

From Skills to Opportunity: Negotiated Employability and Youth Transitions from Education to Work in the United Kingdom and Nigeria

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Abstract

Youth unemployment persists despite sustained investment in education and skills development, raising questions about whether employability is adequately understood as an individual skills deficit. This study examined how young people in the United Kingdom and Nigeria negotiated the transition from education to employment, focusing on how educational and experiential capabilities became visible, credible and convertible into employment opportunities. A comparative qualitative design explored young people's experiences of skills development, employer expectations, access to opportunities, and career adaptation. Reflexive thematic analysis identified patterns within and across the two national contexts. The findings showed that qualifications and skills were generally perceived as necessary but insufficient for labor-market entry. Participants described a conversion process in which capabilities had to be signaled through credible evidence, recognized as valuable by relevant actors and connected to accessible opportunities. When conversion failed, participants adapted their skills, signaling strategies and career pathways, although the possibilities and consequences of adaptation varied across the UK and Nigerian opportunity structures. The study develops Negotiated Employability as a conceptual framework that positions employability as a recursive capability-conversion process. The framework specifies four interrelated mechanisms: capability, signaling, recognition and opportunity access, with negotiation and adaptation operating across the process under particular institutional and labor-market conditions. The findings suggest that effective youth-employment policy requires not only investment in skills development but also stronger systems for credible skills demonstration, recognition, inclusive recruitment and accessible pathways into meaningful employment.

Keywords: Negotiated Employability, youth employment, skills conversion, education-to-work transition, graduate employability, opportunity structures, skills recognition, United Kingdom, qualitative research

1. Introduction

The transition from education to employment has become increasingly uncertain for young people, even as participation in higher and further education has expanded across many societies. Education continues to be presented as a principal mechanism through which young people acquire the knowledge, competencies and credentials required for productive participation in the labor market (Becker, 1964; Amarathunga et al., 2024). Yet the relationship between educational attainment and employment is neither automatic nor uniform. Young people may leave education with substantial qualifications but struggle to find work that reflects their capabilities, experience, or career expectations. The resulting tension raises a fundamental question for contemporary employability research: why do educational capabilities translate into employment for some young people but remain under-recognized or under-utilized for others?

Traditional human-capital reasoning provides an important starting point. Becker (1964) conceptualized education and training as investments that increase productive capabilities and, consequently, individuals' economic returns. However, subsequent research on education-to-work transitions demonstrates that individual qualifications operate within institutional and labor-market structures that can substantially alter their value. Comparative research shows that national education systems, vocational structures, and labor-market institutions influence how effectively young people enter employment, meaning educational attainment cannot be interpreted independently of the environment into which graduates' transition (Müller & Gangl, 2003). The transition is therefore better understood as an

interaction between individual resources and opportunity structures than as a simple return on educational investment.

This distinction has become particularly important as employers increasingly seek combinations of technical, digital, interpersonal, problem-solving and adaptive capabilities rather than relying on qualifications alone (Amarathunga et al., 2024; University Alliance & CBI Economics, 2024). Yet considerable uncertainty remains about which competencies constitute employability and how to develop or assess them. A review of the employability-skills literature found limited consensus concerning the specific competencies that consistently produce labor-market advantage, despite relatively strong recognition of communication, interpersonal and teamwork capabilities (Succi & Canovi, 2020). More recent research similarly suggests that the transition into employment involves changing combinations of career competencies rather than a fixed inventory of skills acquired before graduation (Grosemans & De Cuyper, 2021). The implication is significant: employability cannot be adequately understood by asking only what skills young people possess.

1.1 From Skills Acquisition to Skills Conversion

The present study distinguishes between skills acquisition and skills conversion. Skills acquisition refers to the knowledge and capabilities developed through education, training, employment experience, independent learning and other forms of development. Skills conversion refers to the process by which those capabilities become recognized, credible, and usable in actual employment opportunities. This distinction addresses an important weakness in individualized employability discourse, which can implicitly frame unemployment as evidence that young people have failed to acquire sufficient marketable skills. Signaling theory provides an important explanation for this problem. Spence (1973) argued that qualifications can signal otherwise difficult-to-observe characteristics of potential employees. In contemporary labor markets, however, the signaling process extends beyond formal qualifications. Work experience, internships, practical projects, portfolios and professional certifications may also operate as evidence of competence (Khan et al., 2026; Torpey-Saboe et al., 2026). Consequently, a young person may possess relevant capabilities but remain disadvantaged when employers cannot effectively communicate or recognize them.

Research on higher education and labor-market transitions supports this more dynamic interpretation. Grosemans, Coertjens and Kyndt (2017), for example, found that learning and different forms of person-environment and competence fit matter throughout the transition from education into employment, while noting that perceptions of desirable competencies vary among graduates, educators and employers. A qualitative study of graduates similarly found that practical experience, career exploration and supportive relationships with teachers, mentors and colleagues could facilitate transition. In contrast, limited career agency and insufficient professional experience could constrain it. These findings suggest that the employability problem is partly a problem of alignment: capabilities developed within educational environments do not automatically align with how employers evaluate competence.

The Nigerian context makes this issue particularly visible. Research involving Nigerian higher-education stakeholders has identified concerns about the relationship between what universities provide and what the labor market demands, with attention to the importance of stronger connections between higher education and employment (Anowor et al., 2025; Kolajo et al., 2026). However, reducing this problem to a mismatch between university curricula and employer requirements remains insufficient. Such a framing assumes that increasing the supply of skills will necessarily resolve unemployment. It does not fully account for job availability, unequal access to professional networks, employers' recognition practices, socioeconomic resources, or young people's capacity to navigate uncertainty. The problem is therefore better conceptualized as one of conversion. Education may increase a young person's capabilities without guaranteeing that those capabilities will be converted into employment. This distinction is consistent with Sen's (1999) capability approach, which separates the possession of resources from the substantive freedom to convert those resources into valued outcomes. Applied to employability, a qualification may be an important resource, but its employment value depends partly on whether the individual has access to opportunities, networks, institutional support, and labor-market conditions that enable conversion.

1.2 The Employability Gap

In this study, the employability gap refers to the distance between the capabilities and qualifications young people possess and their capacity to convert those resources into recognized and meaningful employment opportunities. This formulation builds on broader research on skills gaps, employability, and education-to-work alignment (Malekshahian et al., 2025; Rothwell et al., 2025). The gap can arise from several interacting conditions: limited employer recognition of particular skills, weak alignment between educational programs and labor-market requirements, insufficient work experience, unequal access to professional networks, limited opportunities to

demonstrate competence, or structural shortages of suitable employment. This conceptualization challenges the dominant skills-deficit narrative. Under a skills-deficit interpretation, youth unemployment is primarily addressed by giving young people more training. Such interventions can be valuable, but they become problematic when they assume that deficiencies within individuals principally cause unemployment. Leonard and Wilde's (2019) analysis of youth employability policy in the UK shows the importance of examining the institutional and regional contexts that govern young people's employability, rather than treating employability as an exclusively individual responsibility.

The distinction is also supported by comparative research on education-to-work transitions. Müller and Gangl (2003) demonstrate that returns to education and patterns of youth labor-market integration vary according to national institutional arrangements, while van der Velden and Wolbers (2003) show that training systems and labor-market regulation can shape the ease with which young people enter employment. Education therefore does not operate in a vacuum. The institutional environment in which those skills are presented to employers partly shapes their value. The employability gap can consequently be understood as a conversion problem rather than simply a capability problem. A graduate may have analytical competence but lack an opportunity to demonstrate it; possess digital skills but encounter employers who value experience more highly; or hold a degree but lack the professional networks through which suitable vacancies become accessible (Khan et al., 2026). Conversely, individuals with fewer formal qualifications may sometimes compensate through practical experience, social networks, entrepreneurial activity or strong labor-market signaling. Employability is therefore relational: it emerges through the interaction between individual capabilities and the systems that recognize and reward them.

1.3 Why the United Kingdom and Nigeria?

The United Kingdom and Nigeria provide analytically contrasting settings for examining education-to-work transition because qualifications and capabilities are converted into employment within different institutional and labor-market structures. Comparative transition research has long demonstrated that education-to-work outcomes depend partly on the institutional arrangements connecting education, occupations and employment rather than on educational attainment alone (Müller & Gangl, 2003).

In the United Kingdom, higher education remains an important pathway into employment, although graduate outcomes are neither uniform nor automatic. HESA's Graduate Outcomes 2023/24 statistics report that 87% of graduates were in work or further study around 15 months after completing higher education, while 75% of UK graduates working in the UK were in high-skilled occupations (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2026). Contemporary employer evidence also indicates that recruitment decisions extend beyond qualifications to transferable competencies, occupational experience and other evidence of workplace readiness (University Alliance & CBI Economics, 2024). Competition for work experience is substantial: the Institute of Student Employers reported an average of 101 applications per internship hire and 123 per undergraduate placement hire in 2024/25 (Institute of Student Employers, 2025).

Recent qualitative evidence further suggests that the employment value attached to university experiences changes over time. Dinning et al. (2025), for example, found that aspects of university education that supported initial labor-market entry became less prominent as graduates accumulated occupational experience. This reinforces a dynamic interpretation of employability rather than treating it as a fixed outcome acquired at graduation.

Nigeria presents a different labor-market configuration. The Nigeria Labor Force Survey for Q2 2024 reported that 85.6% of employed people were self-employed, 14.4% were employees, and informal employment accounted for 93.0% of total employment (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). These patterns indicate that wage employment constitutes a comparatively small part of the labor market and that education-to-work transitions may involve formal wage employment, self-employment, entrepreneurship, further training and other forms of occupational adaptation. Importantly, these conditions should not be interpreted simply as evidence that young people lack appropriate skills. They also reflect differences in the availability and organization of opportunities through which capabilities can be converted into employment.

The value of comparing the two contexts therefore lies not in constructing a developed-developing-country binary, but in examining whether similar employability mechanisms operate under different opportunity structures. The comparison allows the study to distinguish between possessing capabilities and having access to institutional and labor-market conditions through which those capabilities can become recognized, credible and convertible into employment.

1.4 Towards a Theory of Negotiated Employability

Building on human-capital, signaling, capability and capital-based perspectives, this study uses Negotiated Employability as a sensitizing conceptual proposition for understanding young people's movement from education into employment. The concept treats employability not as a fixed stock of attributes an individual possesses, but as a contextually conditioned process through which educational and experiential capabilities are made visible, interpreted, and connected to employment opportunities. At this stage of the paper, the framework is expressed provisionally as Capability → Signaling → Recognition → Opportunity Access → Employment Outcome. Negotiation and adaptation are not treated as a final stage in this sequence; rather, they operate across the process as young people revise their skills, evidence, networks and occupational strategies in response to labor-market feedback and constraint.

Labor-market structure, employer expectations, institutional arrangements, social resources, digital change, and wider economic conditions condition the process. The framework therefore focuses on the mechanisms through which capabilities acquire labor-market value rather than claiming that employability begins and ends with skills possession. The detailed theoretical contribution is developed later through dialogue between the empirical findings and existing employability scholarship.

1.5 Research Gap and Contribution

Three limitations in existing literature provide the basis for the present study. First, much employability research focuses on identifying the skills graduates require, while less attention is given to how those skills are subsequently recognized and converted into employment opportunities. Second, researchers often examine individual capability and structural opportunity separately, despite evidence that education-to-work transitions are shaped by their interaction. Third, comparative qualitative research remains needed that places young people's own interpretations at the center of analysis across contrasting national contexts.

The study therefore examined how young people in the United Kingdom and Nigeria understood, developed and negotiated their employability during education-to-work transitions. Rather than treating employability as a fixed individual characteristic, it examined the processes through which educational capabilities became or failed to become recognized labor-market resources. The study makes three contributions. Empirically, it provides a comparative account of how young people navigate the transition from education to employment within different institutional and labor-market contexts. Conceptually, it develops Negotiated Employability as a framework linking capability, signaling, recognition, opportunity access and adaptive agency. Critically, it challenges the assumption that youth unemployment can be addressed mainly by increasing individual skills, showing instead that converting skills into employment depends on the opportunity structures surrounding young people.

The central research question was therefore: How did young people in the United Kingdom and Nigeria negotiate the conversion of educational skills and capabilities into employment opportunities, and how did institutional and labor-market contexts shape this process? The study proceeded from the proposition that understanding youth employability requires moving beyond what young people possess to more consequential questions: how those capabilities are signaled, who recognizes them, who can access relevant opportunities, and under what conditions educational capability can be converted into meaningful work.

2. Critical Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Rethinking Employability Beyond the Skills-Deficit Model

Employability has traditionally been associated with the knowledge, skills and personal attributes that enable individuals to obtain and sustain employment (Khan et al., 2026). This framing has been influential because it places education and skills development at the center of labor-market preparation. However, it can also individualize unemployment by implying that unsuccessful transitions primarily reflect deficiencies in the young person. Tomlinson (2017) challenged this supply-side orientation by conceptualizing graduate employability through multiple forms of capital, including human, social, cultural, identity and psychological resources. This relational perspective matters because a qualification's value depends not only on what is learned but also on how effectively that learning can be mobilized within a particular labor market.

Sen's (1999) capability approach further clarifies the distinction between capability and opportunity. Education is a resource, but resources do not automatically translate into valued outcomes. Conversion depends on the social, institutional and economic conditions surrounding the individual. This is especially relevant to young people entering competitive labor markets, where the availability of vacancies, employer recruitment practices, professional networks and geographic mobility can determine whether acquired skills become economically meaningful. The

employability question is therefore not simply whether young people are adequately prepared for work, but whether the environment provides credible pathways to convert that preparation into employment.

2.2 Education, Skills and the Problem of Recognition

The transition from education to employment is also a process of recognition. Spence's (1973) signaling theory explains why qualifications matter partly because employers use observable characteristics to infer otherwise unobservable productivity. Yet contemporary labor markets increasingly require graduates to demonstrate more than formal credentials. Digital competence, practical experience, problem-solving, adaptability and communication are frequently incorporated into recruitment decisions, creating a more complex signaling environment. Research on higher-education transitions reinforces this complexity. Grosemans, Coertjens and Kyndt (2017) found that employers, graduates and educators do not necessarily attach identical meanings to the competencies developed through higher education. Their systematic review also showed that different forms of person-environment and competence fit mediate transfer from educational learning to work. Thus, a competence can exist without necessarily being recognized as valuable in a particular employment setting. This provides an important bridge between the skills literature and the present study's distinction between skills acquisition and skills conversion.

The longitudinal evidence of Grosemans and De Cuyper (2021) strengthens this argument. Their study identified different developmental trajectories of career competencies around graduation: graduates with stronger, more stable career competencies reported better education-job fit, while those with lower or later-developing competencies were less likely to be employed. Importantly, this evidence supports a dynamic rather than static conception of employability. Career capabilities develop through transition; they are not simply deposited in the individual by the educational system and then transferred unchanged into employment.

2.3 Employability as Capital, Agency and Social Position

A purely competence-based explanation remains inadequate because young people do not enter the labor market with equal access to the resources through which they can demonstrate employability. Bourdieu's (1986) distinction between economic, social, and cultural capital helps explain these inequalities. Professional networks can provide information about vacancies, referrals can increase access to employers, cultural familiarity can influence recruitment interactions, and financial resources can enable unpaid internships, relocation or additional qualifications. Consequently, formally equivalent graduates may possess substantially different capacities to convert education into employment.

Tomlinson's (2017) graduate-capital model provides a particularly useful bridge between Bourdieu and contemporary employability research because it demonstrates that graduates mobilize several forms of capital simultaneously during labor-market transition. This insight is particularly relevant to the present comparative study because it shifts attention from how many skills a young person possesses towards what resources the young person can mobilize when those skills encounter a particular opportunity structure. Recent Nigerian evidence strongly illustrates this issue. Olaniyan's (2026) qualitative study of rural and disadvantaged Nigerian graduates found that university degrees alone did not necessarily open employment pathways; place, professional certifications and informal networks influenced recruitment and career trajectories. This evidence is analytically important because it demonstrates that the employability problem cannot be reduced to curriculum quality. Where a graduate lives, whom they know and whether they can access recognized forms of professional capital may influence the employment value of an otherwise similar qualification.

2.4 Education-to-Work Transitions as Contextual Processes

Education-to-work transition research demonstrates why institutional and labor-market context matters. Müller and Gangl (2003) showed that transitions are shaped by arrangements connecting education systems, occupational structures and labor markets rather than by educational attainment alone. Qualifications therefore acquire labor-market value within institutional environments rather than operating independently.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the comparison between the United Kingdom and Nigeria. In the UK, graduate labor-market outcomes continue to demonstrate the value of higher education while also showing substantial variation in employment status, occupational level and the extent to which graduates use what they learned during higher education (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2026). Employer research indicates that academic attainment operates alongside transferable competencies, occupational experience and evidence of workplace capability in graduate recruitment (University Alliance & CBI Economics, 2024). Work experience therefore represents not simply an additional credential but a mechanism through which graduates can demonstrate capabilities that may be difficult to communicate through qualifications alone; recent work-based-learning research

likewise identifies signaling and professional networks as important mechanisms linking internships to later employment outcomes (Torpey-Saboe et al., 2026).

Nigeria presents a different opportunity structure. National labor-force evidence shows that self-employment and informal employment account for a substantial majority of employment. At the same time, employee or wage-based work represents a much smaller proportion of the labor market (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). These conditions shape the pathways available to young people leaving tertiary education and help explain why transition may involve combinations of formal job searching, entrepreneurship, further certification, and occupational redirection rather than a single move from university into formal wage employment.

Earlier comparative research commissioned by the British Council similarly demonstrated the importance of situating graduate employability within national institutional and developmental contexts. The Universities, Employability and Inclusive Development study focused on Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. They examined how factors beyond individual attributes, including job availability and social networks, affect graduates' entry into employment (McCowan, 2014). The significance of such comparison lies not in assuming that one national model represents the norm, but in examining how the value of qualifications, experience, networks and other resources changes according to the opportunity structures in which they are mobilized.

The present comparison follows this logic. A degree, digital capability, professional certification, internship or social connection may have different conversion value depending on employer practices, labor-market demand, institutional recognition and the availability of suitable employment. Context therefore shapes employability not only by influencing which capabilities are valued, but by influencing whether individuals can convert those capabilities into meaningful employment.

2.5 From Employability to Negotiated Employability

Taken together, existing theoretical perspectives explain important but analytically distinct dimensions of employability. Human-capital theory explains why investment in education and training can enhance productive capability (Becker, 1964), while signaling theory explains how qualifications and other observable indicators communicate information about otherwise difficult-to-observe capabilities to employers (Spence, 1973). Sen's (1999) capability approach demonstrates why possessing resources does not necessarily provide substantive opportunities to achieve valued outcomes. Capital-based approaches further show that individuals possess unequal social, cultural and other resources that can shape their labor-market positioning (Bourdieu, 1986; Tomlinson, 2017). Existing employability scholarship has therefore already moved substantially beyond the assumption that employment outcomes are determined simply by skills.

Less clear is the process through which these dimensions interact when young people try to convert educational and experiential capabilities into employment. Possessing capability does not ensure it can be communicated effectively; communicating capability does not ensure employers will recognize the signal as credible; recognition does not necessarily provide access to employment opportunities; and unsuccessful conversion may cause individuals to revise their capabilities, signals, networks, or occupational strategies. These relationships suggest that education-to-work transition involves interconnected conversion mechanisms rather than a simple movement from skills acquisition to employment.

The present study develops Negotiated Employability to conceptualize these relationships. Negotiated Employability refers to the contextually conditioned process through which individuals attempt to convert educational and experiential capabilities into employment by making those capabilities visible, securing their recognition and accessing opportunities in which they can acquire labor-market value. The framework distinguishes four interrelated conversion mechanisms: capability, signaling, recognition and opportunity access. Negotiation and adaptation operate recursively across these mechanisms as individuals respond to recruitment experiences, recognition or non-recognition, changing opportunities and structural constraints.

The framework can therefore be represented provisionally as:

Capability → Signaling → Recognition → Opportunity Access → Employment Outcome

This representation should not be interpreted as a fixed linear sequence. An unsuccessful application may prompt further capability development; weak recognition may lead to a different signaling strategy; restricted opportunity access may encourage network mobilization or occupational redirection; and changing labor-market conditions may alter the conversion value of capabilities that an individual already possesses. Negotiation therefore occurs throughout the process rather than constituting a final stage.

The proposed contribution is consequently not the claim that skills alone are insufficient, that networks matter, or that structural conditions influence employment. These propositions are already well established. Rather, Negotiated Employability explains how capabilities acquire, lose, or change their labor-market value through the interaction of signaling, recognition, and opportunity access, and how individuals recursively respond when conversion does not occur. This provides the conceptual basis for examining whether similar conversion mechanisms operate across the contrasting opportunity structures represented by the United Kingdom and Nigeria.

2.6 Literature Gap

Three gaps consequently emerge. First, employability scholarship has generated substantial knowledge about desirable graduate competencies but comparatively less about the recognition and conversion mechanisms through which those competencies become employment opportunities. Second, individual agency and structural opportunity are frequently treated as separate explanatory domains, despite their evident interdependence. Third, recent qualitative evidence from Nigeria demonstrates the importance of place, networks and professional capital, yet comparative research examining how young people negotiate these processes across contrasting national contexts remains limited. The present study responds by treating employability as a relational, negotiated and context-dependent process. Its central analytical question is consequently not whether young people possess sufficient skills, but whether their capabilities can be credibly signaled, recognized and connected to accessible opportunities within the institutional and labor-market environments they inhabit. This provides the theoretical foundation for examining the UK-Nigeria evidence and for developing the Negotiated Employability Framework as the paper's principal conceptual contribution.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a comparative qualitative research design to examine how young people negotiated the transition from education into employment in the United Kingdom and Nigeria. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focused not simply on employment status but on the meanings, participants attached to skills, qualifications, opportunity, employability, and career decision-making. As Leonard and Wilde (2019) demonstrate, young people's employability experiences are shaped by regional, social and institutional contexts and cannot be adequately understood through employment indicators alone. The comparative design treated the UK and Nigeria as analytically distinct contexts rather than as developmental opposites. The purpose was to identify both convergent experiences and context-specific mechanisms through which educational capabilities were converted or failed to be converted into employment opportunities. This approach was particularly relevant given evidence that national institutional arrangements influence education-to-work transitions (Müller & Gangl, 2003), while the National Universities Commission's validated Graduate Employability Framework for Nigerian Universities explicitly recognized the need to integrate employability skills, practical experience and industry relevance across university education (National Universities Commission, 2025).

3.2 Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy, supplemented by participant referral, was used to recruit young people with recent experience of navigating the transition from tertiary education into employment. The purpose of sampling was not to achieve statistical representativeness, but to generate information-rich accounts relevant to the study's focus on how educational capabilities were negotiated and converted within different labor-market contexts.

In the United Kingdom, we recruited initial participants through university-related, community, and professional networks. Participant referrals were then used when existing participants identified other young people who met the eligibility criteria. Recruitment focused specifically on individuals with recent experience of navigating the transition from tertiary education into employment, self-employment, further training or active job seeking.

In Nigeria, participants were similarly recruited purposively through educational, professional and personal networks, supplemented where appropriate by participant referrals. As in the UK sample, recruitment prioritized young people who could provide first-hand accounts of recent education-to-work transitions rather than attempting to construct a statistically representative sample of the wider youth population.

Participants were eligible for inclusion if they: (a) were aged between 20 and 35 years; (b) were resident in either the United Kingdom or Nigeria during the relevant transition period; (c) had experience of tertiary education or had recently completed tertiary education; (d) were currently navigating, or had recently navigated, the transition from education into employment, self-employment, further training or active job seeking; and (e) were willing to participate in an English-language semi-structured interview.

The target of 20 participants in each national context was established to provide sufficiently rich accounts for within-context thematic interpretation while maintaining a balanced basis for cross-national comparison. Sample adequacy was therefore considered in relation to the qualitative research question, the specificity of the participant group, the depth of the semi-structured interviews and the capacity of the resulting dataset to support meaningful within- and cross-context interpretation. The equal national subsamples also reduced the possibility that one context would disproportionately shape the comparative analysis. The study did not seek statistical representativeness or population-level generalization.

The final sample comprised 40 participants, with 20 from the United Kingdom and 20 from Nigeria. Although the eligibility criteria permitted participation between the ages of 20 and 35 years, the participants ultimately recruited were aged 20-30 years. UK participants were aged 20–28 years and Nigerian participants 20–30 years. The sample comprised 16 women and 24 men. Participants occupied different positions within the education-to-work transition: eight were employed, 21 were unemployed or actively seeking employment, six were self-employed or engaged in entrepreneurial activity, and five were undertaking further training or education. Nineteen participants had recently graduated. This variation enabled the study to examine negotiated employability across different experiences and positions within the transition from tertiary education into the labor market.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	UK	NIGERIA	TOTAL
Number of participants	20	20	40
Age range	20-28	20-30	20-30
Women	7	9	16
Men	13	11	24
Recently graduated	8	11	19
Current transition/employment status			
Employed	6	2	8
Unemployed/job seeking	8	13	21
Self-employed/entrepreneurial	4	2	6
Further training/education	2	3	5

Note. “Recently graduated” describes educational-transition status and is not mutually exclusive with the current employment-status categories.

3.3 Data Collection

Primary data were generated through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to describe their education-to-work experiences in their own terms while ensuring systematic coverage of the core analytical domains.

Data were collected between December 2025 and April 2026 through semi-structured interviews conducted online and face-to-face. Interviews lasted approximately 35 minutes and were conducted in English. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Participants were assigned pseudonyms/identification codes during transcription to protect their identities. Interview questions explored participants' educational preparation, perceptions of employer expectations, skills development, job-search experiences, use of professional networks, digital skills, work experience, career adaptation and perceptions of barriers to employment. Particular attention was given to moments of conversion or non-conversion: situations in which participants believed that a qualification or skill helped them obtain an opportunity, and situations in which they believed that an apparently relevant capability had little labor-market value. This distinction enabled the analysis to move beyond generic accounts of employability towards the mechanisms through which employability was negotiated. Where appropriate, participants were also encouraged to reflect on changes in their employability strategies over time. This was important because career competencies have been shown to develop during the transition from higher education into employment rather than remaining static after graduation (Grosemans & De Cuyper, 2021).

3.4 Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the principles developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021a, 2021b). Analysis proceeded through familiarization, initial coding, development of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, and interpretation. The analysis adopted a theoretically sensitized, abductive orientation within reflexive thematic analysis. Rather than treating coding as either wholly inductive or deductively determined by the conceptual framework, analysis involved iterative movement between participants' accounts and the theoretical concerns informing the study. Initial coding remained attentive to meanings, experiences and patterns within participants' accounts, including those that did not correspond to the anticipated conceptual categories. As patterns were developed and refined, they were considered in relation to the study's theoretical concerns with capability, recognition, signaling, opportunity and negotiation. This iterative process allowed existing concepts to sensitize interpretation without functioning as predetermined coding categories. The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, UK and Nigerian accounts were examined separately to identify context-specific patterns. Second, the themes were compared across the two settings to identify convergence, divergence and explanatory differences. This prevented national differences from being treated automatically as cultural differences and instead encouraged interpretation through labor-market structures, institutional arrangements, employer expectations and access to resources. Theoretical sensitizing questions used during interpretation as follows:

Table 2. Theoretical Sensitizing Questions Used During Interpretation

Analytical mechanism	Central question
Capability	What skills and resources did young people believe they possessed?
Signalling	How did participants present or evidence the capabilities they believed they possessed?
Recognition	How were those signals interpreted, valued or recognised by employers and other labour-market actors?
Opportunity access	Could participants access opportunities in which recognised capabilities could be evaluated or converted into work?
Negotiation	How did participants adapt their strategies when conversion failed?

These questions did not constitute a predetermined coding frame; rather, they were used during later stages of interpretation to examine how empirically developed patterns related to the emerging Negotiated Employability argument. Existing theories and concepts provided theoretical sensitization, while Negotiated Employability emerged as the integrative conceptual contribution developed through the iterative interpretation of the empirical findings.

3.5 Comparative Analytical Strategy

The UK-Nigeria comparison was undertaken through a constant comparative process. Similar experiences were examined for differences in meaning, while apparently different experiences were considered for underlying common mechanisms. For example, difficulties obtaining employment might appear as a problem of inadequate experience in the UK and limited formal vacancies in Nigeria; analytically, however, both may reveal a broader problem of restricted opportunity conversion. This distinction was important because comparative qualitative research can become reductive when observed differences are attributed directly to national context. Instead, the study examined how institutional conditions shaped individual agency. The approach drew on the argument that employability programs and labor-market transitions are embedded in geographical and social inequalities (Leonard & Wilde, 2019).

3.6 Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Credibility was strengthened through systematic coding, comparison of emerging interpretations across cases and deliberate attention to contradictory or disconfirming accounts. Evidence that challenged emerging interpretations was retained rather than excluded, particularly where participants' experiences complicated the assumption that greater skill accumulation necessarily resulted in improved employment outcomes. The comparative analysis also examined patterns within each national context before developing cross-context interpretations, reducing the risk of automatically treating differences between participants as national or cultural differences.

The researcher-maintained reflexivity throughout data collection and analysis. The researcher is Nigerian and lived and studied in the United Kingdom during the period in which the research was conducted. This positionality provided familiarity with aspects of the Nigerian social and educational context while also providing direct

experience of living in the UK. The researcher conducted all 40 semi-structured interviews, creating consistency in the interview process across the two national samples.

This position nevertheless required reflexive attention because familiarity with either context could shape the questions pursued during interviews and the meanings attributed to participants' accounts. In relation to Nigeria, prior contextual familiarity could create assumptions about employment opportunities, networks and education-to-work transitions that participants themselves might not necessarily share. In the UK context, the researcher's position as a Nigerian living and studying in the country provided an experiential perspective on the setting without being treated as equivalent to the experiences of UK participants. These different relationships to the two contexts were therefore regarded as interpretive resources that also required critical scrutiny rather than as guarantees of insider knowledge.

During analysis, reflexivity involved distinguishing participants' accounts from the researcher's interpretations, comparing emerging explanations against the wider dataset and retaining accounts that complicated or contradicted developing patterns. Particular attention was given to avoiding the assumption that difficulties in securing employment necessarily reflected deficiencies in individual skills or effort. Similarly, cross-national differences were not automatically attributed to nationality or culture but were examined in relation to participants' accounts of labor-market structures, employer expectations, opportunity access, and available resources. The theoretically sensitized, abductive analytical approach also required movement between participants' accounts and the study's conceptual concerns, while ensuring that capability, signaling, recognition, and opportunity were not imposed as predetermined coding categories.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study was undertaken as an independent research project, separate from the researcher's doctoral programme at Teesside University. Formal institutional ethical approval was not obtained.

The research involved 40 adult participants in the United Kingdom and Nigeria who were interviewed about their experiences of transitioning from education into employment. Participation was voluntary, and we obtained informed consent before the interviews. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement and their right to decline questions or withdraw from participation.

To protect confidentiality, participant identifiers were used in transcripts and reporting, and potentially identifying information was excluded from published quotations. Interview materials were handled securely and used for research purposes.

The absence of formal institutional ethical approval is acknowledged as a procedural limitation. Although the study was conducted independently, ethical safeguards were incorporated into recruitment, interviewing, data management and reporting. These measures do not constitute retrospective institutional ethical approval.

4. Comparative Findings

4.1 Overview of the Findings

The analysis generated five interconnected themes concerning how young people converted or attempted to convert educational capabilities into employment opportunities: (1) the qualification employment disconnect; (2) skills that count and skills that remain invisible; (3) learning to signal employability; (4) networks, inequality and opportunity; and (5) reconstructing employability when expected pathways failed. Rather than treating these themes as independent barriers, the analysis showed that participants experienced employability as an ongoing process of negotiation between what they had acquired, what employers recognized, and what opportunities were realistically accessible.

This interpretation is consistent with recent qualitative research showing that the transition from education to employment is characterized by a disjuncture between young people's expectations and the opportunity structures they encounter. Rolph et al. (2025), for example, found that young people's transition narratives were shaped not only by aspirations and preparedness but by perceptions of the opportunities actually available to them. The present analysis extends this insight by locating the disjuncture specifically within the conversion of educational capability into recognized employability.

4.2 Theme One: The Qualification Employment Disconnect

Across the interviews, participants generally regarded educational qualifications as necessary but increasingly insufficient for securing satisfactory employment. The dominant narrative was not that education had become

worthless, but that its employment value had become conditional. Participants described discovering that a degree could establish eligibility for employment without necessarily providing access to it.

“The degree got me through the door, but it didn't really get me the job. Once I started applying, everyone wanted experience, so I realised quite quickly that having the qualification was only the first part of it.” (UK07)

“When I finished school, I thought the certificate would make things easier. But after sending applications, you find out that they are asking for experience and other things. So, you start asking yourself what exactly the certificate is doing for you.” (NG 12 Unemployed)

These accounts illustrate a distinction between possessing a recognized educational credential and converting that credential into an employment opportunity. Participants did not describe education as irrelevant. Rather, they described discovering that qualifications often functioned as an entry condition whose employment value depended on additional evidence of experience, practical competence and access to appropriate opportunities.

“I thought getting the degree would put me in a good position, but when I started applying, most of the jobs wanted experience as well. It felt like the qualification helped me qualify to apply, but it was not enough to actually get the job.” (UK07)

“Having the certificate is important, but the problem is finding the opportunity to use it. You can have the qualification and still spend months applying because there are not enough suitable jobs available.” (NG06 unemployed)

Participants' accounts also varied in the extent to which qualifications were perceived as helping them access employment. The study therefore does not treat the qualification–employment disconnect as an identical experience for every participant.

Participants in the UK sample more frequently described qualifications as insufficient without prior workplace experience, demonstrable competence and evidence of adaptability. Participants in the Nigerian sample also questioned the sufficiency of formal qualifications, but more frequently connected this problem to limited formal employment opportunities, additional certification, entrepreneurial alternatives and informal networks. These patterns should not be interpreted as fixed national characteristics. Across both samples, the underlying issue was similar: educational attainment provided an important foundation for employability but did not guarantee access to an opportunity in which capability could be demonstrated.

4.3 Theme Two: Skills That Count and Skills That Remain Invisible

Participants distinguished between skills they believed they possessed and skills they believed employers were willing or able to recognize. This distinction suggested that employability depended partly on the visibility and credibility of competence rather than competence alone. Participants frequently identified digital literacy, communication, problem-solving, teamwork and adaptability as capabilities relevant to employment. However, these broad competencies were often described as difficult to demonstrate through conventional applications. By contrast, certifications, internships, previous employment and tangible project outputs were perceived as providing more visible evidence of capability.

“You can say you're good at problem-solving, but everybody says that on their CV. If you've actually done something and can show it, that's different.” [UK20]

“There are skills I know I have, especially with technology, but the employer wants to see something that proves it. Sometimes you know the work but you don't have the certificate or the person to recommend you.” [NG13]

Across these accounts, participants appeared to distinguish between claiming competence and demonstrating competence. Skills such as communication, teamwork and problem-solving could be stated on a CV, but participants sometimes regarded these claims as insufficiently distinctive or verifiable. Previous employment, practical projects, portfolios, internships and recognized certifications were instead described as forms of evidence through which capability could become more visible and credible.

“I kept saying I could do the work, but it was difficult to prove that from my CV. After I completed a project and added it to my portfolio, I had something practical to show when they asked about my skills.” (UK03)

“I already knew how to use some of the software, but employers seemed more interested when I had the certificate to support it. The certificate did not give me the skill, but it gave me something they could recognize.” (NG01)

“The internship made a difference because I could give examples of things I had actually done. Before that, I was just telling employers I had the skills, but afterwards I had experience to point to.” (UK07)

“One interview was different because they gave me a practical task instead of just asking about my qualifications. That helped me because I could actually show them what I could do rather than just saying it on my CV.” (NG12)

“They asked me to complete a task as part of the interview, and I actually preferred that. I did not have as much experience as some applicants, but the assessment gave me a chance to show that I could do the work.” (UK18)

The distinction between possessing a skill and having that skill recognized therefore emerged as an important feature of participants' experiences. The perceived problem was not always an absence of relevant capability. For some participants, it concerned whether that capability could be demonstrated in a form that employers regarded as credible. The findings therefore point to a recognition gap between what participants believed they could do and what they were able to make visible during recruitment. This recognition problem also shaped how participants subsequently presented themselves to employers, providing the basis for the next theme: learning to signal employability.

4.4 Theme Three: Learning to Signal Employability

Participants described progressively changing how they presented themselves to employers. Rather than simply accumulating additional qualifications, many reported learning to construct a more convincing employment narrative through CV modification, professional networking, short courses, internships, portfolios, volunteering, online profiles and practical projects. Participants' accounts suggested that understandings of employability continued to develop after leaving education, particularly through encounters with recruitment, rejection and employer expectations.

“After the first few months of applying, I changed how I presented myself. I stopped just listing what I studied and started showing what I had actually done with it.” [UK10]

“I started doing certifications and small projects because I realized that the degree alone was not enough. At least when you have something to show, you can explain yourself better.” [NG06]

These accounts showed that participants did not simply continue using the same employment strategies when applications were unsuccessful. Instead, they interpreted rejection and recruitment experiences as information about what employers appeared to value and adjusted how they presented their capabilities accordingly.

“At first, I was using the same CV for almost every job because I thought my qualifications would speak for themselves. After getting no response from several applications, I started changing the CV for each role and using examples that matched what they were asking for. I began getting more interview invitations after that.” (UK04)

“I realized that just saying I had digital skills was not helping much, so I started putting together some of the projects I had worked on. It gave me something practical to show employers instead of just listing the skill on my CV.” (NG18)

For several participants, unsuccessful applications therefore became occasions for reassessing what employers appeared to recognize as credible evidence of employability. Participants described modifying CVs, obtaining additional certifications, undertaking projects, seeking work experience and changing how they explained their capabilities. Job searching consequently became a learning process through which participants progressively adjusted the presentation of competence.

“I've changed my CV, done extra courses and tried to make every application fit the job, but I'm still looking. You reach a point where you feel you've done what they ask, but if the opportunities are not there, changing your CV again is not going to create them.” (UK07)

Importantly, these adaptations did not guarantee successful employment outcomes. Participants could modify how they presented themselves without necessarily changing the availability of suitable opportunities. The findings therefore distinguish between becoming more effective at signaling capability and converting that capability into employment. Across both samples, participants exercised agency by adapting their strategies, but the effectiveness of those strategies remained dependent on the opportunities available to them.

4.5 Theme Four: Networks, Inequality and Opportunity

Participants' accounts indicated that access to employment opportunities was not determined solely by qualifications, skills or the ability to present them effectively. Social relationships also shaped how participants became aware of vacancies, obtained referrals, accessed work experience and entered professional environments. Family connections, friends, mentors, alumni networks and professional contacts were described as providing different forms of access to information and opportunities. However, participants' access to these networks varied considerably.

UK02 and NG10 described contacts as sources of information about vacancies or recruitment, although such assistance did not necessarily amount to a personal recommendation or direct access to a job (UK02; NG10).

Several Nigerian participants described referrals as shaping access before formal competition was fully visible, with NG02, NG07, NG11 and NG19 reporting that recommended candidates could appear to have an early advantage (NG02; NG07; NG11; NG19).

These accounts show that networks operated in more than one way. For some participants, contacts provided information about vacancies or helped them understand recruitment expectations. For others, networks facilitated introductions, referrals or access to opportunities that might otherwise have remained difficult to reach. The advantage therefore did not necessarily involve securing employment directly through personal connections. In some cases, it meant getting earlier information, greater familiarity with recruitment processes, or an opportunity to enter a selection process in the first place.

“For that job, I didn't have anybody recommending me. I found it online and applied like everyone else. I think what helped was being able to explain my experience properly during the interview.” (NG11)

Participants therefore differed not simply in whether they had social relationships, but in whether those relationships connected them to useful labor-market information and opportunities. Similar qualifications and capabilities could consequently produce different transition experiences where participants had unequal access to referrals, professional guidance or sector-specific contacts.

These accounts also indicate that using formal applications and receiving some information through contacts are not mutually exclusive. NG11, for example, described applying for a job online without a personal recommendation; this does not mean that participants had no access to informal information at other stages of their searches.

These accounts show that unequal network access could shape how participants encountered the labor market, but they also indicate that networks were not necessary for every successful transition.

Networks were therefore not necessary for every successful transition. Some participants described accessing opportunities through formal recruitment without referrals or personal contacts. Nevertheless, across the wider accounts, networks could alter the conditions under which participants searched for employment by affecting the information, guidance and opportunities available to them.

Networks were discussed in both samples, although their perceived significance and function varied. Participants in the UK sample more often described contacts as sources of vacancy information, guidance and familiarity with recruitment processes, whereas participants in the Nigerian sample more often emphasized referrals and introductions as routes into opportunities. These are tendencies within the sample rather than fixed national characteristics. The findings therefore indicate that employability was shaped not only by what participants possessed or how effectively they presented it, but also by whether they could access settings in which their capabilities could be recognized and evaluated.

4.6 Theme Five: Reconstructing Employability

When initial education-to-work strategies did not produce the outcomes participants expected, many described adapting their plans rather than following a fixed transition pathway. These adaptations included obtaining additional qualifications or certifications, accepting work outside preferred occupational areas, pursuing temporary or lower-level employment, developing entrepreneurial activities, acquiring new digital or vocational skills, and continuing to search for more suitable opportunities. Transition was therefore experienced as an ongoing process of adjustment in response to changing opportunities and constraints.

“After applying for jobs for some time, I noticed that they kept asking for skills or certificates I didn't have. That was when I decided to take some additional courses. I felt that if I wanted to improve my chances, I had to add something beyond my degree.” (UK16)

“I wasn't planning to go back and do another course so soon, but after seeing the same requirements in different jobs, I felt I needed something extra. That was why I started looking at certifications.” (UK11)

For some participants, negotiation involved further investment in skills and credentials. Repeated exposure to employer requirements influenced decisions about what additional training to undertake, suggesting that skill acquisition sometimes continued in response to labor-market feedback rather than ending with tertiary education.

UK08 and NG14 both described widening their occupational search and accepting work outside their original plans as a pragmatic way to gain experience and establish a foothold in the labor market (UK08; NG14).

For these participants, revising occupational expectations could represent a pragmatic attempt to acquire experience, generate income or establish a foothold in the labor market rather than the achievement of an originally preferred employment outcome.

“I kept applying for jobs, but nothing was really coming from it, so I decided to start doing something for myself. I still wanted a formal job, but I couldn't just sit and wait, so I started using the skills I had to make some income.” (NG18)

Self-employment was not necessarily experienced in the same way by all participants. Where it followed unsuccessful attempts to enter formal employment, it could operate as an alternative route for using capabilities and generating income. Where it reflected an initial preference, it should be analyzed separately rather than treated as evidence of constrained adaptation.

UK05 and NG19 described improvements in responses following additional training or changes to application strategies, while also reporting that these efforts had not yet resulted in employment at the time of interview (UK05; NG19).

These accounts demonstrate both the possibilities and limits of individual adaptation. Participants could modify their strategies, acquire additional credentials, reconsider occupational pathways and seek alternative forms of work, but they could not independently determine the availability of suitable opportunities. Negotiation therefore involved both agency and constraint. Importantly, adaptation did not always represent a preferred course of action; in some accounts it was a pragmatic response to unsuccessful applications, financial pressure or restricted access to desired employment.

Across the two samples, the specific forms and circumstances of adaptation varied, but a common pattern was evident: education-to-work transition was rarely experienced as a single movement from qualification to employment. Instead, participants repeatedly reassessed and adjusted their strategies in response to recognition, recruitment experiences, opportunity access and unsuccessful conversion attempts. This recursive pattern provides the empirical basis for the paper's later conceptualization of Negotiated Employability.

4.7 Cross-National Synthesis

The comparison between the UK and Nigerian samples revealed both common mechanisms and contextual differences in how participants experienced the transition from education to employment. Across both samples, educational qualifications were regarded as important but insufficient on their own. Participants described a broader conversion process in which capabilities had to be made visible, recognized as credible, connected to accessible opportunities and, where initial strategies were unsuccessful, reconsidered through further adaptation.

The principal cross-national similarity therefore concerned the process rather than the specific conditions under which it occurred. Participants in both samples encountered some form of distance between possessing educational or personal capabilities and converting those capabilities into employment. They responded by seeking experience, developing additional evidence of competence, modifying applications, mobilizing available networks, acquiring further credentials or reconsidering occupational pathways.

The conditions shaping this process nevertheless differed in emphasis between the two samples. Participants in the UK sample more frequently described navigating relatively formalized recruitment processes in which prior workplace experience, demonstrable competence, tailored applications and credible evidence of job readiness influenced progression. The challenge was often not simply possessing relevant capability, but presenting it in forms that could be differentiated and evaluated within competitive recruitment processes.

Participants in the Nigerian sample also described the importance of qualifications, skills and credible evidence, but more frequently situated their difficulties within restricted access to suitable formal employment opportunities. Additional certification, personal and professional networks, referrals, entrepreneurial activity and occupational redirection appeared more prominently in accounts of how participants attempted to respond to these constraints. These patterns did not apply uniformly to all Nigerian participants, just as UK participants did not experience a single or homogeneous transition pathway.

Networks illustrate this contextual variation particularly clearly. Across both samples, social relationships could provide information, guidance, referrals or access to opportunities. However, participants differed in the usefulness of the networks available to them. Some obtained valuable information or introductions through friends, mentors and professional contacts, whereas others navigated recruitment largely through formal applications. The significance of

social capital therefore depended not simply on possessing social relationships, but on whether those relationships connected participants to relevant labor-market opportunities.

A similar pattern emerged in participants' adaptive responses. Across both samples, unsuccessful conversion could lead to further training, revised signaling strategies, continued job searching or reconsideration of career plans. However, adaptation did not guarantee employment. Participants could improve how they presented their capabilities or accumulate additional credentials while continuing to encounter restricted opportunities. The comparison therefore indicates that individual agency operated within conditions participants could influence but not fully control.

Taken together, the cross-national evidence suggests that employability should not be understood as a fixed set of attributes producing employment in a predictable way. Across both contexts, participants' transitions depended on interactions between capability, signaling, recognition, opportunity access and adaptation. What differed was the relative prominence and operation of these mechanisms within participants' accounts. The UK-Nigeria comparison therefore points to a shared conversion problem operating under different institutional and labor-market conditions.

Table 3. Cross-National Comparison of Employability Conversion

Dimension	UK pattern	Nigeria pattern	Cross-national interpretation
Qualification	Frequently described as necessary but insufficient without experience and demonstrable competence	Frequently described as necessary but insufficient amid restricted opportunities and additional requirements	Qualification did not automatically convert into employment
Signaling	Tailored CVs, applications, experience and evidence of competence	Additional certifications, projects and adaptive self-presentation	Participants learned to make capabilities more visible
Recognition	Experience, portfolios and demonstrable competence featured prominently	Certification, practical evidence and recommendations featured prominently	Capability needed credible recognition
Networks	Often provided information, guidance and familiarity with recruitment	More frequently described as important for referrals and opportunity access	Network resources were unequally distributed
Adaptation	Experience acquisition, revised applications, additional training and occupational adjustment	Further certification, entrepreneurship, continued searching and occupational redirection	Participants adapted when initial conversion failed
Structural constraint	Competitive recruitment and experience requirements	More frequently described restrictions in suitable formal employment opportunities	Individual adaptation could not guarantee employment

The comparison therefore revealed convergence at the level of mechanism but divergence at the level of context. Participants in both countries experienced a gap between what they possessed and what the labor market rewarded. The difference lay principally in the opportunity structures through which they attempted to close that gap. This finding is consistent with recent qualitative research showing that education-to-employment transitions are shaped by opportunity structures and perceived disjuncture rather than by individual preparation alone. It also supports the broader argument that non-formal experiences can contribute to employment transitions when they provide opportunities to demonstrate capabilities that formal education alone may not reveal.

4.8 Analytical Interpretation: From Skills Deficit to Conversion Deficit

Considered together, the five themes indicate that the central difficulty experienced by participants was not adequately captured by a simple distinction between possessing and lacking employability skills. Participants could possess educational qualifications and capabilities while remaining unable to convert them into employment. The findings instead reveal several points at which conversion could become disrupted.

First, qualifications did not necessarily provide sufficient evidence of workplace readiness. Second, capabilities that participants believed they possessed were not always visible or credible to employers. Third, participants responded to these recognition difficulties by learning to signal their capabilities through experience, certifications, portfolios, projects and revised forms of self-presentation. Fourth, even credible signaling depended on access to opportunities in which those signals could be evaluated, and access itself could be influenced by networks and wider labor-market

conditions. Finally, when conversion remained unsuccessful, participants frequently reconstructed their strategies through additional training, occupational redirection, entrepreneurship or continued job searching.

These mechanisms were interconnected rather than sequential in every case. Participants could return to skill acquisition after unsuccessful applications, develop new forms of signaling after recruitment feedback, mobilize networks to access opportunities, or reconsider occupational goals when preferred pathways remained inaccessible. Employment transition therefore appeared as an iterative process in which participants repeatedly reassessed the relationship between what they possessed, what employers recognized and what opportunities were available.

Importantly, the findings also establish limits to individual adaptation. Participants could change their CVs, acquire additional credentials, develop projects, seek experience and mobilize networks, but these actions could not independently produce suitable vacancies or remove structural restrictions on opportunity. Agency therefore remained consequential but bounded.

This interaction between capability, signaling, recognition, opportunity access and adaptive response provides the empirical basis for the concept of Negotiated Employability developed in the following discussion. Rather than treating employability as a stable stock of individual attributes, the findings suggest that education-to-work transition involves repeated attempts to convert capabilities into recognized and accessible employment possibilities under conditions that individuals can negotiate but cannot fully determine.

5. Discussion and Theoretical Contribution

5.1 From Human Capital to Capability Conversion

The first implication of the findings concerns the relationship between educational investment and employment outcomes. Human-capital theory provides an important explanation for why education and training matter: investment in knowledge and skills can enhance individuals' productive capacities (Becker, 1964). The experiences reported in this study do not contradict that proposition. Participants across both samples continued to regard qualifications and skills as valuable resources. What their accounts challenge is the assumption that possession of those resources is sufficient to explain their labor-market outcomes.

Theme One showed that qualifications frequently established eligibility without guaranteeing employment, while Theme Two demonstrated that capabilities participants believed they possessed were not necessarily recognized as credible evidence of competence. The empirical problem was therefore not simply whether human capital had been accumulated, but whether it could be converted into an employment opportunity.

Sen's (1999) capability approach provides a useful conceptual bridge for interpreting this distinction. Sen separates possession of resources from the substantive opportunities through which resources can contribute to valued outcomes. Applied to education-to-work transition, a qualification can therefore be understood as a resource whose employment value depends partly on the conditions under which it is mobilized. Participants could possess qualifications, digital capabilities or occupational knowledge while lacking experience, credible evidence, useful networks or accessible opportunities through which those capabilities could acquire labor-market value.

The present findings sharpen this conversion problem by identifying mechanisms through which it occurred in participants' accounts. Conversion depended not only on capability acquisition but on credible signaling, recognition and opportunity access. Where these mechanisms were weak or unavailable, further accumulation of skills did not necessarily resolve the transition problem. Employability should therefore be distinguished analytically from human-capital possession: human capital constitutes an important resource for employability, but employability concerns the conditions and processes through which such resources become convertible into meaningful employment.

5.2 Recognition and Signaling: From Possessing Competence to Establishing Credibility

The second implication concerns the relationship between capability, signaling and recognition. Spence's (1973) signaling theory explains how observable characteristics such as educational credentials can communicate otherwise difficult-to-observe information about potential productivity. The findings support the importance of signaling but also suggest that signaling alone does not fully capture participants' experiences.

Theme Two revealed a distinction between possessing capability, presenting evidence of capability and having that evidence recognized as credible. Participants described communication, digital competence, teamwork and problem-solving as skills they possessed, yet these capabilities were sometimes difficult to differentiate through conventional applications. Practical projects, portfolios, internships, certifications and previous employment were regarded as more credible because they enabled participants to provide observable evidence of what they could do.

This distinction suggests that signaling and recognition should not be treated as synonymous. Signaling concerns the presentation of evidence; recognition concerns how that evidence is interpreted and valued by relevant labor-market actors. A young person can therefore signal a capability without that signal necessarily being recognized as relevant or credible. Conversely, recruitment practices that allow applicants to demonstrate competence directly can create recognition opportunities for capabilities that conventional credentials may obscure.

Theme Three adds a developmental dimension to this process. Participants did not simply arrive in the labor market possessing a fixed signaling strategy. Rejection, interviews and employer expectations became sources of information through which some participants learned to modify CVs, develop portfolios, undertake certifications or present experience differently. Signaling was therefore itself negotiated and learned during transition.

This finding develops existing signaling perspectives by locating recognition between signaling and labor-market conversion. The issue is not merely whether information about capability is communicated, but who interprets that information, according to what criteria, and whether the resulting judgement opens access to an employment opportunity.

5.3 Social Capital and Unequal Opportunity Access

Recognition and credible signaling remained insufficient where participants could not access opportunities in which their capabilities could be evaluated. Theme Four therefore introduces a further mechanism into the conversion process: opportunity access. Participants described networks as providing information about vacancies, guidance about employer expectations, referrals, introductions and, in some cases, earlier access to recruitment opportunities.

Bourdieu's (1986) conception of social capital is useful here because it directs attention to the resources available through social relationships rather than treating networks simply as individual networking behavior. Participants differed not only in whether they knew other people, but in whether those relationships connected them to labor-market resources relevant to their intended transitions. This distinction matters because apparently similar levels of educational capability could be accompanied by unequal capacities to mobilize information, referrals or professional guidance.

Tomlinson's (2017) graduate-capital perspective similarly demonstrates that labor-market transition involves the mobilization of multiple resources rather than human capital alone. The present findings support this relational interpretation but identify a more specific role for social resources within the conversion process: networks can affect whether and how individuals reach opportunities in which their capabilities can be recognized.

The divergent accounts are equally important. Some participants obtained opportunities through formal recruitment without personal referrals. Networks should therefore not be interpreted as universally necessary for employment. Rather, their significance lies in their capacity to alter opportunity access by changing the information, guidance and connections available to particular individuals.

Employability inequality can consequently arise before an employer evaluates capability. Two individuals may possess comparable qualifications and potentially credible skills but face different conversion possibilities because they do not have equivalent access to the settings in which those capabilities can be demonstrated.

5.4 Negotiation as Bounded Agency

Theme Five complicates interpretations of employability that locate responsibility primarily within the individual. Participants were not passive in the face of unsuccessful transitions. They acquired additional certifications, changed application strategies, reconsidered occupational preferences, pursued alternative forms of work and, in some cases, turned towards entrepreneurship. Such responses demonstrate agency, but the circumstances in which they occurred show why agency should not be equated with unrestricted choice.

Some adaptations followed repeated rejection or restricted access to preferred employment. Additional training could therefore represent both an attempt to improve employability and evidence that existing qualifications had failed to convert. Occupational redirection could demonstrate flexibility while simultaneously reflecting restricted access to preferred work. Entrepreneurship could represent a positive career choice for some participants but a pragmatic alternative to unavailable formal employment for others.

The concept of bounded agency is useful for interpreting this pattern because participants acted strategically within conditions they could influence but could not independently determine. They could acquire another credential, change a CV, develop a portfolio, activate a network or widen an occupational search. They could not, however, create suitable vacancies, determine employer recognition criteria or eliminate unequal access to opportunity.

Negotiation therefore refers neither to complete individual freedom nor to passive adaptation to structure. It describes the iterative process through which individuals reassess and modify their resources, signals and aspirations in response to the opportunities and constraints encountered during transition. This interpretation avoids both the individualizing assumption that unsuccessful employment transitions result primarily from inadequate effort and the deterministic assumption that structural conditions leave young people without meaningful agency.

5.5 Context Matters: Shared Conversion Mechanisms, Different Opportunity Structures

The comparative analysis further demonstrates that the mechanisms of employability conversion cannot be separated from the contexts in which they operate. The UK and Nigerian samples did not reveal entirely different forms of employability. Rather, similar conversion mechanisms appeared under different opportunity conditions.

Across both samples, qualifications could prove insufficient, capabilities required credible evidence, participants learned to modify signaling strategies, networks could affect opportunity access, and unsuccessful conversion prompted further adaptation. What differed was the relative prominence of these mechanisms. Participants in the UK sample more frequently emphasized competitive recruitment, workplace experience and demonstrable competence, whereas participants in the Nigerian sample more frequently described restricted formal opportunities, additional certification, referrals, entrepreneurship and occupational redirection.

These differences should not be interpreted as fixed characteristics of either national labor market, nor should they be attributed automatically to national culture. They represent patterns within the samples and are better interpreted in relation to institutional and labor-market conditions. This is consistent with comparative transition research showing that education-to-work outcomes are embedded within institutional arrangements linking education, employment and occupational structures (Müller & Gangl, 2003).

The comparative contribution is therefore not simply that the UK and Nigeria are different. More importantly, the comparison demonstrates that similar capabilities can have different conversion possibilities under different opportunity structures. Context affects employability not merely by changing which skills are demanded, but by shaping the conditions through which capabilities become recognized, demonstrated and connected to employment.

5.6 The Negotiated Employability Framework

The preceding analysis provides the basis for the study's principal conceptual contribution: Negotiated Employability. The framework conceptualizes employability as the iterative process through which individuals attempt to convert educational and experiential capabilities into meaningful employment by signaling those capabilities, seeking recognition, accessing opportunities and adapting their strategies within particular institutional and labor-market conditions. Importantly, these mechanisms were not derived solely by combining existing theoretical perspectives. They were developed through iterative interpretation of the empirical themes. The qualification-employment disconnect demonstrated that capability possession did not ensure conversion; participants' accounts of visible and invisible skills identified recognition as a distinct problem; changing CVs, portfolios, certifications and application strategies demonstrated the negotiated character of signaling; accounts of networks and unequal access revealed the importance of opportunity access; and participants' occupational redirection, further training and entrepreneurial responses demonstrated the recursive character of adaptation. The framework therefore represents an integrative interpretation of patterns generated through the empirical analysis, subsequently placed in dialogue with existing theoretical perspectives.

The framework contains four interrelated conversion mechanisms:

Capability concerns the educational, experiential and personal resources an individual can potentially mobilize.

Signaling concerns the ways those capabilities are presented and evidenced through qualifications, experience, portfolios, certifications, applications, projects and other observable indicators.

Recognition concerns whether relevant actors interpret those signals as credible and valuable.

Opportunity access concerns whether individuals can reach employment settings in which recognized capabilities can be converted into actual work.

These mechanisms do not constitute a fixed linear sequence. Negotiation operates across and between them. When conversion fails, individuals may return to capability development, alter their signaling strategy, seek different forms of recognition, mobilize networks, reconsider occupational preferences or pursue alternative opportunities. The process can therefore move forwards, backwards and across stages.

The framework can be represented as:

Capability → Signaling → Recognition → Opportunity Access → Employment Outcome

with negotiation and adaptation operating recursively across the entire conversion process, and with the process conditioned by labor-market structure, employer practices, institutional arrangements, social resources and socioeconomic circumstances.

This distinguishes Negotiated Employability from the theories on which it draws. Human-capital theory explains why capability acquisition matters; signaling theory explains how otherwise difficult-to-observe capabilities are communicated; capability theory explains why resources do not automatically produce valued outcomes; Bourdieu and capital-based employability perspectives explain unequal access to resources; and transition research explains the institutional embeddedness of education-to-work pathways. Negotiated Employability does not replace these perspectives. Its contribution is to specify how their insights interact as a recursive conversion process that individuals experience and actively negotiate during the education-to-work transition.

Employability can therefore be defined as:

the contextually conditioned capacity to convert educational and experiential capabilities into recognized and accessible employment opportunities through continuing processes of signaling, recognition, opportunity access and adaptive negotiation.

5.7 How Negotiated Employability Extends Existing Models

Negotiated Employability should not be understood as claiming that employability research has previously treated employment as a simple product of skills possession. Existing scholarship has already moved beyond simple possession-based accounts and demonstrated the importance of process, signaling, multiple forms of capital, capability, identity, agency and institutional context (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). The present framework contributes by specifying the conversion relationships between these elements.

Human-capital theory explains the acquisition and potential productive value of education but does not by itself explain why similarly qualified individuals encounter different conversion outcomes. Signaling theory explains how information about capability is communicated under uncertainty but pays less attention to unequal access to opportunity and the adaptive reconstruction of employability after unsuccessful signaling. Capability theory distinguishes resources from achievable outcomes but does not specify the labor-market mechanisms through which capability becomes credible to employers. Capital-based approaches demonstrate unequal access to social, cultural and other resources but do not necessarily model the recursive sequence through which individuals respond when those resources fail to generate employment.

Negotiated Employability connects these insights through the mechanisms of signaling, recognition, opportunity access and adaptive negotiation. Its distinctive claim is therefore not that skills are insufficient, networks matter or structures constrain employment. Each of these propositions is already established in existing scholarship. Rather, the framework proposes that employability can be understood as a recursive capability-conversion process in which individuals repeatedly attempt to make resources visible, credible and accessible within opportunity structures they can navigate but cannot fully control.

The additional explanatory value of Negotiated Employability therefore lies in distinguishing between possessing capability, making capability visible, having that capability recognized, and obtaining access to a setting in which recognized capability can be converted into employment. Existing theories illuminate individual parts of this process, whereas the present framework treats their relationship as the object to be explained. This distinction makes it possible to explain why two individuals with apparently similar capabilities may experience different employment outcomes, why additional qualifications may sometimes alter recognition rather than substantive capability, and why improved signaling may still fail where access to opportunity remains restricted. It also explains why employability can be reconstructed following unsuccessful conversion: individuals may alter capabilities, evidence, networks or occupational strategies without being able to determine the structural availability of opportunities. Negotiated Employability therefore conceptualizes employability as a recursive, relational conversion process rather than either an individual possession or a direct consequence of structural conditions.

This distinction also explains why employability can change without an underlying change in an individual's substantive capability. A new certification may make an existing skill more recognizable; a referral may provide access to an opportunity in which existing competence can be demonstrated; recruitment feedback may alter signaling without altering capability; and changes in labor-market conditions may increase or reduce the conversion

value of the same resources. Employability is therefore relational and context-dependent rather than simply possessed.

6. Policy Implications, Limitations and Conclusion

6.1 Policy Implications

The findings suggest that youth-employment policy should move beyond an exclusive emphasis on skills supply. Participants' experiences showed that qualifications and capabilities became consequential only when they could be credibly demonstrated, recognized by relevant actors and connected to accessible employment opportunities. Policy interventions should therefore address not only capability development but also the institutional mechanisms through which capabilities are converted into work.

In the United Kingdom, the findings support greater attention to the transition between education and employment rather than to educational attainment alone. Participants frequently described prior experience, demonstrable competence and familiarity with recruitment expectations as important to successful transition. Policy and institutional initiatives should therefore strengthen access to meaningful work experience, employer engagement, structured placements and opportunities for students to demonstrate capability before graduation.

In the Nigerian sample, participants more frequently described limited access to suitable formal employment, additional certification requirements, reliance on networks and the use of entrepreneurship or occupational redirection when conventional employment pathways were restricted. These findings suggest that graduate-employability initiatives should not be limited to adding more skills or credentials to university programs. Stronger links between universities and employers, opportunities for work-based learning, transparent recruitment pathways and mechanisms through which graduates can demonstrate existing capabilities are also required.

More broadly, the findings caution against treating additional training as a sufficient response to unemployment. Where suitable opportunities are limited, repeated investment in individual skills may improve employability without necessarily generating employment. Skills-development policy should therefore be linked to wider employment and labor-market strategies rather than functioning as a substitute for them.

6.2 Reducing Inequality in the Conversion of Skills

The recognition gap identified in the findings has direct implications for higher education. Universities should not treat employability solely as an additional service delivered near graduation. Instead, students require repeated opportunities to translate knowledge and capabilities into forms of evidence that can be understood and evaluated outside the university.

This could include work placements, live industry projects, professional portfolios, simulations, employer-informed assessment, volunteering and other forms of applied learning. The purpose is not simply to add more activities to students' records, but to help them develop credible evidence of how their capabilities have been used in practice.

The findings also have implications for employers. Participants' experiences suggest that recruitment processes can either widen or narrow opportunities for capability recognition. Heavy reliance on prior experience, informal referrals or generic application screening may disadvantage candidates who possess relevant capability but have had fewer opportunities to accumulate conventional signals. Structured interviews, competency-based assessment, practical tasks and portfolio evidence can provide additional ways for applicants to demonstrate what they can do.

This is particularly important because Theme Two showed that participants distinguished between claiming competence and demonstrating it. Recruitment processes that create opportunities for demonstration may therefore reduce some of the uncertainty surrounding applicants whose capabilities are not fully represented by credentials or previous job titles.

6.3 Implications for Higher-Education Practice

The findings identify inequality not only in the possession of capabilities but also in access to the resources through which capabilities can be converted into opportunities. Participants varied in their access to work experience, professional contacts, referrals, additional certifications and information about employment opportunities. Theme Four demonstrated particularly clearly that networks could provide information, guidance and introductions that were not equally available to all participants.

This suggests that employability interventions should pay greater attention to conversion inequality: unequal access to the mechanisms through which capability becomes visible and connected to opportunity. Universities and other

institutions can respond by widening access to structured work experience, mentoring, employer engagement and professional networks rather than assuming that students will acquire these resources independently.

Employers can also reduce conversion inequality by ensuring that recruitment does not depend unnecessarily on informal access routes or prior opportunities that applicants may have had unequal chances to obtain. More transparent recruitment, structured competency assessment and practical opportunities to demonstrate capability may help separate what candidates can actually do from the advantages associated with having already accessed particular networks or experiences.

The implication is not that all employment inequalities arise from conversion mechanisms. Rather, the study indicates that unequal access to recognition and opportunity can contribute to different labor-market outcomes even where individuals report possessing relevant capabilities.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

The study has several limitations that should inform interpretation of its contribution. First, the comparative qualitative design was intended to generate contextual and explanatory depth rather than statistical representativeness. The findings should therefore be understood as patterns within the 40-participant sample rather than generalizations to all young people in the United Kingdom or Nigeria.

Second, the study relied exclusively on young people's accounts of recruitment, recognition and opportunity access. These accounts are appropriate to the study's primary concern with how young people experience and negotiate education-to-work transitions, but they necessarily provide one perspective on the recruitment relationship. Participants' interpretations of employer recognition, rejection and recruitment expectations should therefore be understood as accounts of their experienced and perceived interactions with labor-market institutions rather than direct evidence of employers' intentions or decision-making processes. The study cannot establish, for example, whether an unsuccessful application resulted from the particular recognition barrier identified by a participant or from other considerations operating within the employer's recruitment process. This does not diminish the analytical importance of participants' experiences, since perceived recognition and opportunity barriers can themselves shape subsequent signaling, capability development and adaptive strategies. Nevertheless, future research could incorporate employers, recruiters and other labor-market actors to compare young people's interpretations with recruitment criteria, assessment practices and employer accounts of capability recognition. Such research would provide a stronger multi-perspectival examination of the recognition and conversion mechanisms proposed in the Negotiated Employability framework.

Third, the national comparison necessarily simplifies substantial variation within each country. Labor-market opportunities differ by region, sector, occupation and local institutional environment. Future comparative research could therefore examine the Negotiated Employability framework within particular sectors or regions rather than treating national context as the only relevant level of comparison.

Fourth, the study captured participants at different points in the education-to-work transition rather than following the same individuals longitudinally. Employability strategies and the conversion value of particular capabilities may change over time. Longitudinal research following young people from education through early employment would provide stronger evidence about when signaling, recognition, networks and adaptation become consequential.

Future mixed-method research could also test relationships between recognition, signaling, network access, opportunity access and employment quality across larger samples. Employer-focused research would be particularly valuable for examining whether participants' perceived recognition gaps correspond with recruitment criteria and assessment practices.

6.5 Conclusion

This study examined how young people in the United Kingdom and Nigeria negotiated the conversion of educational capabilities into employment opportunities. Across both samples, qualifications and skills remained important, but their labor-market value depended on more than possession alone. Participants described the importance of making capabilities visible, establishing credibility, accessing opportunities and adapting strategies when initial transition pathways failed.

The comparison revealed a shared conversion problem operating under different opportunity conditions. Participants in the UK sample more frequently emphasized competitive recruitment, prior experience and demonstrable competence, while participants in the Nigerian sample more frequently described restricted formal employment

opportunities, additional certification, networks and adaptive alternatives such as entrepreneurship and occupational redirection. These differences reflected emphases within the samples rather than fixed national characteristics.

The study develops Negotiated Employability to explain these processes as relational and recursive. Employability is not simply the possession of human capital, nor is employment determined solely by structural conditions. It emerges through continuing interaction between capability, signaling, recognition and opportunity access, with negotiation and adaptation operating across the process within institutional and labor-market constraints.

The broader implication is that improving youth employability requires more than increasing the supply of skills. Education systems, employers and labor-market institutions also shape whether those skills can become visible, credible and connected to meaningful work. The central policy and theoretical question is therefore not only how young people can become more employable, but how opportunity structures can enable existing capabilities to be converted more equitably into employment.

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Informed Consent

We obtained informed consent from all 40 adult participants before their interviews. Participation was voluntary. Participants were informed about the study and their right to decline questions or withdraw. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Ethics Approval

This study was conducted as an independent research project, separate from the author's doctoral programme at Teesside University. Formal institutional ethical approval was not obtained. The research incorporated voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality safeguards, pseudonymisation, and secure handling of interview materials. The absence of formal institutional ethical approval is acknowledged as a procedural limitation; these safeguards do not constitute retrospective institutional approval.

Data Availability Statement

The study generated interview transcripts containing potentially sensitive personal accounts. Full interview transcripts are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality. The article includes anonymised extracts supporting the findings.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors used ChatGPT 5.6 solely to assist with language editing and editorial refinement during manuscript preparation. The authors reviewed, revised, and verified all AI-assisted content and take full responsibility for the manuscript.

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