

# **Self-perceived employability attributes of adult learners within an open distance learning environment**

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## **Abstract**

This study examined the employability self-perceptions of South African open distance learning (ODL) higher education students. Although studies have been conducted within an ODL environment on graduates' employability, rising unemployment together with a lack of industry-specific skills requires more investigation into the concept of employability. It is therefore envisaged that this study will provide valuable information in this regard and add to the current body of knowledge on employability. The employability attributes scale (EAS) was administered to a target population of N = 1 706 ODL students (second to fourth year) in the economic and management sciences field. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design approach was used. The data were analysed to determine students' demographic effects on self-perceived employability. Results suggest that white and younger students perceive themselves as more employable than other ethnic groups by age groupings. Results may reflect historical opportunity structure effects on employability in a modern South African economy. The findings provide valuable information that organisations can use for career development support and counselling practices in the contemporary world of work. They further provide important insights informing human resource practices aimed at addressing the career needs of different age and race groups. The implications of this study will be helpful in guiding both industry and academia in incorporating and enhancing these skills among professionals.

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**Key phrases**

*Adult learners; employability; higher education and open distance learning*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Employer perceptions about the quality of graduates from higher education institutions (HEI) influence the graduands' perceived employability or general work readiness (Coetzee 2012:119-52). Due to South Africa's slow and shaky economy and high and increasing levels of unemployment, particularly among the country's youth, many graduates find it virtually impossible to find a suitable place in the labour market (Paadi 2014:129).

In the multicultural South African context, it would appear valuable to gain an understanding of the employability attributes of adult learners, as it could bring new awareness to the design of formal learning and development programmes and help to promote the continued employability of adult learners attending these programmes (Coetzee & Potgieter 2014). Historically, those with open and distance learning were perceived as less well prepared for work settings than those with on-campus instruction (Attri 2012), although such perceptions are changing with the wider adoption of open and distance learning options buttressed with online instructions, as with massive open distance learning courses (Botha, Coetzee & Coetzee 2015). The idea that a degree is a "passport to employment" has been relegated to the past (Harvey 2000:7). Gradually, even an excellent degree cannot guarantee a student a graduate-level job. The development and awareness of one's employability skills is progressively seen as a way of improving one's career opportunities and increasing academic performance (Baker & Henson 2010). Even though it is not expected of HEIs to produce fully-fledged practitioners/employees, the set of knowledge, skills and competence at entry-level employability is the first crucial step to further development and to lifelong employability (Świgoń 2016:3610). In addition, in the current economic climate, an important

role of academia is to support students and graduates in developing the necessary qualities, behaviours, skills and competencies for the modern workplace (Świgoń 2016).

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

According to Tumuti, Mule, Gecaga and Manguriu (2013), recent literature on the relationship between HEI and graduate employment has emphasised that universities need to develop a deep understanding of the graduate attributes required in the labour market. Tumuti *et al.* (2013) suggest that generic skills require more attention from HEIs.

Barthorpe and Hall (2000) recommend that employers search for new graduates that can immediately become involved in delivering value to the company, without having to make use of lengthy induction programmes. Expectations such as these, therefore, call for graduates to display qualities that will empower them to “hit the ground running” and keep abreast with the latest developments in a changing work environment (Bezuidenhout 2011:2). Even though studies are conducted to investigate students’ employability attributes, there remains a gap in the literature in terms of the understanding of employability skills of graduates. To this effect, the attributes needed to make graduates employable in the new world of work still require more investigation.

A study by De Guzman and Choi (2013:200) focused on individuals’ adaptability resources in terms of self-regulation strategies or strengths that enable individuals to broaden, refine and eventually direct their adaptive behaviours to create a concept of whether they are employable. Botha (2014:1.3) suggests that the dichotomous situation facing South Africa - that of rising graduate unemployment (Pauw, Oosthuizen & Van der Westhuizen 2008), together with a lack of industry-specific skills - requires further investigation into the concept of employability. The researchers’ main assumption, that graduands’ employment readiness remains an open question, was the drive to initiate in three modules a survey to determine the needs of students regarding employability and ongoing learning within an ODL

environment. Subsequently, the researchers asked whether there is a difference between ODL students' self-perceived employability attributes in terms of age, gender, ethnicity/race and education level.

Employers promote employees showing evidence of continuous work and relevant learning, and offer additional incentive pay to enhance ongoing learning (Bussin 2012). In South Africa, there is an ongoing debate regarding the preparedness of graduates for the world of work. Since the future workforce will be comprised of students, there is a need to continuously investigate the employability of students (Koloba 2015). It is therefore envisaged that this study will provide valuable information in this regard and add to the current body of knowledge on employability. Considering the fact that graduate employability is placed on the ODLs' agenda, and that a lack of employability skills makes it difficult for employees to adapt to their work demands (Biemann, Zacher & Feldman 2012), this study seems timely and important.

### **3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS**

The primary objective of this study is to determine the employability attributes and the role of demographic variables such as age, gender, race/ethnicity and education levels of adult learners. This study sought to address the following research question: How do working students within an ODL environment self-perceive their employability, taking into account their socio-demographics of age, ethnicity, gender, and qualifications level? Findings from this study will contribute to the literature by providing evidence of the factors identified to be of importance in self-perceived employability of students. This study is also relevant due to its contribution of empirical evidence that extends current conceptualisation in the area of self-perceived employability of students.

## 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-perceived employability can be defined as the ability to keep the job one has or to get the job one desires (Świgoń 2016:3610). According to Clarke (2008:262) and from an individual perspective, self-perceived employability may be understood “in terms of skills and abilities, attitudes and behaviours, as a current state, a process or a future outcome, and individual characteristic made up of the sum of an individual’s job-related skills, or as a reflection of the individual’s position within the labour market”. Next follows a brief description of the different factors that influence scholars’ thinking related to the area of self-perceived employability, such as work readiness, an attributes framework, contemporary management, higher education and the influence of country settings.

### 4.1 Employability and work readiness

Employability refers to “work readiness”, that is, possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding for employment (Mason, Williams, Cranmer & Guile 2003). Olivier (2015) maintains that the most widely accepted definition of employability was put forward by Yorke (2006:8), namely: “Employability means that students acquire the skills, understanding and personal attributes that make them more likely to secure employment and be successful in their chosen occupations to the benefit of themselves, the workforce and the community and the economy”. Stokes (2013) defines employability as an individuals’ long-term capacity to build a career and to prosper in a labour market. Jackson (2014) maintains that employability is a persons’ ability to conceptualise tasks, and develop expertise and behaviour that improve performance within any work environment. Bezuidenhout (2011:20) defines employability as a “psycho-social construct representing a combination of attributes (dispositions, values, attitudes and skills) that promote proactive adaptability in changing environments and enhance an individual’s suitability for employment and the likelihood of obtaining career success”. Bennett (2016:6) defines ability as “the ability to find, create and sustain meaningful work across the career lifespan”. Even though

definitions of employability are diverse, it can be seen as a blend of understanding, skilful practices, efficacy beliefs and reflectiveness (Little 2006) and the capability of people having the confidence in their ability to take effective and appropriate action and to continue to learn from their experiences (Olivier 2015).

While the concept of employability is not a new idea (Bezuidenhout 2011), its focus and weight are changing (Stokes 2013). Emphasis is now being placed on how prepared individuals are for changes taking place in the economy and the world of work, such as expansion, job creation and increased job insecurity (Stokes 2013). In addition, the criteria used to evaluate employability are also changing. Potential workers need to be trainable to be employable.

Today, employability suggests that individuals must demonstrate their initiative and adaptability to learn continuously, not only to attain employment, but also to be promotable or retain their job (Stokes 2013:1). Individuals with a self-directed career attitude experience greater responsibility for their career choices and opportunities and are more enthusiastically involved with their career development (Briscoe, Hall & DeMuth 2006; Sullivan & Baruch 2009). Employees therefore need to be self-directed and lifelong learners to remain employable (Stokes 2013). Briscoe and Hall (2006:8) define self-directedness as the “ability to be adaptive in terms of performance and learning demands”.

The employability qualities employers impute on university graduands may depend on the institutions that the graduands attended (Lourens & Fourie-Malherbe 2016) as well as the mode of instruction they completed (Bennett 2016; Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall 2009).

## **4.2 Employability attributes framework**

The employability attributes framework (EAF) developed by Bezuidenhout (2011) in collaboration with Coetzee (2010) is of significance to the present study. The EAF has specifically been designed for students in the South African higher education context. This

framework describes a set of eight core employability attributes that are regarded as important for increasing the likelihood of securing and sustaining employment opportunities (Bezuidenhout 2011). The EAF focuses on attributes that may be developed in the higher education setting by creating an environment that is conducive to the cultivation of these attributes. The EAF consists of the following eight measures: career self-management, cultural competence, career resilience, proactivity, entrepreneurial orientation, sociability, self-efficacy and emotional literacy.

Career self-management refers to the individual capacity to ensure continued employability by developing an ongoing learning orientation and autonomously planning and managing a career (Bezuidenhout & Coetzee 2010; Botha 2014; Coetzee 2012). Career resilience involves an individuals' ability to adapt to changing situations by accepting job and organisational changes, looking forward to working with different and new people, being willing to take risks as well as having self-confidence (Schreuder & Coetzee 2011). An entrepreneurial orientation entails viewing risks and potential opportunities, a tolerance for ambiguity, a preference for innovation, creativity and autonomous action in the career progression (Bezuidenhout & Coetzee 2010; Botha 2014; Coetzee 2012). Proactivity is the ability of the individual to be an active agent in career planning and management (Bezuidenhout & Coetzee 2010; Botha 2014; Coetzee 2012). Self-efficacy consists of the ability to function independently of others, to make ones' own decisions, to have the confidence to accomplish ones' goals through ones' own effort, to persist with challenges and to enjoy the discovery of original solutions (Bezuidenhout 2011). Cultural competence involves knowing the customs of other cultures, understanding their values and beliefs and being able to initiate and maintain relationships with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Bezuidenhout 2011). Cultural competence is especially critical in a diverse employment context such as the South African workplace (Ndzube 2013). Emotional literacy refers to the awareness of and the capacity to change and manage personal emotions as

well as the feelings of others (Bezuidenhout & Coetzee 2010; Botha 2014; Coetzee 2012). Sociability is the skill to network with and build social contacts (Coetzee & Potgieter 2014).

### **4.3 Employability and contemporary management**

The speed and nature of globalisation, technological change and innovation, changes in work organisations, environmental change and demographic trends take different forms across organisations. Increasing the employability of the workforce in the face of ongoing and future structural changes can help foster innovation and adoption of new technologies as well as boost productivity (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2016:3).

### **4.4 Higher education and employability**

Higher education (HE) today is tasked with developing employability in their adult learners in order to increase the productive potential of the human resources of organisations (Boden & Nedeva 2010; Coetzee 2012). Despite this, the concept of employability is both unclear and indefinite (Botha 2014:3.1).

A common theme across higher education policy and funding throughout the world is the need to ensure that graduates are prepared for and able to contribute to the economy and society. Employability is therefore labelled as one of the most significant challenges facing contemporary HE (Moolman 2013). In fact, Baker and Henson (2010) argue that the provision of opportunities for the development of employability skills and career awareness has become central in debates about the future of HE. Prokou (2008) proposes that it is accepted that HE has a responsibility for advancing employability of graduates in developing the abilities and skills of students and promoting lifelong learning.

For part-time degree students who are already working, the concept of employability is likely to be linked to issues of confidence and self-esteem (Little 2011) as well as career development and access to the professions (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac & Lawton 2012).

These authors furthermore suggest that some employers, and many students, continue to value the broadest understanding of employability and HE learning in developing their professional identities.

Pegg *et al.* (2012:8) posit that HE should enhance the employment potential for the full spectrum of its graduates and acknowledge the different economic forces that influence the graduates' success. However, continuing the assumption that students can all be treated the same way, and have equal confidence in dealing with the labour market, runs the risk of maintaining disadvantage, as the relatively advantaged are able to maintain their positions.

#### **4.5 Influence of country setting context**

The assumption that all open and distance learning students with similar continuing learning opportunities would perceive themselves as being equally employable, runs the risk of maintaining disadvantage, as the historically relatively advantaged may have higher actual employability. In the South African setting, socio-demographics of race/ethnicity, gender and age [i.e. Generations X (age range 18-32) and Y (age range 33-52)] may influence self-perceptions of employability, since existing definitions of employability suggest that individual characteristics determine employability (Clarke 2008). In addition, these characteristics are often critical in determining a persons' "ability to keep the job one has or to get the job one desires" (Hillage & Pollard 1998:2). In a study conducted by Moreau and Leathwood (2006), age was seen to have influenced outcomes, with more mature graduates attracting more attention in the labour market than the younger ones.

According to McGuigan (2010), various studies have indicated that perceptions of employability and employability attributes differ with age. Nielsen (1999) found perceptions of employability to differ with age. Compared to individuals aged 18 to 34 years, those aged 34 to 44 years were 1.7% more likely to have negative perceptions of employability, whilst those aged 44 and above were 3.0% more likely to have negative perceptions of

employability. Rothwell and Arnold (2007) also found perceptions of employability to differ with age; those younger than 34 years held higher perceptions of employability and those aged 55 years and older showed lower perceptions of employability. Van Rooy, Alonso and Viswesvaran (2005) found a positive relationship between age and employability. Generation, in this study, is directly derived from age, hence the discussion following the different generations.

McGuigan (2010) postulates that popular psychology literature suggests that members of Generation X and Y may have higher perceptions of employability than Baby Boomers. Compared to Baby Boomers, individuals in Generations X and Y are viewed as individuals who require more feedback (Hankin 2005), spend less time in a position and have less commitment to an organisation (Cennamo & Gardner 2008; Kupperschmidt 2000). According to, for example, Van der Heijden (2000), these factors are related to increased perceptions of employability. In addition, Generation Y is more adaptable and optimistic than Generation X and Baby Boomers, making them more inwardly focused on their careers (McGuigan 2010). This could increase Generation Ys' perceptions of employability (Sheahan 2005). McGuigan (2010) found that Baby Boomers' perceptions of their employability were significantly lower than those of individuals from Generations X and Y.

Coetzee and Schreuder (2008) highlighted the importance of research in light of the multicultural South African work environment. Organisations need to consider the differences or similarities between generations, as they might also be different in terms of their values, expectations, needs, workplace practices, and personalities on individual or group level, which in turn could result in conflicting preferences (Bejtkovský 2016; Jonck, Van der Walt & Sobayeni 2017). Findings from Croucher, Ramakrishnan, Rizov and Benzinger (2018:124) demonstrate a limited significance of race/ethnicity to perceived employability. Rothwell, Jewell and Hardie (2009) found no significant differences between self-perceived employability and ethnicity. However, the extent to which these historical influences apply to

already employed students taking open and distance learning courses to increase their work competencies is in need of study.

With regard to educational level, Koloba (2015) found no statistical difference in terms of level of study and perceived employability. However, Karli (2016) found that level of education plays a significant role in participants' employability perceptions. Thindwa (2016) found that educational attainment is one of the key factors in employability. This is not surprising in view of literature supporting educational attainment as important in employability. Thindwa cautions that the relationship between education and employability is complex, since education needs to go hand in hand with courses that are demanded by the labour market.

## **5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **5.1 Research design and approach**

The study aimed to determine the employability attributes and the role of demographic variables such as age, gender, race/ethnicity and education levels of adult learners. Although being a descriptive study, within this, a quantitative research method was employed. A cross-sectional study design was used to collect primary data (Zikmund, Babin, Carr, Carr & Griffin 2013), involving adult learners enrolled for undergraduate studies in the economic and management science field at an ODL university.

### **5.2 Participants and setting**

The target population in this study was N = 1 706 ODL students in the economic and management sciences field. Study participants formed a convenience sample of 725 ODL students (females = 70.2%; blacks = 16.5%, Indian = 13.9%, coloured = 3.5% and white = 6.8%), age range 20 to 61; (mean age = 32.86 years; SD = 8.23 years). By generation, 52% were Generation Y (aged between 20 and 32), 45.9% Generation X (aged between 33 and

52) and 1.5% Baby Boomers (aged 53 years and above). Because there were only 11 students (1.5%) from the Baby Boomers generation, they were excluded from the analysis.

In terms of their highest education level, the majority (n = 425; 58.5%) had an undergraduate degree/diploma qualification. A majority of the sample was either full- or part-time employed (81.7%), 1.2% self-employed, with only 16.1% being unemployed.

### **5.3 Research instrument**

The students completed the Employability Attributes Scale (Bezuidenhout & Coetzee 2010), which is a 56-item measure of eight dimensions of career self-management (11 items), cultural competence (5 items); self-efficacy (6 items), career resilience (6 items), sociability (7 items) and emotional literacy (7 items). Items are rated on a six-point Likert-type scale. A high score would suggest that the respondent was satisfied with the particular item, while a low score would indicate the opposite. Previous studies reported reliability coefficients of between 0.78 and 0.90 for scores from the EAS (Coetzee 2010; Coetzee & Potgieter 2014). For this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.72 to 0.83 were observed for scores from the EAS.

### **5.4 Research procedure**

Permission for the study was granted by the ODL University. The students individually consented to the study in writing. They were assured of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of responses in the form of a participant information sheet. An electronic survey was created on e-survey creator (which created a dedicated uniform reference locator [URL] on its file server) and a message was posted on the university's student portal with a hyperlink to the URL where the survey was hosted. Students were informed in the research participant information sheet that the researchers valued their voluntary participation in the study and that they would not be penalised if they did not complete the questionnaire. Since responses were entered by means of an electronic survey, participation

was anonymous, as students could not be identified. Only the researchers had access to the data on the URL, which was password protected.

### **5.5 Statistical analysis**

Data were analysed by employability attributes and students' demographics applying the independent t-test, Mann-Whitney test, Kruskal-Wallis test and ANOVA. A t-test for independent groups was used to determine whether statistically significant differences existed between (i) the two age groups (generation X and Y) and (ii) gender with regard to each of the employability attributes. A 5% level of significance was used. The null hypothesis of equal variances assumed was not rejected ( $p > 0.05$ ) for 10 of the 11 attributes and we can thus assume equal variances. For the attribute *innovation*, the null hypothesis of equal variance assumed was rejected ( $p < 0.05$ ); therefore equal variance not assumed was used, necessitating use of non-parametric techniques for the data analysis. An independent-sample t-test was also conducted to compare employability attributes between the different genders. The null hypothesis of equal variances assumed was not rejected ( $p > 0.05$ ) for 10 of the 11 attributes and we can thus assume equal variances. For the attribute *reflection*, the null hypothesis of equal variance assumed was rejected ( $p < 0.05$ ), therefore equal variance not assumed were used. Thus, to the extent that equal variances could be assumed, analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedures were utilised for the data analysis.

### **5.6 Ethical considerations**

The research conformed to all academic research etiquette and ethics as described by the research and innovation policy and the policy on research ethics by the ODL University. The actual results of the study were analysed and presented without distorting any information; no deliberate or intentional misrepresentation of the results took place. The identity of the participants was protected and was not revealed during or after the study and all rights to

privacy were protected. The data collection was treated in confidence and was not shared in a way that would bring harm to any of the participants.

## 6. RESULTS

### 6.1 Empirical results

The factor analysis results, reliability results and the results containing the research goals are discussed in this section.

#### 6.1.1 Factor analysis results

The factors identified in the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) by Potgieter and Coetzee (2013) were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis. Data for this study did not provide an acceptable fit for the model as suggested (CFI = 0.611; IFI = 0.614; RMSEA = 0.082). Subsequently, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted using principal component extraction and varimax rotation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (0.943) and the Bartlett's test of sphericity were significant ( $p = 0.000$ ). Both indicated that a factor analysis was appropriate. The analysis identified twelve factors, based on the eigenvalue criterion (final factor loadings are shown in Table 1) which explains 62.85% of the variance.

**Table 1: Factor loadings**

Statement and statement number		Factor											
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
31	I can easily understand why I feel a certain way.	0.73											
29	I generally know what emotions I am feeling.	0.72											
32	I know what to do to be in a good mood.	0.67											
28	It is easy for me to	0.55											

Statement and statement number		Factor											
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	identify the emotions of others.												
30	When I am in a good mood, I am better able to persist with challenges.	0.55											
34	I know how to control my own emotions.	0.54											
35	I find it easy to disarm an emotionally explosive situation.	0.50											
33	I find it easy to cheer someone up who is sad.	0.48											
47	I am able to adapt to changing circumstances in my career.		0.70										
46	I anticipate and take advantage of changes in my career.		0.67										
45	I adapt easily to changes in my environment.		0.63										
48	I am able to persevere even in the face of difficult career circumstances.		0.58										
41	I enjoy working independently to reach my goals.		0.50										
40	I generally set challenging targets for myself.		0.49										
44	I continuously look into new business opportunities.		0.40										
52	I pay a great deal of attention to develop myself.			0.67									

Statement and statement number		Factor											
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
55	I feel changes at work or in my studies have positive implications.			0.63									
51	I continuously seek out improved ways of doing things.			0.60									
53	I regularly keep up with the latest developments concerning my type of job or career.			0.56									
56	I am generally willing to consider new ideas.			0.56									
50	I spend a lot of time enhancing my knowledge and skills to benefit my career.			0.53									
54	I am curious about new things.			0.47									
15	I understand the values and beliefs of other cultures.				0.83								
14	I am confident in my ability to communicate inter-culturally.				0.72								
13	I know the customs of other cultures.				0.70								
16	I can easily initiate and maintain relationships with people from different cultures.				0.67								
17	I enjoy working with people from different cultures.				0.60								
18	I change my non-verbal behaviour in different cultural circumstances.				0.48								

Statement and statement number		Factor											
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
37	I enjoy discovering original solutions to tasks.					0.70							
38	It is essential to regularly seek out new ways of doing things in my career.					0.69							
36	I tend to think about how things can be done differently.					0.63							
39	I am generally willing to take risks.					0.49							
24	When I achieve something, it is because of my own effort.						0.62						
25	When I attempt something, I am usually successful.						0.62						
43	I like to make my own decisions.						0.56						
49	I can generally identify a good opportunity before other people can.						0.45						
26	I am confident that I can successfully carry out my plans.						0.44						
20	I am capable and worthy compared to others.						0.42						
27	I generally persist in executing a difficult task and do not easily give up.						0.36						
7	I know what I must do to make a success of my career.							0.71					
2	I know what skills I need to be successful							0.59					

Statement and statement number		Factor											
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	in my career.												
8	I know what I want to accomplish in my career.							0.59					
6	I have clearly formulated career goals and action plans on how to achieve them.							0.58					
1	I regularly reflect on what my career aspirations are.							0.50					
5	I actively seek feedback from others to make progress in my career.								0.81				
4	I regularly ask others' opinions regarding my strengths and weaknesses.								0.79				
3	I regularly seek information regarding what a specific career involves.								0.58				
10	I find it easy to adapt to different social situations.									0.71			
9	I can easily establish and maintain interpersonal relations.									0.64			
21	I have many good qualities.										0.71		
22	I take responsibility for my decisions.										0.53		
23	I am responsible for my own successes and failures in my career.										0.46		
12	I can use my											0.64	

Statement and statement number		Factor											
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	networks to find new job opportunities.												
11	I have built a network of friendships with people that can advance my career.											0.58	
42	I am comfortable in uncertain situations.											0.57	
19	I am generally satisfied with myself.												0.68

Source: Calculated from survey results

The twelfth factor consisted of only one variable and was not subjected to any further analysis. The other eleven factors were labelled as emotional awareness, career resilience, self-development, cultural competence, innovation, perseverance, career self-directedness, reflection, sociability, proactivity, and networking. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each of the identified factors in this study is shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Reliability results**

ID	Factor	Cronbach's alpha
1	Emotional awareness	0.85
2	Career resilience	0.87
3	Self-development	0.89
4	Cultural competence	0.86
5	Innovation	0.83
6	Perseverance	0.84
7	Career self-directedness	0.77

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8	Reflection	0.76
9	Sociability	0.78
10	Proactivity	0.72
11	Networking	0.77

Source: Calculated from survey results

When conducting the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, the reliability of factors 10 (proactivity) and 11 (networking) was below the acceptable threshold value of 0.70. The Cronbach's alpha for these factors initially was 0.36 and 0.52 respectively. Subsequently, one statement within each factor with a low item-total correlation was removed. This resulted in higher reliability values as reported in Table 2. The statements that were removed were statement 19, "I am generally satisfied with myself", statement 21, "I have many good qualities" and statement 42, "I am comfortable in uncertain situations". These statements will be reported on separately. The reliability coefficients reported in Table 2 show acceptable internal consistency (reliability) of the EFA (cut-off point of 0.70). In general, the researchers regarded the measuring instrument as reliable for interpreting the results.

### **6.1.2 Age effects of self-perceived employability**

Results from the independent t-test (Table 3) and mean scores suggest that Generation Y (M = 4.53, SD = 0.91) obtained higher mean values than did Generation X (M = 4.70, SD = 0.87) on the employability attribute self-development;  $t(503) = -2.13, p = 0.03$ . For all the other employability attributes there were no statistical significant differences between Generation X and Generation Y students.

**Table 3: Age effects of self-perceived employability**

Employability construct	Levenes' test for equality of variance		t-test for equality of means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Emotional awareness	0.14	0.71	-0.41	530	0.68
Career resilience	0.00	0.95	-1.64	520	0.10
Self-development	0.89	0.35	-2.12	503	0.03*
Cultural competence	0.43	0.51	-0.25	527	0.80
Innovation	2.88	0.09	-1.15	493	0.25
Perseverance	0.23	0.87	-0.62	516	0.53
Career self-directedness	0.63	0.43	-1.08	526	0.27
Reflection	0.07	0.79	-0.90	530	0.50
Sociability	0.08	0.77	-1.23	532	0.22
Proactivity	0.06	0.81	-0.45	531	0.65
Networking	0.00	0.96	-0.76	553	0.45

Source: Calculated from survey results

The results from the Mann-Whitney U test (see Table 4) analysis revealed a statistically significant difference for the employability attribute of self-satisfaction in favour of Generation X students (mean rank = 252.28, n = 249) as compared to Generation Y students (mean rank = 282.57, n = 287); (U = 31692.00, z = -2.33, p = 0.02, r = 0.10).

**Table 4: Mann Whitney U test: Differences between Generation X and Y**

	<b>Question 19</b> "I am generally satisfied with myself."	<b>Question 21</b> "I have many good qualities."	<b>Question 42</b> "I am comfortable in uncertain situations."
<b>Mann-Whitney U</b>	31692.00	35291.50	34199.50
<b>Wilcoxon W</b>	62817.00	76619.50	65574.50
<b>Z</b>	-2.33	-0.34	-0.89
<b>Asymp. Sig. (two-tailed)</b>	0.02	0.73	0.37

Source: Calculated from survey results

### **6.1.3 Gender effects on employability self-perceptions**

Findings from both the independent t-test and Mann Whitney U test did not find any statistically significant difference in employability attribute values relating to gender.

### **6.1.4 Ethnicity/race and education level effects on employability self-perceptions**

Results from ANOVA revealed a significant difference by ethnicity/race with regard to the construct career resilience ( $F_{3, 527} = 3.88, p = 0.01$ ). A post-hoc test using the Tukey HSD multiple comparison test indicated that white students ( $M = 4.64, SD = 0.97$ ) self-perceived to be employable to a greater extent than Indian students ( $M = 4.59, SD = 0.89$ ), coloured students ( $M = 4.48, SD = 1.01$ ) and black students ( $M = 4.48, SD = 0.82$ ) ( $p < .001$ ). See Table 5.

**Table 5: Ethnicity/race level effects on employability self-perceptions**

Construct		Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<b>Emotional awareness</b>	Between groups	0.93	3	0.31	0.45	0.72
	Within groups	372.74	537	0.69		
	Total	373.67	540			
<b>Career resilience</b>	Between groups	8.82	3	2.94	3.89	0.01
	Within groups	398.84	527	0.76		
	Total	407.66	529			
<b>Self-development</b>	Between groups	7.27	3	2.42	3.08	0.03
	Within groups	414.11	526	0.79		
	Total	421.37	529			
<b>Cultural competence</b>	Between groups	4.85	3	1.62	1.68	0.17
	Within groups	515.65	534	0.97		
	Total	520.51	537			
<b>Innovation</b>	Between groups	4.98	3	1.66	1.85	0.14
	Within groups	479.36	535	0.90		
	Total	484.34	538			
<b>Perseverance</b>	Between groups	2.32	3	0.77	1.18	0.32
	Within groups	341.45	522	0.65		
	Total	343.76	525			
<b>Reflection</b>	Between groups	3.58	3	3.56	3.59	0.01
	Within groups	341.45	522	0.99		
	Total	343.76	525			
<b>Sociability</b>	Between groups	0.67	3	0.224	0.18	0.91
	Within groups	686.73	538	1.28		
	Total	687.40	541			

<b>Proactivity</b>	Between groups	0.40	3	0.14	0.19	0.91
	Within groups	389.73	538	0.72		
	Total	390.14	541			
<b>Networking</b>	Between groups	4.36	3	1.44	0.80	0.50
	Within groups	975.41	540	1.81		
	Total	979.73	543			

Source: Calculated from survey results

Similarly, white students self-perceived with higher employability on the attributes of self-development and career self-directedness compared to other racial groups ( $p < .0001$ ) (see Table 5). However, Indian students self-reported with higher self-satisfaction compared to other racial groupings. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to determine whether statistical significant differences exist between race levels with regard to the following: statement 19, "I am generally satisfied with myself", statement 21, "I have many good qualities" and statement 42, "I am comfortable in uncertain situations". Results are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6: Ethnicity effects on self-perceived employability**

	<b>Statement 19</b> "I am generally satisfied with myself."	<b>Statement 21</b> "I have many good qualities."	<b>Statement 42</b> "I am comfortable in uncertain situations."
<b>Chi-Square</b>	12.14	1.63	0.31
<b>df</b>	3	3	3
<b>Asymp (Sig.)</b>	0.01	0.65	0.96

Source: Calculated from survey results

Results from Table 6 revealed a statistically significantly difference in statement 19, "I am generally satisfied with myself" across the four cultural groups (Indian,  $n = 161$ , black,  $n = 228$ , coloured,  $n = 53$  and white,  $n = 103$ ),  $\chi^2(3, n = 545) = 12.14, p = 0.01$ . The Indian group

had a higher mean rank (Md = 288.26) than the other cultural groups, thereby indicating that they tend to agree more with the statement than the other cultural groups. With regard to educational level, no statistical difference was found.

## 7. DISCUSSION

This study sought to determine the employability attributes of undergraduate and postgraduate students under study as well as to how working students within an ODL university self-perceive their employability, taking into account their socio-demographics of age, ethnicity, gender, and qualifications level. By investigating this, the study intended to bring a measure of clarification to the construct of employability and its application in the current knowledge-driven business context.

With regard to the first objective, the researchers found the following eleven constructs to be the employability attributes of students under study: emotional awareness, career resilience, self-development, cultural competence, innovation, perseverance, career self-directedness, reflection, proactivity and networking.

The researchers found a statistical difference between age and certain employability attribute constructs. Specifically, it was found that Generation X students self-perceived as higher on self-development needs than Generation Y students. This finding is contrary to findings by Oosthuizen, Coetzee and Mntonintshi (2014), who found that different age groups ( $\leq 25$  years and 26-45 years) did not differ significantly regarding their employability attributes. However, Van Rooy *et al.* (2005) found a positive relationship between age and employability.

According to Instant Impact (2014), Generation Y students place greater value on their own personal development, suggesting continued learning. In fact, personal development was the most important factor when choosing a job for Generation Y students. It was further found that Generation Y students are more satisfied with themselves than Generation X

students. The results of the latter finding suggest that Generation Y students are more content with themselves. This is in line with the characteristics of the Generation Y cohort who are seen as confident (Benckendorff & Moscardo 2013). Jackson (2012) posits that overconfidence in personal ability is commonly associated with Generation Y graduates. In a study by Solnet, Kralj and Kandampully (2012), they found that the Generation Y cohort consider themselves more employable than their non-generation Y counterparts.

The researchers found no significant difference between gender and employability self-perceptions. This finding confirms findings of Potgieter (2012), but contradicts findings of Bezuidenhout (2011), Clarke (2008) and Harvey (2000). The results from this study are also contrary to findings by Quenani, MacDougall and Sexton (2014) where it was found that male students have 50% more confidence in their employability skillset compared to female students. However, findings of this study support the findings by Koloba (2015), Karli (2016), Rothwell, *et al.* (2009) as well as Rothwell and Arnold (2007), who found no direct relationship between gender and any type of self-perceived employability. This result is encouraging, given the fact that females have more often lagged behind their male counterparts in terms of employment (Koloba 2015:135).

The researchers found a statistical difference between ethnicity and certain employability attribute constructs. In this study, white students self-rated higher on the employability attributes of career resilience and self-development. It was also found that Indian students self-reported with higher self-satisfaction compared to other racial groupings. Rothwell *et al.* (2009) found no significant difference between self-perceived employability and ethnicity, yet contrary to these findings; Croucher *et al.* (2018) found that ethnic group effects on perceived employability do exist, although minimal. It was also found that there is a difference in career self-directedness between black and white students.

In a study on Arabic undergraduate students, Khasawneh (2010) found that ethnic-gender expectations were perceived by students as having low levels of influence on their career

planning. Reio (2004) reported similar findings from his studies at a major university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. However, our findings contradict those by Fisher and Stafford (2002), who found that there was no significant difference among African-American, Hispanic, and Anglo-American students on career resilience.

Findings of the present study are likely explained by the fact that these students are able to adapt to changing situations and have the self-confidence to master the challenges presented by a situation or event (Potgieter 2012). Individuals who possess career resilience have a higher sense of control over their future and the direction their careers will take (Schreuder & Coetzee 2011). Hence, the white students' self-perceived high levels of career resilience and development suggest that they feel in control over the direction their careers will take. Nevertheless, it could possibly also be attributed to the historic advantage of white students accessing and retaining employment (Oluwajodu, Blaauw, Greyling & Kleynhans 2015). Then again, the findings in the current study about Indian students' high level of self-satisfaction suggest that these working students are happy with their studies in an ODL environment. Their high satisfaction level could also be interpreted as working students who are confident that they will accomplish their career goals through their own development efforts in an ODL environment.

From this study, it is clear that educational level does not have an effect on self-perceived employability. This is contrary to findings from Karli (2016), who found a significant difference in employability perceptions based on educational level. Findings of this study, however, support the findings from Koloba (2015) who found no statistically significant difference in terms of level of study and perceived employability. It is therefore evident that, regardless of year of study, students are equally confident about their employability.

## **8. STUDY LIMITATIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This was a cross-sectional, exploratory study and no statements about causation can be imputed. In addition, the study relied on self-report measures that carry the limitation that the data used are self-reported and reliant on participant self-perceptions. Another limitation is that only 16.5% of the participants were black. This does not give a clear picture of this population group's view concerning their employability. Moreover, we did not disaggregate for analysis the data for those with employment and those unemployed at the time of study. Considering that environmental factors are important in understanding employability, future studies should focus on the differences between those that are employed and those that are unemployed.

Hence, the findings of the current study suggest that within the current labour market, employers need a better understanding of their role in employability in order to provide all students with the necessary skills to assess their employability attributes related to the needs of the labour market. Additionally, HEIs are also required to gain a better understanding of their role in employability in order to provide all students with opportunities to develop their skills and abilities to become more self-directed in their learning and to take control of their own careers, especially within the black and coloured ethnicity groups. Therefore, the researchers recommend a need for more qualitative research related to self-report studies to gain more in-depth experience in terms of employability attributes of adult learners. The researchers furthermore recommend intervention methods to create social learning opportunities between all the different ethnicity and age groups. Such opportunities need to create prospects for these groups to learn from one another. A typical qualitative research study could enable these groups to tell more in-depth narratives about their career resilience, career development and satisfaction levels to flourish within the current labour market.

Lastly, it is recommended that HR professionals involved in organisational training design programmes that are innovative and sufficiently diverse to connect with all student cohorts. Training programmes should be designed in such a manner that they utilise the expertise of both academics and career development practitioners, thereby empowering more explicit understanding of learning outcomes by academics, students and business audiences.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

The study revealed that the self-perceived employability attributes of self-development and self-directedness differ by ethnicity and age. Specifically, Generation X students self-perceived higher on the employability attribute self-development, while Generation Y self-perceived higher on the employability attribute self-satisfaction. A significant difference by ethnicity/race with regard to the employability construct career resilience was found, where white students self-perceived to be employable to a greater extent than the other ethnic groups. However, a turbulent changing workplace towards a fourth industrial revolution requires from both university programmes and human resource development programmes to create a level of stability and a calling for adult learners to become aware and assess their own levels of self-directedness, resilience and fulfilment for self-development career opportunities. Therefore, graduate employability programmes emphasising individual skills and knowledge need to be complemented by targeted geographical and industry development, continuing (lifelong) education programmes beyond university and social inclusion initiatives in order to be effective.

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