• Relational/social skills</li> </ul>
Position theory	<p>The influence of social and economic position in the gaining of employment, accentuating the differences in employment opportunities available for individuals depending on their backgrounds.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Socio-economic background</li> <li>• Access to education</li> </ul>
Process theory	<p>The active effort of the individual in seeking employment as a process rather than a condition, needing diverse tools and course of actions to succeed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• career self-management</li> <li>• pre-professional identity</li> <li>• environment/career exploration</li> <li>• networking</li> <li>• guidance seeking</li> </ul>

The measurement of employability used in the research is drawn from the literature review and understands the need to account for elements beyond the status of the person as being employed or unemployed (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015), and is categorised into three main aspects detailed in Table 2 which comprises of objective employability (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Cranmer, 2006), perceived employability (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Berntson & Marklund, 2007), and fulfilling employability (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2013; Wilton, 2011).

Table 2 - Employability framework

<b>Employability framework</b>	
<b>Categories</b>	<b>Definition and comprised elements</b>
Objective employability	<p>Further to the employed or unemployed status, the need to account for external factors such as the individual's rejection of the job, the labour market situation, and the employers' hiring requirements and bias.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labour market situation</li> <li>• Job rejection</li> <li>• Employer demands</li> </ul>
Perceived employability	<p>Personal judgement of their own characteristics that makes them employable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal perception</li> </ul> <p><i>Note: External perception cannot be measured as it needs the perception of the employer</i></p>
Fulfilling employability	<p>Consideration of the characteristics of the job</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of employment (Fulfilment: training and growth opportunities, salary)</li> <li>• Graduate job (application of their knowledge and expertise)</li> </ul>

Furthermore, although not measured, the three main theories regarding graduate employability that were acknowledged are to be divided into the two main categories of demand/structure side and supply/agency side aspects (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Tholen, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Cranmer, 2006; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Brown, 2000), for contextualising purposes.

The diagram below highlights the employability of graduates as the main outcome of the three theories of position, possession and process, while also being further divided into three different categories for measurement, which include: objective, perceived and fulfilling employment. Moreover, the three main theories of position, possession and process, are divided into the two primary concepts of demand and supply factors as an overall reference to the literature reviewed even though these concepts are not measured or applied within this study.



Figure 1 - Diagram of the theoretical framework

The questions for the semi-structured questionnaire are elaborated around the main themes identified from the conceptual and theoretical framework drawn in the literature review and comprises of the main themes detailed in Table 1 and Table 2. This set of open and semi-structured questions were developed to fit into a precoding template, which can be observed in Table 3. Moreover, in the developing of the questions, some guidance was obtained from the quantitative questionnaire from the work of Okay-Somerville & Scholarios (2015).

Some of the questions include more than one variable as the answers were created with the purpose to explore the presence, absence and relationships of one or more key elements in the three different graduate employment theories. Also, it is important to note, that due to the sensitive nature of the position approach, which refers to contextual barriers that bring socioeconomic inequalities, in turn led to questions not being directly asked but suggested or guided, as can be observed in Table 3 where the questions promote a response that does not solely claim the presence of a positional variable but also elements of the other theories depending on the individual's personal decision to share these elements.



Table 3 - Template pre-coding

<b>Template Precoding</b>		
<b>Coding variables</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Key elements for each variable</b>
<b>Objective Employability</b>	Questions 1,2 and 10	Further to be employed or unemployed, factors to accept or reject employment such as economic or social pressures to obtain employment and rejection of the job for distinct reasons such as salary expectations, work-life balance needs, distance, among others similar. It also considers the labour market situation like the demand in the sector.
<b>Fulfilling employment</b>	Question 9	The characteristics of the job, such as opportunities for growth, training available, payment and benefits, application of their knowledge and expertise.
<b>Perceived employability</b>	Question 11	The skills and capabilities the individual possess considered to be appealing to employers.
<b>Process Theory</b>	Questions 3,4,5,7,8	Proactive actions, assistance/support in decision making, career advice and guidance, labour market exploration, seeking of career opportunities, the building of a professional network. (E.g. difficulty finding jobs, doing interviews, writing a CV.)
<b>Possession Theory</b>	Questions 3,4,6,8	Knowledge acquired, personal attributes, skills obtained, learning support received. (E.g. advantages of holding a degree level or other educative certifications, personal traits.)
<b>Position Theory</b>	Questions 3,4,7	Access to education, university reputation, social and economic barriers. (E.g. obstacles faced due to English fluency, nationality, in most cases being part of a minority group.)

Furthermore, whilst the identity of the participant is kept anonymous, brief demographic information was requested under their consent, as disclosed in Table 4 below with the purpose of drawing further analysis. Any requirements for the individuals to participate in the interview, further to their consent, is also described in Table 4.

Table 4 - Demographic information asked and requirements needed for an individual's participation

<b>Demographic information</b>	<b>Participant's requirement features</b>
Gender	
Age	Have conducted studies in Ireland.
Degree subject, level and grade	Have worked or currently pursuing employment in Ireland.
Years after graduation	Have graduated at least one year ago.
Nationality/Ethnicity	

Finally, with the purpose of evaluating the research instrument, a pilot interview was conducted with two people with similar characteristics as of the target sample aimed for this paper, which aided to amend the original draft of the instrument in accordance with the methodological suggestions of Quinlan (2011) and Saunders et al (2015). The research questionnaire and a transcript of a representative interview can be found in the appendices section.

#### **4.5. Procedure**

After the interview with the first contact, the researcher was directed to further volunteers by the first contact who also complied with the inclusion criteria and were willing to participate in the interview.

The first interviewee acted as an intermediary between the researcher and the new referred persons by sharing the invitation to participate in the interview along with the letter of information and consent form, and a preview of the research questionnaire summarised with the key themes to be addressed, where both documents can be viewed in the appendices section.

The persons referred and that agreed to participate in the interview were scheduled within a period of two weeks to take part in the interview process in accordance to their availability. The interviews were made face to face on a one to one basis, where permission to audio-record was granted by the interviewees. The most common setting was a café, due to their facilities which provide a warm and quiet place to record an interview. Other settings included a public park and a restaurant.

As with the invitation, a copy of the key themes to be discussed in the interview was also sent and thus they had the opportunity to read and familiarise themselves with

the topics. This served the purpose of allowing the participants to be prepared for the interview and promoting trustworthiness in the participants while enhancing the validity and reliability of the research (Saunders, et al., 2015). The interviewer aimed to engage in an empathic manner with the participant thus trying to avoid the presence of any bias and there was also an initial casual chat allowing for rapport building prior to the interview. Then the copy of the letter of information and consent form was shared again with the participant highlighting the main points and confirming a second time their willingness to take part in the interview process and their right to withdraw their consent.

Once the participants confirmed their consent, demographic questions were asked, as detailed in the data collection tools subject addressed previously in this chapter, the information was written down in a notebook with a letter of identification in alphabetical order in accordance with the number of participants (e.g. participant number three was letter C)

After collecting the demographic information, the interviewer started with the first question according to the questionnaire as detailed in the appendices. Depending on the discussion of each question a natural conversation flow may sometimes lead to one or more other impromptu questions, for which notes were taken, also as an aid for the interviewer, the copy of the questionnaire held by the researcher had a table with guiding questions. Although the numeric order of the questions asked would initially be followed, in several occasions however this would be abandoned, and questions would be asked in a nonnumerical order as a conscious attempt to extract further relevant information, however, extra care was taken to assure that every variable and topic was covered in each interview carried out.

The average timing of the interview varied from one participant to another, being in a range of 40 to 70 minutes on average. After each interview was conducted the participant was thanked for their time and participation. In addition, the contact information regarding the interviewer remained with the interviewee in the case of any further queries arising regarding the research and/or interview.

## **4.6. Data Analysis**

The analysis for this research is based on a deductive approach as the research objectives are based on previous theories that helped to construct a theoretical framework from which the data collection tool was developed, recognising the relevant interrelation between the qualitative data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2015; Saunders, et al., 2015).

A template analysis was made for seeking the main themes and patterns within the collected data, and used a precoding template previously developed from the main themes which is structured within the conceptual framework as shown in graphic 2 under the data collection tool subject with the purpose of providing a logical and systematic method of analysing the data (Saunders, et al., 2015). However, as the audio-recorded interview was analysed further changes and adaptations were made to the original coding, for instance, new codes emerged as a result of newly identified patterns of information, including the demographic data.

The data collected consisted of the audio-recorded interviews, the notes taken by the researcher and the transcript of the answers of each interview. Regarding the data collected, only the relevant sections of the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed due to the extensive amount of data gathered, this demanded careful and repeated listening of each interview and a review of the transcripts made (Saunders, et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the data gathered was coded into the previously developed coding template which was amended according to the new findings and analysis of the data. Further to the coding process the data analysed was interpreted against the existing theory addressed in the literature review chapter and discussions and conclusions were drawn.

## **4.7. Ethical Considerations**

As stated by Quinlan (2011), ethics in research implies to the moral behaviours and convictions or values through the elaboration of the research paper, where among the diverse codes of ethics, key principles emphasise the integrity, respect, privacy,

voluntary and informed consent and avoidance of potential harm, which should be abided by any study (Saunders, et al., 2015; Flick, 2014; Quinlan, 2011).

As ethics and morals can vary according to different contexts and cultures, the code of practice for guiding this research paper is the one established by the National College of Ireland, which comprises of three core principles of respect for persons, beneficence and non-maleficence, and justice. These principles refer to the respectful and dignified treatment of the participants avoiding any potential harm and minimising risks, where participation is voluntary, consented and sensitive privacy details undisclosed. Moreover, the participation of vulnerable populations must be restricted. It is also important to highlight that this research paper has undergone the NCI Ethics review process, receiving approval and allowing its commencement.

In compliance with the ethical principles of the college, the participation of the individuals was voluntary and agreed, where an information and consent form, which can be observed in the appendices, was provided for each participant stating the purpose of the study, the use, collection and nature of the data collected, the researcher information and their right to withdraw their consent at any stage of the process. In order to preserve the anonymity of participants, each audio-recorded interview file was named in a coded manner following an alphabetical order of assigning common Spanish names (e.g. A, B, C, Alberto, Benito, Carlos). With the privacy of information in mind, it led to the immediate deletion of the interview recordings from the recording device (smartphone) after it was saved onto the researcher's personal computer with a copy of it on the researcher's external memory device also.

#### **4.8. Trustworthiness**

Although the criteria of validity and reliability in its application to a qualitative research is debated to be a difficult process, mainly due to its multi-layered nature which understands reality as a social construct, alternatively however, more flexible applications can allow concepts to be matched to the qualities of the qualitative approach (Saunders, et al., 2015). In this regard and despite that qualitative research cannot be replicated, as it represents a unique individual's perception on a specific subject in a specific context and time, the thorough and detailed information

presented in this paper regarding the methodology and design of the study is aimed to help others to conduct similar studies, addressing the external validity of this paper (Saunders, et al., 2015; Quinlan, 2011).

Furthermore, to develop the internal validity of the study, member validation was practiced, firstly, through rephrasing and corroboration of the answers given by participants during the interview process, secondly by the sharing of the interview notes with the interviewees in order to validate their accuracy and agreement, and thirdly by means of sharing the data interpretation with a proportion of the sample population (Quinlan, 2011).

#### **4.9. Potential Research Bias**

In order to prevent possible threats to the reliability of this study measures were taken to avoid errors and bias by the researcher and participant. Firstly, to avoid participant error and bias, which refers to the negative factors that affect the performance and influences the responses of participants (Saunders, et al., 2015), the time and place for the interview was carefully chosen, procuring a quiet setting with comfortable atmosphere where the interviewees could feel free to express themselves with no disruptions. Secondly, to address the researcher error and bias previous to the interview process, the researcher prepared herself to reach a neutral position thus being aware and capable of managing her own bias and assumptions, also studying thoroughly the key themes in the questionnaire. Hence, the researcher was sufficiently equipped to do the interview and pay careful attention to the participant's output.

#### **4.10. Limitations**

Regarding the limitations of this research, it includes the acknowledgement of the constraints of the sampling method as a non-probabilistic snowball sample that represents the target population in a non-statistical representational manner, therefore further generalisations cannot be made. Moreover, despite the advantage of the semi-structured interview process it is important to recognise the potential of bias in the interview process as the interviewer can influence the participant's responses, either

intentionally or unintentionally (Saunders, et al., 2015; Flick, 2014; Quinlan, 2011), despite the researchers best effort to address such threats.

Further constraints regarding the researcher's profile include being an international student with merely a little over two years of stay in the country and barriers such as a foreign language, network access, and contextual background may represent obstacles or downturns within the study.

## **5. Findings**

The description of the results of this study obeys a structure disclosed into eight main sections, the first section consists of a brief introduction to the context of the research by summarising the demographic information collected from the participants. The seven following sections include the adaptation of the precoding themes in accordance with the emerging themes and needs during the analysis process. This holds the objective of further addressing the research questions which consist of exploring the presence and/or absence of key elements of the three main graduate theories of position, possession and process. This can also enable the discovery of the existence of any interrelations between such theories through the analysis of an individual's perception of employability based on their own personal experience. The full questionnaire guiding the semi-structured interview can be found in the appendices section.

### **5.1. Contextual and demographic information**

As stated previously in the methodology chapter, due to the first interviewee contact having a profession in the IT field who also referred the researcher to other individuals, does individual in question happened to be, similar to him, also professionals in the IT sector. As previously mentioned, from the eleven people interviewed one is a woman and ten are men with ages ranging from 23 to 37 years old. All eleven possess a Bachelor's degree, with two also complementing their Bachelor's degrees with a Master's degree. All the degrees possessed are in an Information Technology related field of study. The participants graduated with grades ranging from an honours, 1.1 and 2.1 to passing grades, where the most frequent grade was a grade of 2.1. The participants had graduated between one and

half to four years ago, with three years being the most common answer. To add further detail to the previously mentioned nationality backgrounds of the participants it should be noted that although the majority of the people interviewed were Irish, there were participants with Irish citizenships with different nationality backgrounds. This was comprised of one Kazakh-Irish, one Armenian-Irish and one Kongo-Irish citizen. Moreover, there was one European national with a Brazilian-Polish background and one Chinese national. A complete detail of the demographic information gathered can be found in the appendices section.

## **5.2. Objective Employability**

All the participants interviewed were employed at the time of the interview. Within the participants the average time for finding a job was between one and two months, where on the extreme side, two participants began working directly after graduation as they had relatives or friends who referred them to their respective employers and in contrast to this, two participants stated that it took them between four and six months of job searching to find employment.

Hector – ‘Straight away, it wasn’t through college or anything, my cousin works in this company, so she got me in the door there, literally just after I graduated.’

Cesar: ‘...it took me six months to find an internship, I didn’t have a very good CV, I didn’t have experience of how to do interviews.’

Many participants commented that they did not start looking for a job until they graduated as they were too busy finishing their degrees and the application process for some companies can be very time-consuming while others commented that before looking for employment they wanted to take a vacation. For some individuals, this decision had a downside as they realised that they missed a window of opportunities during this period of time as many graduate vacancies would be advertised during the summer season.

Karlos - ‘...you waste a lot of time writing cover letters, you apply to a lot of companies online and you don’t get any feedback’



Alejandro – ‘It probably took me about six weeks, mainly because I went on holidays, because like, there were a lot of offers going around when you finish your degree for companies that want people starting in the summer.’






Among most participants, the high supply of jobs in the Irish IT sector was recognised.

Daniel – ‘...having you know nine of the top ten tech companies based here, their headquarters here, definitely that has helped a lot.’

Ignacio – ‘I think the IT sector is very large, there are plenty of jobs, so it’s not a problem to try to find a job.’

Eight out of the eleven participants stated that they had rejected a job offer, the main reason provided included a distant location of employment, other reasons provided can be viewed in Table 5 below.

*Table 5 - Reasons for rejecting a job offer*

Number of respondents	Reasons for rejecting a job offer:
3 	Distant Location
1 	Type of contract (temporary contract instead of permanent)
1 	Jumping jobs in a short period of time would look bad for recruiters
1 	Job was not what they were expecting
2 	Salary didn’t match their expectations

Benjamin: ‘Location, it was location, it was just too far, I had to travel on the N15, which is a nightmare’

Daniel – ‘I was just more focused on what I was doing, I wanted to get a year’s experience, and I just didn’t find that it would attract other employers if I was switching from job to job in a short period of time.’

Ignacio – ‘...it wasn’t what I thought it was after discussing what the benefits were and what exactly the job was.’

### **5.3. Quality of employment & Process Theory & Possession Theory**

For the majority of the participants, their current job has been their very first full-time job after graduation. A few participants have had on average two to three different jobs with the changing of jobs being driven by their desire to attain a better job.

Although all participants confirmed that their previous and current jobs have been relevant to their area of study, most of the participants, however, stated that they were not fully satisfied with their current jobs.

Whilst there were only a few participants who voiced their full satisfaction with their current jobs, most however, pointed to diverse areas in which they did not feel satisfied.

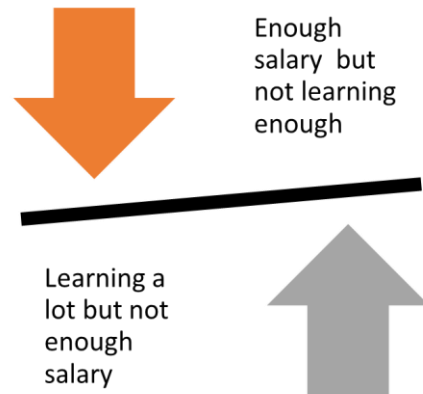
Hector – ‘...yes, I love what I do, there is a lot of new stuff for me in this role so it’s kind of a big learning experience for me.’

A combination of different opinions was evident regarding the areas in which they were satisfied and the areas in which they were not. Most recognised the ups and downs of their current job and a summary of such statements can be viewed in Figure 2. While some participants mentioned that their work was fulfilling some others were displeased with the knowledge they were obtaining.

Daniel – ‘...it was fulfilling until I reached the point where I wasn’t learning anymore and then I started to seek different opportunities in a more knowledgeable area, I needed more technical challenges’

Some other participants commented that although they were learning a great deal in their current job they did nevertheless feel that their salary expectations were not met. In this regard, some participants commented that although at the beginning as a graduate the salary seemed appealing, after a very few years however they realised that it was no longer competitive nor matching their performance.

Benjamin – ‘...as a graduate it was fine because you know it’s your first job...but after three years... yes, salary is one of the main aspects I am not happy about’



*Figure 2 - Employment satisfaction and dissatisfaction*

Moving deeper in to this topic, it was also found that most participants agreed that when they first graduated they lacked knowledge of the labour market in their respective field and thus were unaware as to what salary to expect or the best companies to apply for. This makes them now feel that they were at a disadvantage when it came to making the best decisions regarding offers they received compared with what they know now.

Hector - ‘...I never had any breakdown of the IT sector or what may be the most interesting role to go into, what salary to expect, I never had anything like that.’

Participant Erica goes further to point out that some companies may take advantage of the graduate’s lack of knowledge of the labour market regarding what they should expect.

Erica - ‘...many companies take advantage of people being recent graduates and not having any job they want to sell it (the vacancy) for more than it actually is...’

Gabriel - ‘I believe that many graduates do not know what to expect from a potential employer regarding benefits and salary and due to this I feel it is very easy for some employees to make low salary offers...’

Reinforcing these viewpoints, Hector's opinion regarding his salary expectations point out that when accepting his job, he was not very concerned about the salary, he was however more interested in the experience he could obtain from it.

Hector – '...because at the time I was moving to Dublin it was the foot in the door to the IT industry, because as I said earlier I felt that I didn't have the experience even though I did have the degree behind me.'

There was only one participant who mentioned he felt well informed about the labour market and knew what kind of salary to expect and what kind of companies to apply for. This participant commented that he obtained this information from people who have already done a Master's degree and also through internet research as a means to obtain improved market context, which he could use as a guide.

Gabriel – '...when I was in college I was continuously asking people who have already graduated, not exactly what their salary is but what in general the graduate salary in the IT field is, so from there I knew that I should be looking for at least thirty to forty thousand euro, so I knew figures, I knew about that... I think it made me more aware of what jobs to apply for.'

Moreover, there was a general consensus among participants that after gaining employment and developing work experience they were more eager to explore and understand their labour market, which gave them the confidence to look for better conditions and quality of employment.

Ignacio – '...the stuff that I've gained in the last three years, the knowledge that I've gained, I now understand a lot more than I did a few years ago, and now if I were to go for a different job I would be able, I would know how to negotiate a better salary a better contract, benefits and stuff like that, so I understand the industry much better now.'

Beyond the contextual knowledge of the labour market, it was made evident by most participants the imperative importance of technical knowledge in order to obtain a better salary.

Gabriel – ‘The major reason why I did a Master’s straight after my Bachelor’s was because I was told that if I were to do a Master’s then that would increase the average salary by about five thousand...’

To summarise these findings, figure 2 below shows a relation between quality of employment, knowledge of the labour market and the technical knowledge and educative credentials held by graduates.

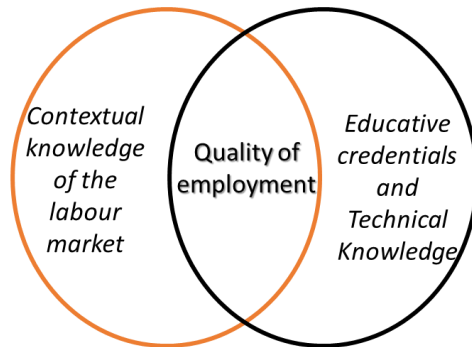


Figure 3 - Relevant elements in the Quality of employment

#### **5.4. Perceived employability & Possession Theory**

Regarding their perception of their employability ten out of the eleven participants showed confidence, stating that they feel they could find employment elsewhere if they wanted to. The main reasons which led them to this claim was their current working experience, which has provided them with the knowledge and technical skills required by most companies within their sector. Some other participants also mentioned the importance of social skills.

Hector – ‘...my technical abilities that have improved so I think I can confidently go and look for another job.’

Ignacio – ‘...my interpersonal skills and communication skills, how to deal with different people at different levels, did help me a lot because at my current job that is what I do. Communication skills and interpersonal skills, because it is not just about technical knowledge, you have to be able to communicate well with people, resolve conflicts and that kind of stuff.’

Within this viewpoint, the two participants who spent the longest time to achieve employment mentioned that one of the reasons for their initial absence of employment, was, according to them, their lack of experience, where none of them did an internship, moreover as the demographic information shows both participants had a passing grade in comparison with the rest of the participants who achieved a 2.1 or a 1.1.

Juan – ‘...a lot of employers, I don’t think look at a CV that has no experience, because they want people that are ready to go as soon as they open the door.’

Adding to the opinion of the relevance of doing internships to gain work experience, it was also highlighted that not having this experience could place graduates at a disadvantage among their peers as most of them would have had this internship experience.

Gabriel – ‘...I believe prior work experience is very important and thus I think graduates who do not have any prior relevant work experience will find it hard to find employment, unless they have carried out some very impressive projects during their time in college and received excellent grades. I think this is even more true for the IT sector because there are many IT related internship opportunities on offer so nearly any CV an employer receives for a graduate position will have some form of internship experience in it.’

## **5.5. Perceived employability & Process Theory**

Following the viewpoint that notes the importance of technical knowledge as a means to become more employable, some participants commented on their proactive approach to enhance their employability, such as identifying the skills and attributes companies were looking for through analysis of job specifications and in turn upskilling themselves during their spare time.

Benjamin – ‘...because I have learnt a lot here in fairness in my three years I have some QA experience and I’m upskilling in different tools as well and looking at

different job specs and seeing what they (employers) are looking for and trying to pick up the ones that are most popular...learning those skills.'

Erica – 'I never stopped learning, is not just a paper or title or certification, I know more than I have to know at my current job, that's good because I can adapt. I look for that, I keep studying, I'm never behind. I want to always be in a position that I can get another job if I wanted to, it is safety, being able to learn is the most important thing'

## **5.6. Process Theory**

The most recurrent problems which faced participants while seeking employment was revealed to be the writing of their CVs and attending interviews. All of them pursued diverse kinds of assistance to write and improve their CVs and to improve their interview skills. They approached friends, school support and people with experience in the human resources area and also turned to internet sources to improve their CVs. To improve their interview skills most of them found help online and through practice by attending several job interviews. These overall results can be found in Figure 4 at the end of this segment.

Alejandro – 'I didn't really know what I was doing for a CV, I had a friend who was worked at a recruitment agency and she helped me with my CV.'

Benjamin: 'Probably obstacles doing interviews, I haven't done interviews in... since when we were first taught to do interviews, which was a long long time ago, and if you don't do interviews you forget those things... So I practiced interviews and I did an online preparation course for interviews, that helped me a lot.'

Important to highlight also that both participants who took from four to six months to find employment also mentioned that they faced difficulties in writing their CV and doing interviews.

Juan – 'I struggle, I get really nervous going and speaking at interviews, especially because you are looking at these companies that are so well established and everything, and you come across like this little kid graduate.'

Among the few participants who did not find much trouble when undergoing interviews, commented that their social skills, such as good communication and ability to socialise, in combination with their confident attitude, facilitated the taking part in the interview process and felt it gave them a distinct advantage over their competitors who were currently also undergoing the interview process.

Karlos – ‘Particularly in this industry yes, social skills, most people in my group, I would say close to the 40% of the class don’t know how to work well in social situations or with other people, and well, that’s good if you are writing code (programming), just come in and concentrate, but if you need to communicate with people when doing interviews, it makes a big difference that you are able to speak expressively and show yourself off.’

The confident attitude for expressing themselves during interviews stems from varied reasons such as their technical knowledge, personality, personal experiences or a combination of each.

Hector – ‘...yes definitely! I really think so, because like, the reason I am confident in doing the interviews is because when I worked as a student in college I went for a lot of interviews, but not everyone has that experience you know, or feel that confident doing interviews.’

Erica - ‘I think with living in a different country and speaking a different language you learn a lot about not being afraid to ask questions and make mistakes and all that.’

Ignacio – ‘I’m a shy person but when it comes to a professional environment I am confident because I know what I’m doing and now I think it is even better because I understand how the workforce goes and how to deal with certain situations. I am much more confident now.’

In regard to what measures or actions participants took to achieve employment, most of them showed a proactive attitude, seeking career guidance from their attended colleges and external groups, joining societies and similar professional groups to build their professional network, explore their labour market and receive advice.



Daniel – ‘In college I used to always attend like... you know in college there’s all sorts of career events that happen, so I used to attend those events and I also, you know when you attend those events you kind of meet different people and you get advice from people.’

All participants confirmed that their college had diverse support to help them to find employment such as CV clinics, career guidance and career fairs. However, they mentioned that this kind of support was not always effective or advertised in a perfunctory manner.

Daniel - ‘...they have done a lot but it’s just the way in that... I think they need to advertise more the things that they offer, they need to get the students’ attention.’

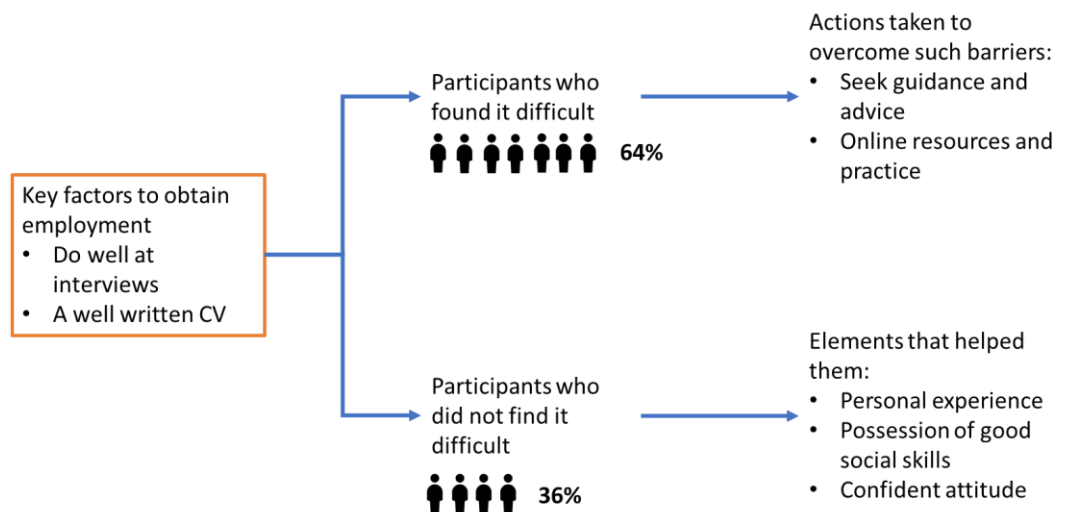


Figure 4 - Key factors to obtain employment

## 5.7. Possession Theory

Eight from the eleven participants confirmed that they have undertaken an internship and referred to it as a huge advantage that helped them to become more employable, stating that work experience and technical knowledge is what companies are looking for, moreover both participants who did not do an internship also recognised the important value of it. Moreover, while for some of them it was a mandatory requirement from their college, others undertook it as a proactive decision in an effort to improve their employability.

Fernando – ‘It wasn’t mandatory at all, it was something that I felt was needed, to make myself more employable and get some good experience.’

Hector - ‘I think doing internships are really good as well because if you look at a lot of specs for jobs it says you need a minimum of one-year experience and how are you supposed to get experience as a graduate, so you need the internship...’

The participants who undertook internships commented that such experience helped them to acquire more technical knowledge and skills, moreover some of them mentioned that it also helped them to develop certain attributes such as social and communication skills for dealing with different people in a professional environment, a sense of responsibility and accountability for their work, learning how to meet deadlines, managing time and dealing with pressure.

Benjamin – ‘Obviously the main ones are team-working, you know meeting deadlines, getting stuff done, how you sort of divide your work and the technical tools you get... prioritising.’

Daniel – ‘...because of the experience, I gained a lot of the traits such as time management, being responsible and dealing with pressure, technical knowledge, accountability for projects and going to meetings.’

Fernando- ‘...prioritise tasks, learn how to work in a team, basically all you are not taught in college, learn how to work in a work environment.’

All the participants emphasised the importance of having work experience and technical skills to obtain employment where the majority recognised that their education helped to open doors for them initially. However, many pointed out that their educational background was more of an initial requirement rather than an actual permanent factor to obtain employment.

Erica - ‘...having a degree helps you to get your first job, and from there the experience is more important than the degree.’

Gabriel - ‘...I think the educational background helps to get your foot through the door but when you have three to four years of experience then I do not think it matters as much. I believe it is most important for entry level...’

In this regard, participants commented that holding a degree is important but that also for some companies, experience can be more appealing than having an actual degree.

Alejandro - ‘Yes, the degree helps, but I don’t know, it’s not the end of the world if you don’t have a Bachelor’s degree as long as you, well I don’t really know what companies are looking for...but I think if you instead have the experience you can do fine also...’

Most of the participants agreed that when possessing a degree, it is also important for it to be accompanied with good grades for the purpose of achieving employment as it is proof of the knowledge possessed and is often a highlighted requirement on job specifications for many companies as to the minimum grade they desire. A summary of the overall findings can be found in Figure 5.

Hector - ‘...well because, you know, it shows you have put in the work when you were in college and you understood what it was that you were there to learn, it’s a reflection of your work ethic and how much you know.’

Fernando - ‘...yes, grades are definitely a massive factor, if I would have got a 2.2 I wouldn't have got that many interviews. Unfortunately, I don't think it should be that way, I would have gotten interviews eventually, but it would have been tougher.’

Ignacio - ‘...a lot of the jobs I was looking for especially in the IT sector, a lot of them were looking for a 2.1 at least, so that was very important, but not necessary as long as you have the technical skills and you can prove it to them through assessments then that can get you through.’

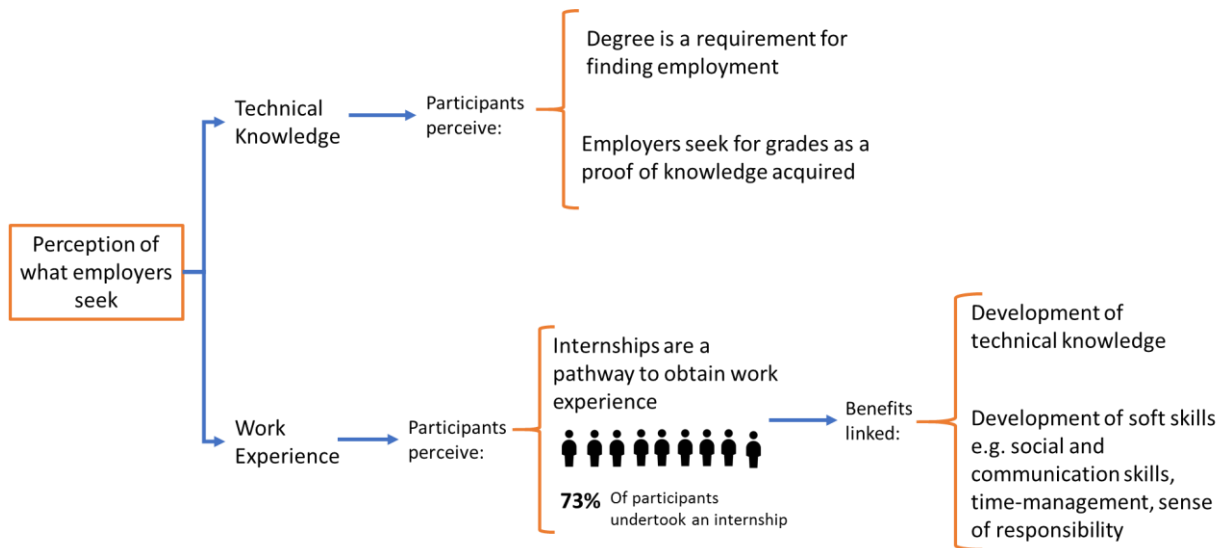


Figure 5 - Perception of what employers seek

## 5.8. Position Theory

Most of the participants agreed that the reputation of academic institutions was not a concern for companies, where participants recognise that companies care more about the people having a degree in the correspondent area regardless of the academic institution attended. Furthermore, many participants also commented on the relevance of the structure of the selected course rather than the name of the academic institution, emphasising the relevance of the knowledge over the reputation of the university or institute.

Hector - ‘I think going to university for IT will stand for you more than if you went to, obviously excluding like private college, but if you went to an institute and things like that, I think if you go to university for IT you will have that step above... it depends on what you want to do’

However, a few participants disagreed with such a statement, commenting that they felt the reputation of their university had an important influence in their recruitment process. The reasons behind such an opinion were due to two different reasons, firstly, because many of the high performing employees of the company they applied for had studied in the same university as them. As a result, the company recognises the excellence of such an academic institution in the teachings of IT and applicants coming from the same academic institution have become more appealing to them.

Gabriel – ‘In regard to the reputation of my university, the job that I am in now, they were actually seeking people from DCU because some of the employees that they have now come from DCU and they have left a very good impression which in turn made my manager who hired me to seek people from DCU.’

Secondly, because some companies have agreements between themselves and academic institutions to develop educative programs to meet the companies’ particular demands and therefore does companies lean more towards individuals who graduated from those colleges. Overall findings can be seen in Figure 6.

Ignacio – ‘I think so because some companies are affiliated to some universities, so if they see that this person is coming from that university they would know a lot more because of that course, yes because for example, I don’t want to name names, but you know what I mean, so there are companies who work with certain universities on a certain course and people who graduated from those courses can work for that company, so the university and the company work together to structure the course, there are some companies like that.’

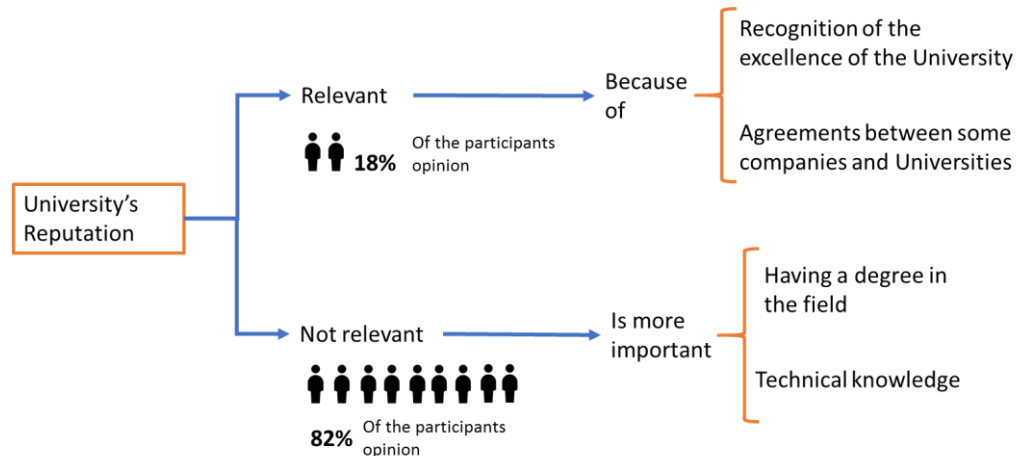


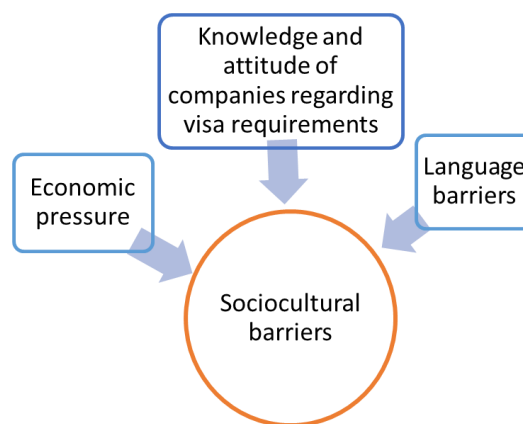
Figure 6 - Relevance of a University's reputation

Regarding the barriers that stem from one's social background, only two participants felt a need to refer to them, which include Cesar and Erica. The two mentioned participants are coming from a different socio-cultural background, and compared to some other participants have spent less time living in Ireland and commented that they felt extra barriers when seeking employment.

Although Erica commented that she had experience in living in another country, America, not to mention also speaking fluent English and having a European citizenship, she did nevertheless mention that one of the problems she faced when looking for employment in Ireland after graduation was the lack of knowledge that companies had regarding visa requirements. This led to many companies continuously asking her questions regarding her visa due to their lack of understanding of the Irish immigration requirements associated with whether she was entitled to work in Ireland or not, despite her Polish-Brazilian dual nationality.

Erica - 'I had to say in the cover letter that I was European, and they would still ask me further questions because they couldn't understand my situation.'

In a similar situation, a participant identified as a non-European citizen mentioned he had to face numerous challenges in comparison with the other participants who are all European citizens although some with diverse backgrounds. This is highlighted in Figure 7 below.



*Figure 7 - Sociocultural barriers*

In this regard, participant Cesar commented that it took him six months to find employment after graduation. The reasons he mentioned included difficulties in writing a CV and undergoing interviews where he highlighted that one of his main obstacles was his lack of English fluency as he felt that he could not express himself well as he could have done in his native language when undergoing an interview, making it harder for him to compose an appealing CV.

Cesar – ‘I didn’t fully show all my strength in the interviews... sometimes my English didn’t allow me to express myself better or to understand questions, especially human resource questions, they were harder to answer, I couldn’t express myself as well as I could have done in my native language.’

Other pressures Cesar faced was the urge to obtain employment for economic reasons as he had to cater for his own expenses while living in a foreign country. There were also pressures regarding his visa requirements as there was an obligation to be employed in order to renew his visa which was close to expiring, and if the obligation was not satisfied he would not have the right to remain in the country.

Cesar – ‘I’m just by self in Ireland I have to pay for everything on my own...one of the reasons is my nationality, if I want to stay in Ireland I need to find a job to get a job permit and eventually citizenship.’

The first job Cesar accepted was an internship as it was the first offer he received. He felt options were reduced for him as many companies also required European citizenship for their positions and there were a limited number of companies who offered sponsorship.

Cesar – ‘One difficulty is nationality because I went to a few interviews or even became rejected before the interviews because they don't sponsor your visa... and required EU passport or citizenship.’

## **6. Discussion and analysis**

This chapter will address the key findings of this research through the critical analysis of their implications related to the previous literature review. The structure followed in this section refers to the research questions, where first it will acknowledge the limitations of the results and then each subheading will consist of a brief answer to the research questions comprised of the detailed discussion of each question.

### **6.1. Limitations**

Among the limitations of the findings in this research, it is recognised the constraint of a population of IT professionals that cannot account for the reality and viewpoint

of graduates of other disciplines, such as business or engineering, who may have a different labour market context and insights. Where it is also important to emphasise the little representation of female participants as most respondents were males.

Also, despite the population sample containing different nationality backgrounds, it was however not fully representative of the entire demographic population of Ireland. Moreover, the participants did not represent all the diverse IT courses and academic institutions within Ireland, where although information was gathered regarding their course, the name of their college however was not collected. In order to face these limitations, it is suggested to use a quota sampling in future research to complement the sampling technique used in this study. This will allow the obtainment of an even male to female ratio in terms of participants, as well as include an even number of participants from different disciplines and thus will capture a closer representation of the population within Ireland.

Moreover, another limitation which led to the difficulty of assessing and collecting information from participants regarding their socioeconomic background was due to ethical issues as such information is considered to be sensitive, especially when conducting a face to face interview.

Overall the major constraints of this research point out the weaknesses of the non-probabilistic sampling method which is a non-statistical representative and hence does not allow generalisations of the research findings. Therefore, suggestions for further research also points out the use of a probability sampling technique as a means to represent the studied population, integrating the diverse fields of study, schools, sociocultural background and gender, where this approach towards quantitative research aims to improve the quality and quantity of the data obtained enabling the generalisation of the obtained results. Hence, such a quantitative approach will enable one to explore, to a greater scale, the relationships between possession and process theories. It will also allow further exploration of the presence and relevance of factors regarding the position approach, where, as the participant retains more privacy through surveys, which requires less personal interaction than interviews, then more direct and well-structured questions in this area could be asked provided they abide by ethical principles.



## **6.2. Possession, Process and Positional theories are all relevant to a graduate's attainment of employment**

It was agreed in accordance with the findings of previous research (see Suleman, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Barrie, 2006), that technical knowledge, as well as social skills, have a positive effect on the perception and quality of employment.

Where technical knowledge along with soft skills, core elements of the possession theory (Suleman, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Barrie, 2006) gave participants the confidence to consider themselves more employable, similarly, the quality of employment was linked back to the viewpoint that technical knowledge enhances the individual's salary expectations (Reid, 2016; Tomlinson, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Nonetheless, despite the focus on knowledge and social skills, a level of disregard towards the educative institutions was evidenced where several participants stated that for employers it was more relevant the grade they obtained rather than the degree they held.

Moreover, the participants recognition of internship as a way to obtain technical knowledge and work experience supported previous research stating that the degree is no longer enough to obtain employment, therefore individuals had begun to involve themselves in activities to become more appealing to potential employers (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Wilton, 2014; Tomlinson, 2008; Teichler, 2007). This is also in alignment with findings of previous researches which shows that obtaining internships or similar work placements enhances an individual's chances of obtaining employment (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Pollard, et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Taylor & Hooley, 2014; Cranmer, 2006)

Within the process theory, elements such as career exploration along with pre-professional identity were discussed to aid individuals to make better decisions regarding job opportunities and quality of employment (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Pollard, et al., 2015; Watts, 2013).

Hence, this viewpoint reinforces findings of previous researches on the concept of pre-professional identity, associating its development with work experience (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Jackson, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012), which according to Trede, et al (2012), gives individuals a sense of direction that nurtures their self-assurance and drive.

Meanwhile, the importance of career self-management and continuous learning was confirmed through the proactive actions taken by graduates to enhance their employability and achieve a certain level of job security, such as career guidance, networking, and the learning of technical skills, and also improving their adaptability to the changes of the labour market (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Watts, 2013; Bridgstock, 2009).

The above measures taken by graduates also reinforce the evolving concept of employability where individuals need to keep themselves employable for future employers and that the concept of job security does not rely anymore on the loyalty to a company but to continues learning (Hippe & Fouquet, 2018; Brown, et al., 2003; Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; McQuaid, et al., 2005).

Furthermore, the presence of elements in the process theory did not only improve the individual's employability but also went further to suggest that the absence of some elements such as career guidance and exploration can hinder the employability of graduates. Evidenced in their struggle to perform well at interviews and writing appealing CVs, confirming statements from previous research which remark the relevance of key elements of the process theory for enabling individuals to effectively promote themselves in the labour market and thus to obtain quality employment (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Taylor & Hooley, 2014; Watts, 2013; Wilton, 2014).

In contrast to what the positional theory suggests, which is that holding a degree from a prestigious university gives one an advantage over its peers (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; Cranmer, 2006; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006), most of the participants however challenge this suggestion through their perception that the name of their educative institution did not have a major effect on their recruitment outcome. It was however recognised among participants that to a certain level some institutions

standout over others due to the recognition of their course structures or affiliation with certain companies. This shows the principles of the positional approach which remarks the existence of socioeconomic inequalities outside of the individual's control affecting their attainment of employment (Tomlinson, 2012; Wilton, 2011).

It was also confirmed that participants who belong to minority groups, faced diverse socioeconomic inequalities that represent extra barriers when seeking employment in comparison to others. Where their socioeconomic background situates them in a disadvantaged position in their quest for employment by the practices of society (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Brown, 2000). This supports previous research findings which state that members of minority groups tend to have less favourable employment outcomes (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2008; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Furthermore, a recognised limitation of this research is one in the form of insufficient information regarding the participants' socioeconomic backgrounds and thus further implications cannot be drawn. Hence whilst for some individuals, elements of the position theory are crucial in their achievement of employment, for others however it could be completely irrelevant.

Regarding the acknowledgement of the most relevant theories influencing the employability of graduates, the findings gathered in this research support the equal and major relevance of the process and possession theories, where, as it will be further discussed in the next subheading, both show an important level of interaction. This finding differs from previous research which states that possession theory is more important than process theory but agrees with them in relation to the limited relevance and influence of the elements within the position theory (see Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015).

Furthermore, as stated previously, the limitations of this research are acknowledged, where the social background of participants was not explored, and the information gathered regarding the positional theory was limited due to the lack of direct questions within this topic, therefore, further inferences could not be drawn. Moreover, similarly with previous research (see Holmes, 2013; Okay-Somerville &

Scholarios, 2015) it becomes suggested that positional elements can be concealed through practice making it more difficult to evaluate them.

### **6.3. There is evidence for relevant interaction between possession and process theories**

While previous research aimed to compare the relevance of one theory over another, there was little interest in exploring the possible interactions between such approaches. However, the existence of a link between elements of the diverse theories supports the integration of a more holistic approach. Hence the most valuable contribution of this paper is recognised to be the discovery of a possible interaction between elements of the process and possession approach.

These findings expose a link between the process and possession theories regarding the perceived employability of graduates, which seem to complement each other in the graduate's achievement of employment by improving the way in which they sell themselves to employers (Taylor & Hooley, 2014; Wilton, 2014).

The combination of the participants' responses points to a link between the social skills as referred to in the possession theory (Suleman, 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Barrie, 2006) and aspects of the process theory such as pre-professional identity where the individual internalises a professional identity and displays it through their behaviour enhancing their drive and confidence (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2001) confirming what previous researches have stated that there is not much relevance in having exceptional technical skills if individuals are not able to prove themselves to potential employers (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Taylor & Hooley, 2014; Watts, 2013; Wilton, 2014).

Furthermore, to reinforce the link between possession and process theories, findings regarding a participant's involvement in internships supports the evidence concerning the ability of internships to facilitate a more successful outcome when seeking employment. This is in part due to the development of technical and soft skills, as well as building up a of professional identity and nurturing self-confidence (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Taylor & Hooley, 2014) .These findings also add more insight into

the minimally researched area of the reasons behind the advantages of enrolling into an internship.

Although some research in the area shows a major relevance of both theories ( see Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013), the insights of this study is to point out a probable link between theories that allows the further integration and development of a complete approach much needed in this area, as while elements of the process theory are still emerging and developing, this paper could serve as a starting point for future research and allow it to integrate with other elements of the different theories rather than isolate it into another different outlook that competes with the various others.

#### **6.4. Contextual factors beyond the researched theories affect the employability of graduates**

All the answers provided support previous research findings stating that personal circumstances such as market demand, type of contract, salary, location and personal judgement represent an important aspect that can influence individuals to reject or disregard a job (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Cranmer, 2006), therefore the measurement of employability without contextual factors cannot be an accurate one (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015). However, it is important to recognise that beyond the objective measurement of employability contextual factors were not entirely comprised within any of the three main theories studied within this research.

While the position theory includes some contextual elements such as socioeconomic inequalities and barriers faced by minority groups and limitations to access education, further contextual factors such as the demand from the field, the particular characteristics of the business and the contextual elements of the region are not considered further within any of the studied theories. In this regard, an important finding for the achievement of employment was the timing of the application for a job and the time invested into applying for jobs, such findings deem further exploration in the study of a graduate's employability as the lack of consideration for

this aspect could put recent graduates at a disadvantage when seeking suitable employment.

Among the contextual factors not thoroughly explored include the characteristics of the labour market in Ireland, which may vary to the ones within the UK, where based on literature reviewed, suggest that most of the research regarding graduates have been conducted within the UK context, such as the size of the population, the number and distinctions between educative institutions, the hiring criteria and practices, and in general the conditions of their workforce.

Furthermore, the participants' viewpoints supported the statements of different studies regarding the evolving concept of employability and how the information Era has influenced it (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016; Brown, et al., 2003; Michaels, et al., 2001) where graduates recognised the major emphasis given to work experience and presented great interest in the opportunities provided to them to learn and upskill themselves in order to become more employable and appealing to potential employers, agreeing with many research reports, that possessing a degree is not considered sufficient alone to achieve employment (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Wilton, 2014; Tomlinson, 2008; Teichler, 2007).

As the overall reality of employment is subject to the external context, limitations in this research recognises the need to study further contextual factors influencing the employability of graduates, where it is acknowledged that the level of competition among graduates and the opportunities offered vary depending on diverse factors such as the different sectors and locations. It is therefore suggested, that further research can explore and collect relevant information on the particular features from the job market in Ireland, which is expected to differ from the context of different countries such as, the United Kingdom, where most of the studies have been carried.

### **6.5. Elements of the possession and process theory are always present in a graduate's achievement of employment, whilst elements of the positional theory are more difficult to evaluate.**

Despite the findings which suggest that there is an important interrelation between the process and possession theories where elements are always present in a graduate's attainment of employment, the elements of the position theory are nevertheless more difficult to assess. This is due to the limitations of this paper failing to obtain sufficient information as it is deemed to be too sensitive to collect, especially in a face to face approach as the one undertaken by this qualitative study. Hence, without this information, it is difficult to explore the level of competition among the workforce and the measurement of socioeconomic inequalities and barriers.

Whilst positional elements were experienced by several participants, such as in the positional advantage of participants being referred to employment by friends and relatives, as well as the social inequalities experienced by non-Irish nationals and the preference of some employers towards certain educative institutions, further inferences beyond the ones just mentioned cannot be made. Therefore, while for some individuals their socioeconomic background has a strong influence on their achievement of employment, for others this aspect has no relevance nor is it present at all.

## **7. Conclusion and recommendations**

In the aim of better understanding of the factors underpinning the employability of graduates, this research paper analysed the perspective of graduates based on their experience in the achievement of employment through the main theories in the areas of: possession, position and process approaches. The results of this study support the major relevance of the possession and process theories, where it was also found that an important interaction between both existed regarding the graduate's attainment of employment and the quality of it, advancing further with the research in this area towards a more integrated approach.

While the results gathered confirm the relevance of the three theories studied, it evidences the major significance of elements comprised in the process and possession theories, dictating that for the quality of employment as well as for perceived employability, technical knowledge and social skills are considered vital. Among the most important aspects to consider from this outcome is that academic institutions, although recognised to provide credentials, background knowledge and skills needed for graduates to achieve employment, was however for the most part perceived as not enough, leading many of the participants towards proactive actions to improve their knowledge and skills by way of internships, career guidance and general advice with the ultimate aim of becoming more employable. Hence, also demonstrating key aspects of the process theory, which were not only comparable in relevance to the elements of the possession theory but also complementing them. Where the findings of such interactions between the process and possession theories mark advances in the current research field and takes a step towards a more integrated approach that encompasses all the key elements underpinning the employability of graduates.

Calling for further research to deeper explore the interactions between both theories enlightens one to develop a more complete approach regarding the employability of graduates that can have practical outcomes to aid graduates in achieving better results as they seek employment.

While possession theory favours the influence of knowledge and soft skills in the search for employment, the claim of the process theory is one which empowers individuals to take control of their own career progression. Henceforth, both theories, one guiding the direction and the other supporting every step needed to achieve the goal can be very beneficial to graduates who can devise their own pathway to achieve employment rather than be subject to the consequences of not being employable.

Taking into account the limitations of this research, it is necessary to take into consideration the inability of generalising these findings, where for instance, the results showing the amount of knowledge required to acquire employment could be biased by a specific field, which for this research was the field of Information Technology. In the IT field tangible technical knowledge is deemed to be embedded in the area of expertise which may differ from other fields such as Arts, Business



Studies or Marketing, where knowledge can be more subjective. Therefore, it is vital to conduct further research that explores these differences enabling the possibility of generalisation of results.

As stated previously, this study suggests the need for quantitative research that can include the diverse fields of study and work industries in Dublin. This can enable the access to probabilistic data that allows a valid representation of the graduate population in Ireland and thus allows generalising of conclusions. Within this suggestion it became evident that individuals who have graduated between one and four years ago have a great input in the field of research similar to this, where as recent graduates would not. While this study followed a guideline suggested by past studies to consider graduates of over one year to four years since graduating, further research however, can set their own parameters according to their own criteria.

Additionally, the extensive time that quantitative research in this area may demand must be recognised, especially if the intention is to comprise the several areas of study that are employed within the work industries in Dublin, as suggested by this study. Hence as a recommendation, if conducting research at a big scale is not possible then a well-conducted research limited to two or three different fields of study can be valuable enough to make their findings generalisable and make a stronger case calling for practical action.

Moreover, while the contribution of this study points out the need for further research to enable generalising findings which involve a possible interaction between both process and possession theories, it has also contributed to the support of the process theory as a vital factor to improve the employability and quality of employment for graduates.

In this researched it was also evidenced that the lack of career exploration, career guidance, professional networking and pre-professional identity had a negative impact on the participants' achievement of employment and its quality. In this regard, it was also pointed out that although some academic institutes provided students with some level of support in such areas, it was either not sufficient or not adequately advertised, or was simply not appealing to students for the most part. Therefore, further developing this emerging area of research and creating awareness among the

stakeholders such as graduates, educative institutions and government is deemed necessary in order to induce action. On this matter, an interesting finding shows that while some participants took proactive actions such as career exploration, guidance seeking and building of a professional network, others took more limited options and as a result their outcome was not as successful as for those who did more in this regard.

Whilst such findings remark the significance of elements of the process theory, they also beg the question of how some individuals are more in alignment of key elements of career self-management and pre-professional identity than others? Where this questioning can serve as a starting point to discover how to best develop such traits in graduates contrary to the belief of 'you either have it or you don't'. This approach supports the notion that an individual can acquire knowledge, skills and abilities through process planning. In this regard, it is not only vital for graduates to know how they are able to shape their own career paths and success but also that universities together with the government can provide equal support for graduates in this area. As stated previously, despite the fact that many universities already provide some assistance to students, they are not always as effective as can be desired or well promoted. Henceforth funding and support from the government towards educative institutions is suggested as means to set norms and standards for the assistance provided. This may potentially enable the support provided by one education institute to be tantamount to another in regard to quality.

The benefit expected from further research in the process theory is to aid the government and universities to develop a successful program to support graduates to transition effectively into the working life. Highlighting the significance of a well-structured program, backed up with a reliable body of knowledge that is successfully promoted in order to reach and catch the interest of students and future graduates.

Furthermore, whilst elements from the possession and process theories were deemed as the most relevant, variables of the position theory were also found and were relevant to some participants belonging to minority groups who faced more obstacles to find employment compared to others.

As this paper has acknowledged the limitation of this study regarding the measurement and analysis of data regarding the position theory, it has also suggested the need for further research in this topic to be able to thoroughly explore its relevance and the possibility of interactions with any other theory. Where, as discussed previously, a quantitative approach is suggested which allows sufficient privacy for participants in order to answer questions related to their sociocultural background. Moreover, the challenge of gathering this information is recognised given its sensitive and private nature and also several ethical implications.

The findings in this research highlight the relevance of demand or contextual factors and remarks the need for theories to integrate such aspects more thoroughly, as while such factors are considered in the measurement of objective employability the three main theories explored in this paper do not comprise them in their totality, leaving out elements that could be vital to the development of a more holistic approach that can lead to more successful outcomes in the graduates pursuit for employment.

These contextual factors are also represented in the limitations of this study, such as the narrowed outlook of a single work industry rather than a more inclusive sample of the diverse work industries within Dublin. Recognising that the type of industry can have their own contextual variables shaping the reality of its labour market, therefore a diverse sector could face a totally different setting for their labour force and hence affect the presence and interaction of the elements of the diverse theories explored in this study.

In general, the overall findings of this research have diverse implications for several stakeholders, such as the government, educative institutions and individuals. Firstly, individuals need to be made aware of not only that the current labour market is more competitive and demanding than ever before, but that they also need to take ownership of their professional careers by developing a pre-professional identity accompanied with career exploration and guidance seeking. These proactive actions should not be seen as a burden on the individual but as a catalyst for self-empowerment. This mindset will help them to make informed decisions and draw better pathways to achieve their goals while also allowing them, to overcome to a certain extent, the contextual barriers that they may come across.

Secondly and in relation to the above paragraph, educative institutions need to revisit not only what they are offering to students regarding knowledge and skills, but further assistance and support that can aid them to become more employable after graduation. For example, compulsory internships as a measure to improve their technical knowledge and social skills, as well as helping them to develop the pivotal elements identified in the process theory, such as career management and development of pre-professional identity. Moreover, whilst some educative institutions already provide such support, this must be re-evaluated to guarantee that they are effective and thoroughly engaging to all their students.

Additionally, government and policymakers should take part in assuring that the quality of the employment and the opportunities for individuals how are entering the labour market are equal and plentiful. In this regard, the actions requiring consideration are the funding of educative institutions in order to develop and implement effective support for their students. This will, as a direct consequence, enhance their chances of obtaining employment with the meaningful insights gained and allow for further research studies exploring the interaction between the process and possession theories.

Moreover, as it was evidenced in the findings of this research, contextual factors influenced the employability of graduates, such as the locations of employment, the demand of the field, along with socioeconomic barriers which were explored within the position theory and thus as a result, the government should take responsibility to reduce and prevent such negative effects outside the control of the individual. Some possible actions from the government could include the funding of public transportation for recent graduates as a means for them to arrive to work. Another possible government measure could include the overall improvement of city infrastructure as a means to enhance access to and within cities. Furthermore, the government increasing their support for universities could help to guarantee a high quality of education and ensure equality in the access to such education. In addition, the government could select to establish new and improved policies which could prevent or at least reduce companies from discriminating, directly or indirectly, against applicants of minority groups such as foreign students.

Overall the present paper outlines the importance of integrating the diverse approaches with graduates' employability in order to facilitate the achievement of more successful outcomes, recognising the need to acknowledge all the elements in play during the graduate's transition to work, where recommendations for further research are made towards the exploration of the relationship between the process and possession theories as well as a more thorough integration of contextual factors that are not comprised within the three theories studied in this research. A part of the aim of this paper is to also highlight the relevance of the elements in the process theory supporting the findings of previous research in this area, calling for a further study on this theory as there is still only slight research on this area and thus lacking a more integrated structure despite the findings of a positive correlation between their key elements and the achievement of employment by a graduate.

### **7.1. Timescale and cost for actions recommended from this research**

As the key need for taking action is pointed to educative institutions and the government, a joined approach is deemed pertinent and thus proposed, by which it is suggested that the government could aid, and fund strategies developed by universities to provide their students with better tools to succeed for the achievement of employment. The overall benefit will not just be for graduates but also for the society as a whole, improving the economy and development of the city/country.

Actions suggested in this study were divided into two different steps, which are further detailed in Table 6 and 7. First, a thorough research at a big scale aiming to integrate together the main theories regarding graduates' employability by exploring the relationship between the process and possession theories, whilst also exploring further how contextual factors influence its outcomes, such as the diverse context of industries and labour market within Dublin. And secondly, it is expected that from this research a pilot program will be drawn and launched in order to aid students to achieve better results in their pursuance for employment and thus this program will become further evaluated.

The ambitious scope of this project and the many obstacles and difficulties it may bring are considered, this viewpoint nevertheless aims to draw a path or a course of actions to follow at either an extraordinary scale as proposed, or simplified into small

actions with several number of researches which through their individual input can lead to actions taken by the government and educative systems to improve the success of graduates in achieving employment.

Details of the actions, time and resources involved as well as benefits per actions are disclosed in Table 6 and 7.

*Table 6 - Research Study*

<b>Action: Research study</b>			
<b>Description</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Cost/Resources</b>	<b>Benefit</b>
<p>A research study with a great scope to include a representative population from the diverse industries in Dublin.</p> <p>Aiming to explore the possible interactions between the possession and process theories and exploring further the influence of contextual factors.</p>	2 - 3 years	<p>Significant economic and time investment.</p> <p>Several professional researchers to evaluate at a bigger scale the influence and interactions of the main theories regarding graduates' employability within the diverse industries in Dublin, where the present study can serve as a reference point.</p>	<p>This body of knowledge will serve as a solid and strong foundation from which further programs and strategies can be developed to help with graduates' employability outcomes.</p> <p>Results would also serve as a reference for professionals and students to make better-informed decisions and actions to improve their employability.</p> <p>In regard to the government, it will aid them in making better decisions regarding the course of actions such as the development of programs, the destination of resources and policymaking regarding the support for academic institutions and graduates to guarantee better employment outcomes.</p> <p>Regarding academic institutions, it will allow for better assessment and development of career support programs for their students and future graduates.</p>

Table 7 - Program development

<b>Action: Development of a support program for graduates within the insights of the possession and process theories</b>			
<b>Description</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Cost/Resources</b>	<b>Benefit</b>
A pilot program in a number of academic institutes	2 - 3 years	<p>Once enough information is gathered to develop a program, this will be launched and be subject to future evaluation.</p> <p>Significant economic investment to implement the program across several universities in Dublin. To provide appropriate material and facilities and also the salary of personnel to provide student support.</p> <p>High time invested to prepare material, recruit, hire and train personnel.</p>	<p>To be able to re-structure/ re-design and improve the launched program as it runs.</p> <p>Learning from mistakes and pitfalls.</p> <p>Reduction in cost given the implementation in only a limited number of academic institutes subject to the assessment of outcomes.</p>
Promotion	1 year	<p>Moderate to significant economic cost and time invested in marketing strategies.</p> <p>Ensuring students are made aware of the program available and the expected outcomes from them.</p>	<p>Guarantee equal access for all interested parties.</p> <p>Increased number of participation from students.</p>
Evaluation	2 years	<p>Moderate to significant economic cost.</p> <p>Time-consuming in evaluating several academic institutes' outcomes. Produced yearly to have a reference for comparison.</p>	<p>Gathering of feedback from diverse stakeholders.</p> <p>Assessing the desired outcomes in order to improve the program/strategy.</p>
Amendments and launching of a program in all academic institutes in Dublin.	2 - 3 years	<p>High and significant economic resources as well as a significant time investment.</p> <p>Cost and allocation of facilities in all the academic institutes to be able to provide support to all students.</p> <p>Hiring, training and compensating of professionals who provide such support.</p>	<p>Better employment outcomes for graduates.</p> <p>Reduce time and investment of companies to recruit the right talent.</p> <p>An overall increase in the economy and development of the city/country.</p>

## **8. Personal Learning Statement**

My passion for Human Resources stems from my initial work experience, after successfully graduating college and obtaining employment in a multinational company where I learnt more than I could first imagine. This fuelled my eagerness for continues learning and developing myself further in this field and thus I took the decision to travel overseas and pursue a highly recognised Master's degree in Human Resources.

The journey on which I embarked on during my Master's degree have met my expectations to the fullest, furthermore, it has been an extraordinarily enriching experience for both my professional and personal growth. The knowledge I have acquired along with my experience gives me confidence, confidence which in my mind is the key to all success and will thus allow me to bring my strengths to the forefront enabling me to perform to best of my abilities in this field. It has also increased my employability perception, although it has not been an easy journey it has nevertheless been a worthwhile one.

I found the practice of assignments and case studies to be a very enriching and practical experience, preparing me to embrace and overcome future work related challenges. Carrying out research helped me to further develop the skills I have adapted while in pursuance of my Master's degree, which include, the ability to develop and summarise key ideas and organise them in a manner that makes sense, access reliable and relevant information, filter large amounts of data in addition to analyse and reach conclusions which is a thorough process that will undoubtedly be a demand in the work life when dealing with complicated situations while the answer is an ambiguous one at first, begging to be understood.

My interest in my research topic grew to unimaginable heights since attending a class from the 'People Resourcing' module, where we explored a case study related to the recruitment of graduate trainee managers for a growing company. Given that we were asked to focus on the topic at hand through the perspective of a human resource professional on how to acquire and retain the best talent, this simultaneously aroused a curiosity in me of viewing the process through a different perspective, through the



lens of a future graduate such as myself. Recognising that the recruitment of talented individuals is not only a difficult task but that it is also accompanied with a sense of responsibility for the diverse stakeholders to support these individuals and nurture their potential.

The pursuit for higher education and credentials to become more employable is a journey I underwent accompanied with many classmates, while some were younger, some were also older than me, with diverse backgrounds, different motives and different work experiences. Analysing this situation amplified my interest in pursuing this research study and providing the answer that many, including me were looking for, which included questions such as *'Is this the right path?'* *'How to do it better?'* *'How to become more employable?'* and also understanding what kind of obstacles we will face and how to overcome them.

Carrying out this research, I was able to learn more about employability and obtain a better understanding of how diverse theories and diverse factors influence it. Through a critical eye, I pondered the advantages and disadvantages of diverse theories and found myself agreeing with the work of the different authors in the need for a more integrated approach to understanding this topic. Recognising the need for such valuable information in order to improve the attainment of graduates' employment through the utilisation of useful information that can guide the actions of graduates, academic institutions and government.

As a potential graduate, I can empathise with other graduates in relation to the fears and hesitations that many graduates have when attempting to enter the work life and undergoing the interview process, but thankfully, the insightful opinion of the participants interviewed, helped me to feel more confident as I was able to analyse the data and relate it with the research theories I have studied. It gave me a strong foundation which I am sure to find useful for my own career development, such as an understanding as to what is most important for employers, and how difficult it can be for international graduates to find employment. In summary, I can assess my strengths and weaknesses in comparison to what employers are looking for and the steps I could take to improve my employability.

I have come to learn that while I could describe myself as a self-motivated individual who is able to set a goal, pursue it and overcome frustration and stress, that these attributes, which I consider as my strengths, could also be interpreted to be valuable towards self-career management and professional behaviour and thus I could improve such a pathway through more diverse actions such as career exploration and building of a professional network.

Most importantly, I consider that the major contribution of this research is to create awareness for graduates in educating them that obtaining employment will not always be an easy accomplishment after graduation and thus we need to better prepare ourselves in order to overcome the barriers, hardships and obstacles that we may face as we pursue employment.

Moreover, as stated in the conclusion and recommendation, educative institutions and governments also have a pivotal responsibility in ensuring that graduates receive relevant information and support as to obtain a more successful employment outcome.

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## 10. APPENDICES

### I. RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

#### 1. How long did it take you to find employment? Why?

Guiding questions - *When did you start to look for a job? Were you urged to start working?*

#### 2. Have you ever rejected a job offer or disregarded a job? If so, Why?

Guiding questions - *Have you not considered work offers because they were too far from you, inflexible hrs, similar?*

#### 3. What were the challenges/difficulties you faced in finding employment? How did you overcome those obstacles? Could you overcome them?

Guiding questions - *Not having enough knowledge or experience? Too little job opportunities in your area? Jobs too far? English level?*

#### 4. What do you consider has helped you to obtain employment? Why?

Guiding questions - *Do you think having a Bsc/Msc degree has helped you? Your social skills?*

#### 5. What measures or actions have you taken to obtain employment? Which ones worked, and which didn't? Why?

Guiding questions - *Did you seek career advice/guidance? Did you decide to do an internship? Did you take further studies? Did you get help with your CV?*

#### 6. What skills or attributes do you consider have or could help you to obtain employment? Why?

Guiding questions - *The knowledge you have? The degree you have? Social skills? Communication or team player skills?*

#### 7. Do you think your school formation has helped you to obtain employment? Why?

Guiding questions - *Because of the knowledge obtained? Because of the degree? Because of the skills developed? Do you think it is important for employers what college you attended? Your grades?*

#### 8. What kind of assistance did your school provide you to facilitate your transition into the workplace?

Guiding questions - *Career guidance? Learning assistance? CV help? Assignment help? Do you think it helped? Why? What other kind of support do you think could have helped you better? Help with interviews? Career guidance? Internships?*

**9. Do you find your current job fulfilling?**

Guiding questions - *Do you feel you are using all your knowledge/expertise? Do you feel it is rewarding? What is missing? Is your job related to your career? Is it the area you are interested in? Do you feel you have enough opportunities to grow? Are you happy with the salary/benefits? Are you trying to get a different job?*

**10. Is this your first job? Have you had another previous job after your graduation?**

Guiding questions - *Were they related to your career? Why did you take it? Were they graduate jobs? If related to your area of expertise, were they fulfilling? What were they missing?*

**11. Do you consider yourself confident to go and find a better job? Why?**

Guiding questions - *What do you think you will need to succeed? Do you feel you possess enough knowledge? Job experience? What skills do you possess?*

*Note: This semi-structured interview served as a foundation to perform the interviews, the order varied depending on the flow of the conversation. It is important to note that the key questions are the ones numerated, while the purpose of the guiding questions were to direct and trigger in-depth answers from the participants.*

## **II. TRANSCRIPT OF A REPRESENTATIVE INTERVIEW**

Interviewer – Ok, thank you again Gabriel, for taking part in this interview. So, I'm just going to start with some demographic information if you are ok with that?

Gabriel – Of course, no problem.

Interviewer – Could you please tell me your education level?

Gabriel – Master's degree in Electronic Commerce. Technical Electronic Commerce.

Interviewer – And could you also tell me what grade did you achieve in your Master's?

Gabriel – 2.1.

Interviewer – 2.1? Very good, and how many years since you graduated?

Gabriel – I graduated in 2016, so two years.

Interviewer – Perfect, your gender, male, and what is your age?

Gabriel – I am twenty-five.

Interviewer – Ok, twenty-five, and finally, what is your nationality?

Gabriel – Originally, I am from Armenia, but I have Irish citizenship.

Interviewer – Ok, that's perfect. That concludes the demographic information, now we are going to jump to the actual questions, can I start with question one?

Gabriel – Of course, go ahead.

Interviewer – Ok, so, how long did it take you to find employment?

Gabriel - I graduated from my Master's degree in August 2016 and found employment in November 2016, so two months after graduating I found employment.

Interviewer – The time it took you to find employment, do you consider that it was fast, or it was longer than you expected?

Gabriel - Well, it could have taken me less, but because my Master's degree required me to carry out a project throughout the summer most of my focus was dedicated to that, this in turn stopped me from actively searching for a job during the summer. I believe most graduate jobs are advertised in the summer so if I did not have the

commitment of a college project then I believe I would have found a job during the summer as opposed to November.

Interviewer – Did you have any pressure or rush to start working?

Gabriel - I did not have an economical or financial pressure to start but I felt an eagerness to start working given that I had dedicated five years to higher education and felt a desire to put my learnings to the test, there was also a slight pressure from my mother for me to start working but very minor.

Interviewer – and, tell me, have you ever rejected a job offer or disregard a job?

Gabriel - I was doing a little job searching during the summer of 2016 and there was a particular job in my area of expertise that was offered to me. The job spec read a salary from 35,000 to 40,000 euro which appealed to me, however the offer which I received completely contradicted the advertised figure and was 27,500 euro. I, of course, responded to them and raised my concern regarding the low offer, a week later they came back with a counter offer of 30,000 euro. I found that to be quite low also and thus rejected the job. That was the only job I have rejected.

Interviewer – and have you disregard a job or not considered applying for a position for any other reason?

Gabriel - I would have disregarded some job advertisements due to the location being too far. I didn't want to spend too much of my day traveling. Also, in some minor cases the advertised salary was a little too low. I was very conscious of salary and location and of course doing something which I enjoy. The major reason why I did a Master's straight after my Bachelor's was because I was told that If I were to do a Master's that would increase the average salary by about five thousand. So, in other words a Bachelor's graduate would earn, in my field, between 30,000 – 35,000 while a Master's graduate would earn 35,000-40,000, that was the impression I had received from carrying out research online and speaking with past graduates. Other major reasons for pursuing a Master's was to become more employable, make my CV stronger and also, I had promised myself that if I finish my Bachelor's degree in the minimum time of four years then I will commit an extra year to a Master's degree, which is what happened.

Interviewer – You mentioned that you were told that studying a Master's will increase your salary and employability, right? Who gave you that advice? Did you look for some career guidance?

Gabriel – Not really. When I was in college I was continuously asking people who have already graduated, not exactly what their salary is but what in general is a graduate salary in the IT field, so from there I knew that I should be looking for at least from thirty to forty thousand, so I knew figures, I knew about that. I think it made me more aware to what jobs to apply for. The lectures didn't really speak about the salary they more said that if you get a Master's you will be more employable, but I think even speaking to some other student who have done a Master's, I think

researching on the internet, it felt very much that there would be an increase of about five thousand Euro.

**Interviewer** – I think that's very good that you looked for some references regarding the salary in your field.

*Gabriel* – I believe that many graduates do not know what to expect from a potential employer regarding benefits and salary and due to this I feel it is very easy for some employees to make low salary offers with the expectation that a graduate will accept simply because the graduate is keen on starting his or her career as soon as possible with salary being a secondary objective. This keen interest to work, in my opinion leads a graduate to not scrutinise the job offer enough.

**Interviewer** – That's a very interesting point, a very insightful answer, thank you.

*Gabriel* – No problem at all. Very interesting questions too.

**Interviewer** – And regarding your Master's degree, do you consider that has helped you to obtain employment?

*Gabriel* - Yes, definitely. My education has helped to obtain employment, my Bachelor's degree and my Master's. I believe they stand out when I apply for a vacancy. I believe having two degrees shows ambition and drive. I believe it also highlights that I would have strong technical ability due to the five years spent in university for two courses which strongly relate and complement each other.

**Interviewer** – So, do you believe that your school has helped you by developing your technical knowledge?

*Gabriel* – Yes. I think my education background has helped me with the technical knowledge I have gained which allows me to answer technical interview questions and the reputation of my university has helped, not massively, but it has helped. I think the educational background helps to get your foot through the door but when you have three to four years of experience then I do not think it matters as much. I believe it is most important for entry level. I think the grade is important too.

**Interviewer** – Why do you think so? Is it maybe because it shows the knowledge you have?

*Gabriel* – Yes, I think so. I got a 2.1. I saw that many jobs were looking for a minimum of 2.1 so if I got less than that then maybe my application would not have been considered as thoroughly. So again, I think the grades are important but only at the start.

**Interviewer** – And besides the grades, you also mentioned that the reputation of your university has helped you, why do you think that is?

*Gabriel* – Well, in regard to the reputation of my university, the job that I am in now, they were actually seeking people from DCU because some of the employees that they have are from DCU and they have left a very good impression which in turn made my manager who hired me to seek people from DCU. Actually, one of our

strongest employees studied the exact same course as I did in DCU and another employee studied the sister course to mine. Due to this I believe a strong university reputation played a part in me obtaining employment at my current job, not a massive part but a part nonetheless.

**Interviewer** – That’s very interesting, I understand then that your Master’s and the reputation of your college has helped you a lot in obtaining employment, didn’t it?

*Gabriel* – Yes. Absolutely.

**Interviewer** – And did your school also provide you with any other kind of assistance that you consider helped you to transition better into the working life? I mean, like career advice and things like that?

*Gabriel* – The job portal in DCU. They had this job portal which helped me with obtaining employment as it had many graduate vacancies, which is actually how I found my current job. This was efficient as it was restricted to only graduate roles and even though popular career websites such as Indeed are good, they would however force me to filter through many vacancies which were not pertinent to my objective, but the DCU job portal allowed me to avoid digging through vacancies that were not for me. DCU also offered carers guidance which I visited and received information such as the different IT jobs that are available in Dublin, I also asked them about possibly immigrating to Canada and what jobs I could find there and thus they gave some helpful leaflets and directed me to website where I could find the information I was looking for. There was also a CV clinic which I went to once, but I think should have went there more given that my expertise grew throughout my time in university, however I would not update my CV regularly to closely reflect my development and this was brought to my attention at the graduate fair CV clinic.

**Interviewer** – So, I understand that the major help that your university provided you with, was the help with the CV clinic and the job portal, is that right?

*Gabriel* –Yes. Well, there was also an internship program during 3<sup>rd</sup> year where I worked as an intern for around four months. This allowed me to build an expectation regarding to what the work life would bring, it allowed me to have a better understanding regarding the communication dynamics within different departments in the company, it allowed me to obtain the skill of good time management and task prioritisation, it allowed me to really understand what professional courtesy is.

**Interviewer** – And do you believe these traits you acquired during your internship helped you to obtain employment?

*Gabriel* –Yes, it helped me with obtaining more technical skills, in fact one of the reasons why my current job invited me to the interview in the first place was because they had seen in my CV that I had done many tasks at my internship which matched with what they required for the position they advertised, this included troubleshooting and testing. I believe prior work experience is very important and thus I think graduates who do not have any prior relevant work experience will find it hard to find employment, unless they have carried out some very impressive projects during their time in college and received excellent grades. I think this is even more true for the IT

sector because there are many IT related internship opportunities on offer so nearly any CV an employer receives for a graduate position will have some form of internship experience in it.

**Interviewer** – That’s actually a very interesting point you just made. And tell me, regarding all these kinds of support your college offered, do you believe there is some room for improvement? Is there any other resource they could offer to their students?

**Gabriel** – I believe mock interviews would have been very useful that DCU could have offered, for me I was always quite good at interviews but looking back at some of the interviews I did while seeking an internship, I realised that I was speaking a little too openly as though I was speaking with a friend, but I think a little bit of extra professionalism would have helped and I could have realised this sooner during mock interviews as opposed to by myself through trial and error. I also received a little bit of feedback from the interviewers, but it was very limited in helpful information, so most of the weakness I had, I had to identify them myself. I believe the DCU career guidance and CV clinics could have been advertised better by DCU with more of an effort to attract students to them.

**Interviewer** – So, you believe that your university could have helped students more with the interview process through activities such as mock interviews and you also consider they may review their advertisement techniques to catch the attention of more students, is that right?

**Gabriel** – Yes, that’s right.

**Interviewer** –Ok, we are nearly finishing the key topics, for the next question, you may already have covered parts of it, but could you tell me what were the biggest challenges you faced when seeking employment and how did you overcome them?

**Gabriel** – Some challenges included the majority of graduate jobs becoming filled during the summer which is when my main focus was on my summer Master’s project. Also, it is possible that my CV was not as strong as it could have been, but if I had to point to one particular reason then it would be me leaving the proactive job search a little too late. If I had dedicated more time during the summer then I would have obtained a graduate job earlier, possibly starting in August or September.

**Interviewer** – Ok, so you say that you should have started searching for jobs earlier as after the summer time most of the graduate jobs were gone. And regarding your CV, did you take any actions to improve it?

**Gabriel** – Regarding my CV, I went to a graduate fair during October and there I visited a CV clinic where I received feedback on how to improve my CV. There I began to consider the thought that some of my previous job applications may not have received any interest because my CV was not as strong as I had hoped. Exercising the feedback, I had received from the CV clinic I made adjustments to my CV for the better. I also began to write cover letters for job applications after visiting the CV clinic, whereas before I did not feel that a cover letter played an important part in the job application process. I feel the extra effort taken to compose a cover letter made a difference as immediately after the graduate fair I applied to two or three jobs which



appealed to me with a cover letter and received invites to an interview for two jobs within only a week of applying. I believe the improved CV and the addition of a cover letter allowed this to happen.

**Interviewer** – That’s very good, that you applied their suggestions and it worked out very well and in such a short period of time, excellent. And, besides the actions you took to overcome the difficulties you faced when looking for employment, did you also take any other sort of actions or measures to improve your chances of getting a job?

*Gabriel* – I went to a graduate fair, I got in contact with recruiters, which I became connected with at the graduate fair and LinkedIn. The CV clinic also helped. Speaking with friends regarding their current jobs and if there are any vacancies in the company that they work for which they could refer me to.

**Interviewer** – Ok, that’s very good, so you got the help for your CV and you also started to reinforce your professional network. Tell me, besides these proactive actions you undertook, what skills or attributes that you possess, do you consider have helped you to obtain employment?

*Gabriel* – I think I have good technical skills that have helped me to obtain employment, I am a keen learner, I want to continuously grow technically and also before I attend an interview I do very good research regarding the company which I am interviewing for. Most interview I do, I receive the feedback that “this person has done very good research and really studied the company”. Also, from an interpersonal perspective, I believe I come off very confident in an interview. I am very calm and relaxed, I verbalise my opinions well and I am able to sell myself, I am able to convince them of my ability, I am able to convince them that I will add value to their company. Now I wish to continue to add to my technical knowledge I think that is something that will be a big benefit, I want to continue to grow.

**Interviewer** – That’s a very positive and proactive attitude. Now, we are nearly finishing the questions, just, in regard to your current job, do you find it fulfilling?

*Gabriel* – I find my current job is fulfilling in the sense that we take part new projects every couple of months which allows for technical growth but there are also periods where we do the same thing for a little too long. It is as though I am developing in segments. It’s a periodic improvement, I may do something new for three months then go back to doing something I have already done for three months and stagnate.

**Interviewer** – And just to confirm, is your current job related to your area of study?

*Gabriel* – Yes, my current job is related to my educational background, I am a Quality Assurance Engineer, so I test programs, but I develop them also with the perspective of testing.

**Interviewer** – And regarding opportunities to growth in your company and the benefits you receive, do you find them fulfilling?

*Gabriel* – Not really. There are opportunities at my current job but not as many as I would like. I would say the benefits at my current company are good, I believe they

offer what is expected, I am grateful, but I believe I would be receiving this in most places. But with the salary, I am not pleased. I believe it could be higher, every year the company increases the salary but in very small segments, I guess what I am trying to say is that, if I were to stay at my current company for five years then naturally my salary would increase, but if I left now to a different company then I would earn that same salary now.

**Interviewer** – And do you feel you are using all your knowledge and expertise?

*Gabriel* – I believe I am using around 60% of my expertise at my current job, but I also know many other programming languages that I am not utilizing and thus I do not find my job completely fulfilling.

**Interviewer** – And is this your first job?

*Gabriel* – Yes. As soon as I graduate this was my first job.

**Interviewer** – And for the last question, could you tell me, do you consider yourself confident to go and find a better job?

*Gabriel* – I feel very confident to go find another job as I believe my interpersonal skills will guide me, my confidence will guide me, my social skills will guide me and also my technical skills. I believe I have a very good combination of both technical and social skills. My CV highlights my strong educational background, I speak four languages which shows this person has driven and ability, in the IT industry from a technical perspective it may not matter too much given that programming languages are in English and most IT employees speak English anyway, but I also speak German which I believe can help due to companies having many German business partners and this allows for building rapport.

**Interviewer** – Well, that's a very strong background you have, I'm sure you will have many great opportunities in the near future.

*Gabriel* – Thank you.

**Interviewer** – Ok, well, that's everything, thank you very much for your time and thank you again for taking part in this interview.

*Gabriel* – Absolutely, no problem.

### III. LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Dear student, hereby you are invited to participate in qualitative research study aiming to explore the **perceptions that graduates possess regarding their employability**. Participants in this survey should have conducted their studies and currently working in Ireland and having over one year of graduation.

#### **Statement of Intent**

This research project is a semi-structured interview designed to explore graduate's perceptions of their employability within the key elements of the main theories in the area. Being undertaken in partial fulfilment of a Master's in Human Resource Management at the National College of Ireland.

#### **Interview structure:**

The semi-structured interview consists of open questions to guide the conversation around two principal areas, the first area investigates categories of your employment and the second compress the exploration of the elements of the main graduate's employability theories. Furthermore, under your consent, demographic information such as gender, age and years after graduation will be collected.

#### **Confidentiality & Anonymity**

All the information gathered in this study will remain confidential and your identity will remain anonymous.

#### **Time commitment**

The estimated time of participation in this study is from 30 to 40 within a semi structured focus group compressed by up to eight participants.

#### **Data Recording**

For the purpose of data collection, an audio recording device will be used, to be further transcript and coded to be analysed, ensuring a reliable and accurate examination.

The access to such transcripts and records will be limited to the researcher and supervisor, and will be destroyed on the completion of this study.

Your data will be stored securely, and the results will be used only for academic purposes.

#### **Consent of participation**

If you would like to take part in this study, please indicate your agreement in the following statements and sign at the bottom of the page.

- I have read and fully understand the content of this study and what is being asked of me as a participant.
- I willingly consent to voluntarily participating in this study.
- I understand that I have the right to retract my participation, without any consequence.
- I understand I have the right to retract my statements.

Date and Signature of Participant:

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Your signature illustrates your acknowledgement of the terms of to participate in this research and that you wish to be a part of this study, as in informed contestant.

**If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me by email at  
x17115337@student.ncirl.ie**

**Thank you for your participation and assistance in this study.**

**Flor Gordillo**

## **IV. CONFIRMATION EMAIL OF THE INTERVIEW**

Dear [participant's name]

Thank you very much for accepting the taking part in this interview. As agreed previously I am confirming our appointment at [time] on [date] at [place].

Please find below the list of subjects we will be addressing in the interview. I would also like to kindly remind you that the interview is flexible, although there are some topics to be covered, it is flexible enough to allow a more fluid conversation.

***Key topics to be covered:***

- Actions, attributes and other elements that aided or hindered your achievement of employment.
- The role played by your school in your attainment of employment.
- The satisfaction and characteristics of your current and/or previous employment and the number of jobs you have had.
- Your current job situation and how you perceive yourself in finding a new job if desired.

Also, please keep in mind that at any moment you can withdraw your consent from taking part in this interview if you so wish.

If you have any further question or require more information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best regards,

**Flor Gordillo**

## V. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Degree subject</b>	<b>Degree level</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years since graduated</b>	<b>Nationality /Ethnicity</b>
<b>Alejandro</b>	Enterprise Computing	BSc	1.1	Male	27	4 years	Irish
<b>Benjamin</b>	Information Systems	BSc	2.1	Male	37	3 years	Irish
<b>Cesar</b>	Cloud Computing	MSc	pass	Male	25	2 year	Chinese
<b>Daniel</b>	Enterprise Computing	BSc	2.1	Male	25	3 years	Kazakhstan/ Irish
<b>Erica</b>	Computer Information Systems	BSc	2.1	Female	31	4 years	Brazilian/ Polish
<b>Fernando</b>	Computer Science	BSc	2.1	Male	23	1 year and a half	Irish
<b>Gabriel</b>	Technical Electronic Commerce	MSc	2.1	Male	25	2 years	Armenian/ Irish
<b>Hector</b>	Business Study of Computer Application	BSc	2.1	Male	26	3 years	Irish
<b>Ignacio</b>	Enterprise Computing	BSc	2.1	Male	26	3 years	Kongo/Irish
<b>Juan</b>	Computer Science	BSc	pass	Male	27	3 years	Irish
<b>Karlos</b>	Enterprise Computing	BSc	2.1	Male	25	3 years	Irish