

The Employability of Young Graduates in Algeria: Critical Determinants for Building Sustainable Career Pathways

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Abstract:

This study explores the employability of young graduates in Algeria as a multidimensional and dynamic construct. Using a mixed-methods approach, we analyzed theoretical frameworks and labor market data to identify critical determinants: education quality, skills alignment, mobility, civic engagement, and language proficiency. Despite declining unemployment rates, young graduates continue to face persistent barriers to labor market integration due to mismatches, limited mobility, and weak language skills. Findings highlight the need to strengthen university development, revise vocational training, foster university–enterprise collaboration, and enhance international cooperation. The study emphasizes that improving student life and empowering local governments are essential for building sustainable and inclusive career pathways.

Keywords: Graduate employability, Quality education, Skills mismatch, Student mobility, Civic engagement, Language proficiency.

JEL Classification: I21; I28; J24; J62

Introduction

Rather than merely securing a job for an applicant or protecting the position of an existing worker, contemporary approaches emphasize the importance of developing individuals' capacity to obtain employment, adapt to future labor market changes, and thereby enhance their employability. This perspective reflects a conceptual shift from employment as an immediate outcome to employability as a sustainable process. It underscores graduates' ability to acquire new competencies, continuously adapt, and construct resilient career trajectories within dynamic and uncertain labor markets. Employability is thus conceived not simply as access to work but as the long-term capacity to sustain meaningful and productive participation in the economy and society.

In Algeria, strengthening employability as a guiding axis of labor market orientation has become a matter of growing importance. Although the unemployment rate has shown a remarkable decline over the past two decades, the quality of professional integration remains a pressing concern, particularly for young graduates. Indeed, despite successive policy initiatives and institutional reforms, graduates continue to be disproportionately affected by unemployment compared to other categories of job seekers. Against this backdrop, the employability of higher education graduates emerges as a critical socioeconomic imperative, calling for innovative and holistic approaches that move beyond the mere acquisition of employment toward the cultivation of sustainable, adaptive, and meaningful professional trajectories.

Research Question

-What are the key determinants influencing the employability of young graduates in Algeria?

Study Hypotheses

-H1: Higher quality of education is positively associated with the employability of young graduates in Algeria.

-H2: Skills mismatch negatively affects the transition of young graduates into the labor market.

-H3: Greater student mobility enhances the employability of young graduates through exposure to diverse competencies.

-H4: Participation in extracurricular and civic activities improves the acquisition of soft skills, thereby increasing the employability of young graduates.

-H5: Proficiency in foreign languages (French and English) significantly enhances the competitiveness of young Algerian graduates in both regional and global labor markets.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

-Trace the conceptual evolution of employability and its applicability to the Algerian context.

-Analyze the structure and dynamics of the Algerian labor market with a focus on young graduates.

-Identify the key obstacles and enablers of young graduates' employability through interdisciplinary lenses.

-Propose evidence-based recommendations for fostering inclusive and sustainable career pathways.

Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of theoretical frameworks and policy documents with quantitative examination of recent labor market data from national and international sources. Comparative regional analysis and empirical findings are utilized to contextualize Algeria's position and propose tailored solutions.

Structure of the Study

1. Theoretical framework for employability
2. Overview of young graduates' employability in Algeria
3. Key determinants of young graduates' employability in Algeria
4. Conclusion and recommendations

1- Theoretical framework for employability

Building on a seven-stage evolution, this discussion develops an operational conceptualization of employability and situates it within its interdisciplinary foundations in economics, sociology, psychology, and management.

1.1- The genesis of employability: a seven-stage evolution

Employability is situated within a long-term temporal framework, evolving as a response to socio-economic changes in society. The contemporary debate on this concept dates back to the early 20th century, as demonstrated by pioneering work (Gazier, 2017) that provides an insightful conceptual framework to understand its historical development and current definitions. Seven historical versions of employability have been distinguished.

The concept was initially articulated with a **dichotomic approach** focused on the availability of physically capable workers (Beveridge, 1906), a perspective later criticized as simplistic. Following World War II, a **socio-medical approach** emerged, particularly in the United States and Europe,

The Employability of Young Graduates in Algeria: Critical Determinants for Building Sustainable Career Pathways

concentrating on rehabilitating disabled individuals through quantitative assessments of physical and mental abilities.

From the 1960s, American **manpower policy** expanded the concept to include socially disadvantaged groups by emphasizing training and subsidies; however, this approach was criticized for its individualistic focus and neglect of systemic factors. Around the same period, the French sociologist introduced the concept of "**flow employability**" (Ledrut, 1966), defining it as the probability that a job seeker secures employment, thereby highlighting structural inequalities. Despite its contributions, this perspective proved limited by the persistent unemployment trends of the 1980s.

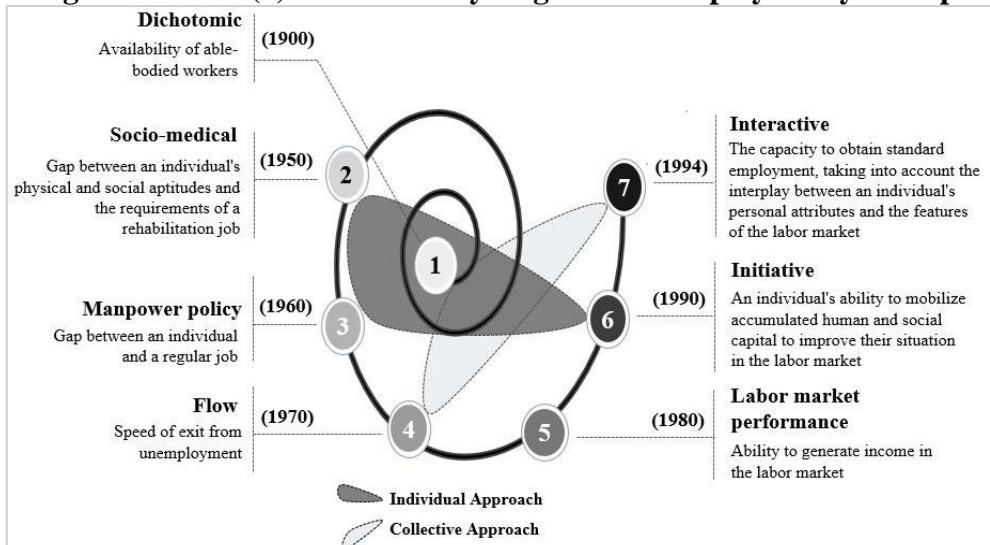
By the late 1970s, employability evolved into a neutral statistical measure combining probabilities related to accessing employment and earnings, although this quantitative treatment weakened its connection to socio-economic realities (**labor market performance version**).

In the 1990s, an initiative-based version emerged, describing employability as an individual's capacity to mobilize human and social capital to pursue professional goals, reflecting an entrepreneurial and **individualistic model** that was later criticized for its idealism and inability to fully address job seekers' real constraints.

Finally, the most recent perspective integrates an **interactive dimension** that views employability as the relative ability of an individual to access employment, resulting from the interaction between personal characteristics and socio-economic context, within a multidimensional framework involving individuals, employers, and public authorities.

These various conceptualizations reveal different degrees of linkage between individual competencies and contextual determinants (MORTAD, 2016). The dynamic is illustrated in the following figure:

Figure number (1): Evolutionary stages of the employability concept



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on (Gazier, 2017)

This figure illustrates the evolution of employability paradigms from individual-focused models (2, 3, 6) to holistic, context-sensitive approaches (4, 7), with (1) as a hybrid form and (5) as a neutral model. This historical overview paves the way for examining scholarly definitions of employability.

1.2- Towards an operational definition of employability

Several definitions have been developed to grasp the concept of employability, reflecting its richness and complexity. These definitions, drawn from various perspectives and priorities, are summarized in the following table:

Table number (1): Key definitions of employability

Author	Definition
(Outin, 1990)	The notion of employability, understood as the probability of securing a job, encompasses multiple dimensions. It relates to the individual and professional qualifications of job seekers while also incorporating collective aspects. These include local variations in the macroeconomic context in which job searches take place, workforce management strategies adopted by companies, and state policies on employment and training.
(Hillage & Pollard, 1998)	Employability is about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required.
(De Grip, Van Loo, & Sanders, 2004)	Employability refers to the capacity and willingness of workers to remain attractive for the labour market (supply factors), by reacting to and anticipating changes in tasks and work environment (demand factors), facilitated by the human resource development instruments available to them (institutions).
(Cedefop, 2008)	Employability refers to the combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards/gain employment, to stay in employment and to progress during their career. Employability of individuals depends on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ personal attributes (including adequacy of knowledge and skills);

The Employability of Young Graduates in Algeria: Critical Determinants for Building Sustainable Career Pathways

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ how these personal attributes are presented on the labour market; ▪ environmental and social context (incentives and opportunities offered to update and validate their knowledge and skills); and ▪ the economic context.
(Loufrani-Fedida, Oiry, & Saint-Germes, 2015)	<p>Employability is the process that enables an individual to occupy, find, or create a job through the optimal use of their individual skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acquired skills (Biographical Employability); ▪ Potential skills (Projective Employability); ▪ Recognized skills (Differential Employability); ▪ Utilized skills (Supported Employability).
(Bennett, Knight, Jevons, & Ananthra, 2020)	<p>Ability to find, create, and sustain meaningful work across the career span.</p>

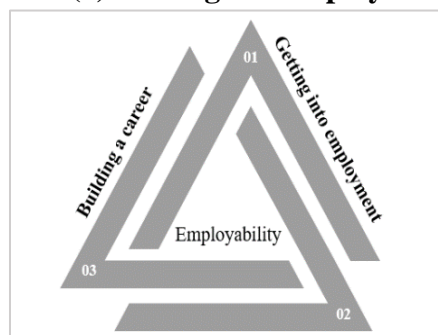
Source: authors' compilation

Thus, a review of the literature reveals the absence of a scholarly consensus on the definition of employability. Interpretations differ according to the underlying conceptual framework: one perspective emphasizes individual responsibility: (Hillage & Pollard, 1998) ; (Loufrani-Fedida, Oiry, & Saint-Germes, 2015); (Bennett, Knight, Jevons, & Ananthra, 2020). Another highlights the role of contextual factors: (Outin, 1990); (De Grip, Van Loo, & Sanders, 2004). This divergence reflects the economic principle of labor supply and demand. Nevertheless, the study of employability necessitates a coherent conceptual framework to yield operational results. In this respect, the definition proposed by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop, 2008) and endorsed within the European education strategy, constitutes a key reference :

« The combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards or get into employment, to stay in employment and to progress during career».

Based on this, three key phases can be identified, reflecting a comprehensive state of employability:

Figure number (2): Triangular employability framework



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on (Cedefop, 2008)

The figure presents a triangular model of employability, highlighting three interconnected stages: (1) Getting into employment, (2) Maintaining employment, and (3) Building a career. This framework conceptualizes employability as a dynamic process encompassing job acquisition, retention, and professional development. This understanding is built upon diverse theoretical and empirical insights, highlighting the complexity and multidimensionality inherent in the concept of employability.

1.3- Interdisciplinary foundations of employability: insights from economics, sociology, psychology, and management

Employability remains an elusive concept, shaped by interdisciplinary insights from economics, sociology, psychology, and management. Economists anchor employability in **human capital theory**. Early contributions posited that education and training enhance productivity, leading to higher wages. Distinctions were made between general training—transferable across firms, with costs borne by workers—and firm-specific training, funded by employers (Becker, 1964). The wage equation ($Y = f(S, E)$) formalized the relationship between education (S), experience (E), and earnings (Mincer, 1958). Critiques soon emerged (**filter and signaling theories**): education was argued to signal innate abilities rather than skills (Arrow, 1973), while diplomas were emphasized as tools to reduce information asymmetry in hiring (Spence, 1973). These debates highlight tensions between education's role in skill-building versus credentialing.

Sociological perspectives shift focus to **social capital**, defined as networks enabling resource access (Bourdieu, 1980). The power of “**weak ties**” in bridging diverse networks to uncover opportunities was demonstrated (Granovetter, 1973), while gaps between unconnected groups that create informational advantages were highlighted (Burt, 1992). Mobilizing social resources, distinguishing between latent (**inherited networks**) and mobilized (**strategically activated**) capital, was further emphasized (Lin, 1995). Yet, these frameworks often overlook psychological factors influencing employability, such as motivation.

Psychological theories address this gap by exploring intrinsic drivers. **Hierarchies of needs** (Maslow, 1943), **hygiene-motivation** dualities (Herzberg, 1968), and **self-determination theory** (Deci & Ryan, 1985) underscore how autonomy, competence, and purpose shape career behaviors. Cognitive models linking **motivation to perceived rewards** and feasibility were developed (Vroom, 1964), and **self-regulation theories** stress goal-setting and self-efficacy in navigating careers (Locke & Latham, 1990). However, psychological approaches risk overlooking cultural biases. Management theories reconcile individual and organizational imperatives. Cross-organizational mobility and self-directed skill development are emphasized in the **“boundaryless career”** framework (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), whereas psychological success over traditional hierarchies is prioritized in the **“protean career”** model (Hall, 1996). Competency frameworks, rooted in the resource-based view and the concept of **core competencies**, argue that sustainable employability requires rare, adaptable skills aligned with market demands (Barney, 1991). Yet, aligning education with dynamic labor needs remains challenging, exposing gaps between organizational strategies and broader employability determinants. Collectively, these disciplines reveal employability as a multifaceted construct, blending individual agency with structural and organizational dynamics. While economic models prioritize human capital, sociological and psychological lenses enrich understanding of networks and motivation, and management theories bridge individual adaptability with systemic demands. However, siloed approaches risk oversimplification, underscoring the need for integrated frameworks that address both micro-level behaviors and macro-level inequities in evolving labor markets.

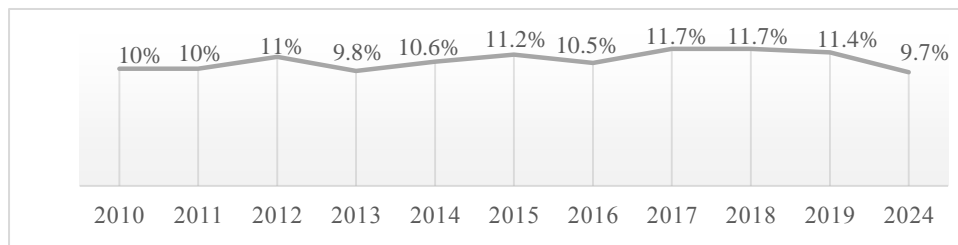
2- Overview of young graduates’ employability in Algeria

Situated within the dynamics of Algeria’s labor market, this section explores why youth employability remains a persistent challenge.

2.1- Dynamics of the labor market in Algeria

According to the most recent ONS report (Office National des Statistiques, 2024) Algeria's unemployment rate remained stubbornly high during the 2010–2024 period, primarily fluctuating above the 10% threshold, despite recent reforms. With rates above 11%, the most severe phase appeared between 2015 and 2018. The latest data point (2024) shows a significant decline to 9.7%, suggesting a possible upward trend.

Figure number (3): Evolution of Algeria's unemployment rate (2010-2024)



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on (Office National des Statistiques, 2024)

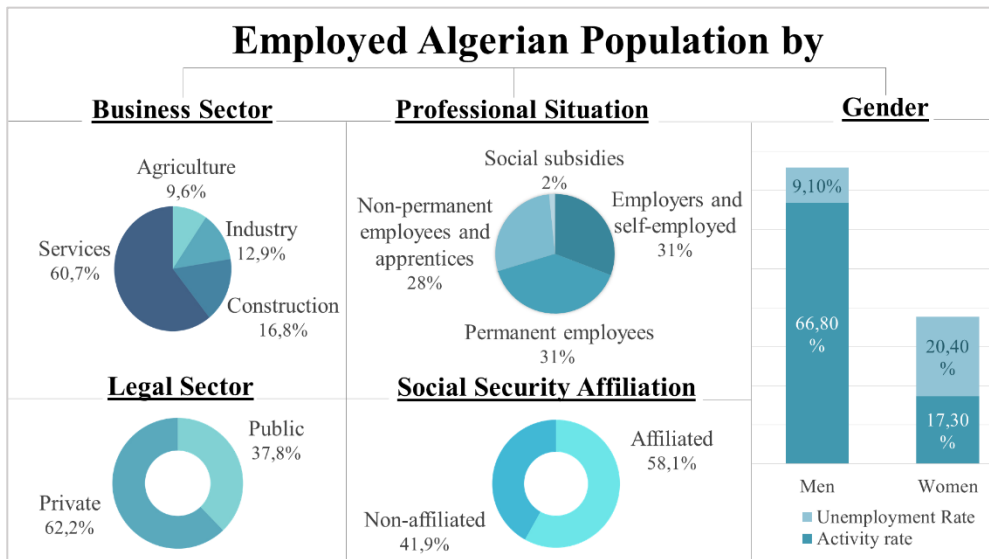
A deeper investigation reveals the following dynamics (ONS, 2019) :

- **Relatively large active population:** in May 2019, the current active population, as defined by the International Labour Office (ILO) - meaning that a considerable percentage of the population is of working age - is estimated at 12,730,000 people at the national level.
- **Dualities between the public /private sectors and between formal /informal employment:** In 2014, the public sector held up to 40% of all jobs. However, this percentage dropped to 38% in 2019 as a result of the civil service's partial hiring freeze. The degree of informal employment, as determined by the social security affiliation rate, is another determining factor. It is still significant even though it has decreased from 50.4% in 2009 to 41.9% in 2019. This phenomenon primarily affects the private sector, where nearly 4,727,000 people, or two-thirds of workers, do not have social protection.
As a result, the Algerian labor market has two distinct dynamics: the public sector, which offers better social protection and comparatively higher wages but suffers from structural rigidities, and the private sector, which is more flexible but has lower wages and more precariousness. In 2019, employers and independent contractors made up 30.8% of all workers in the private sector, while permanent employees held only 39.5% of jobs, mostly in the public sector.
- **Production system vulnerability:** The tertiary sector, which accounted for 60.8% of all jobs in 2019 compared to 56.1% in 2009, is a defining feature of the Algerian economy. However, in terms of value added, services only account for 40% of the GDP. Over the past ten years, the construction, public works, and hydraulics (BTPH) sector has seen a decline in employment from 18.1% to 16.8%, while the agricultural sector has seen a decline from 13.1% to 9.6%.

On the other hand, the percentage of jobs in industry has not changed. The bulk of newly created jobs during this time frame were in low-value services.

- **Skills misalignment:** Young graduates encounter many challenges when trying to find employment after completing their education or vocational training. The supply and demand for skilled labor are, in fact, significantly out of balance.
- **Gender inequality:** Despite being a sizable minority in the workforce, women are still disproportionately underrepresented in leadership roles. According to 2019 estimates, women's employment rates for those aged 15 and over are 17.3%, while men's employment rates are 66.8%. Meanwhile, women's unemployment was 20.4%, more than twice as high as men's, which was 9.1%.

Figure number (4): Employment structure of the Algerian population by sector, professional situation, social security affiliation, and gender (2019)



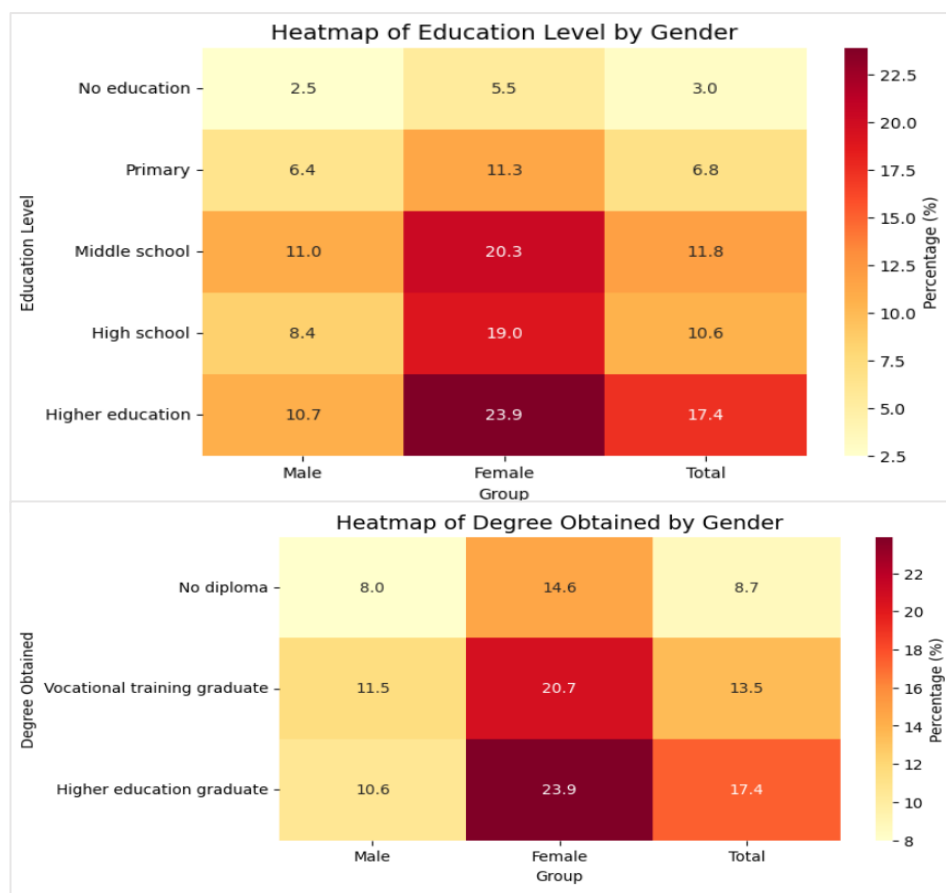
Source: Elaborated by the authors based on (ONS, 2019)

Algeria's labor market is thus marked by notable structural paradoxes, combining demographic dynamics fueled by a growing youth population, the informal sector's dominance, and enduring gender and territorial inequality.

2.2- Why is youth employability a challenge in Algeria?

Whatever the established systems, graduates seem to be more affected than other categories of job seekers by unemployment in the formal labor market (Ghouati, 2019). Indeed, an analysis of the composition of the unemployed population by diploma obtained (table 2) shows that the category of non-diploma holders is much less affected by unemployment (8.7%) than the category of higher education graduates (18%) or vocational training graduates (13.5%); (ONS, 2019).

Figure number (5): Unemployment rate by level of education, diploma obtained and gender (2019)



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on (ONS, 2019)

Providing a comprehensive explanation for this phenomenon is a complex analytical challenge. First, there is the structural mismatch between the skills provided by academic institutions and the evolving demands of the professional environment (MESTOUR, 2019). Second, systemic political

and economic factors aggravate this situation, including the long-standing predominance of the informal sector, the preferential use of foreign labor for national-scale projects, the precariousness of jobs offered by the private sector—a central player in the labor market—and the questionable effectiveness of public mechanisms designed to facilitate the professional integration of young graduates. These interrelated elements create a multidimensional problem requiring a holistic approach.

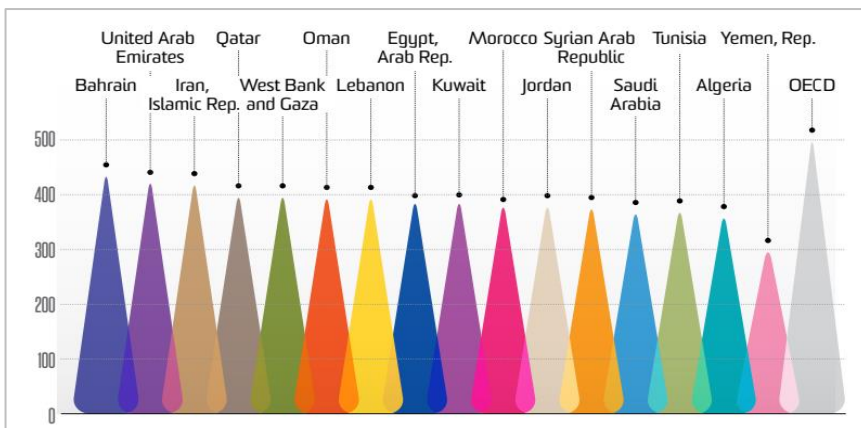
3- Key Determinants of young graduates’ employability in Algeria

The identification of the following determinants is grounded in both theoretical insights and empirical evidence. From a conceptual standpoint, employability is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct shaped by the interaction between individual attributes, institutional frameworks, and labor market dynamics : (Cedefop, 2008) ; (Gazier, 2017); (Bennett, Knight, Jevons, & Ananthra, 2020). Building on this literature, the present study focuses on five domains that recurrently emerge as critical in explaining graduate employability in developing and transitional economies: the quality of education, alignment between skills supply and demand, student mobility, civic engagement, and languages proficiency.

3.1- Quality education

The quality of higher education constitutes the foundation of graduate employability. While Algeria has expanded access to tertiary education, persistent gaps remain in learning outcomes, curricular relevance, and institutional performance compared to international benchmarks. As highlighted by comparative studies, Algerian universities struggle to meet the demands of a knowledge-based economy, particularly in aligning programs with evolving labor market requirements. This suggests that employability is not only a function of diploma attainment but also of the extent to which education systems develop adaptable and transferable competencies.

Figure number (6): Education quality in MENA and the OECD regions



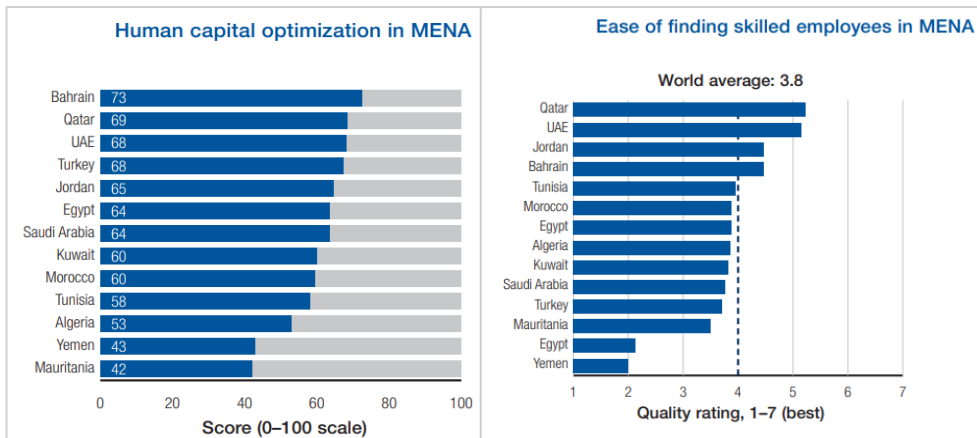
Source: (Marchesini, 2020)

In comparative regional assessments, Algeria performs below the OECD average and remains behind several MENA countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Tunisia, highlighting persistent structural weaknesses in educational outcomes (Marchesini, 2020).

3.2- Skills mismatch

A recurrent challenge is the structural misalignment between the competencies supplied by higher education institutions and those demanded by employers. International indices, such as the Human Capital Index, consistently position Algeria below regional peers in terms of skills utilization and labor market efficiency. This gap indicates that beyond expanding graduate numbers, the system has not sufficiently integrated work-based learning, industry partnerships, and applied training, thereby perpetuating underemployment and job–qualification mismatches.

Figure number (7): Human capital optimization and availability of skilled employees in MENA region



Source : (Samans & Zahid, 2017)

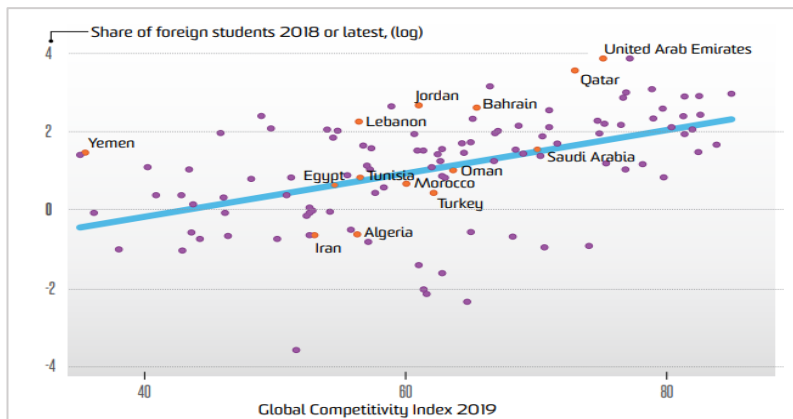
Specifically, Algeria scores 53/100 on the Human Capital Index, well below regional performers such as Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, which all exceed 68, highlighting its difficulty in optimizing human capital (Samans & Zahid, 2017). Moreover, in terms of the ease of finding skilled employees, Algeria scores below 3.8 on a 1–7 scale, lagging behind MENA peers such as Qatar and Jordan, which perform significantly above the regional average, further underscoring the scarcity of job-ready graduates

(Samans & Zahid, 2017). Furthermore, a recent study conducted at the University of Boumerdes (2024، يحيوي و مطالي) reveals that the weakness of training and incentive systems constitutes an obstacle to the empowerment and employability of graduates, thereby confirming the need for a structural reform of the Algerian education system.

3.3- Student mobility

Mobility, both national and international, is a critical lever for employability, as it fosters exposure to diverse contexts, networks, and competencies. Yet, Algerian students remain largely constrained by linguistic, regulatory, and institutional barriers that limit participation in global academic flows. The limited attractiveness of Algerian universities for foreign students further curtails opportunities for reciprocal learning and internationalization. Enhancing mobility thus requires not only structural reforms but also strategic investments in international partnerships, accreditation, and language diversification.

Figure number (8): Correlation between global competitiveness index and share of foreign students in MENA region



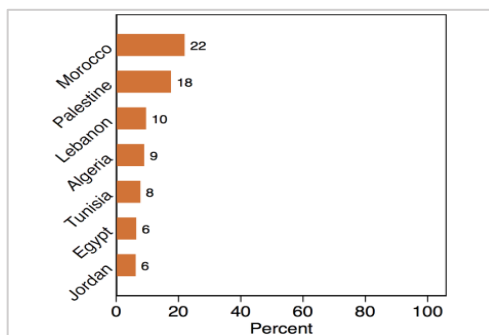
Source : (Marchesini, 2020)

Compared to regional peers, Algeria registers both low international student inflows and weak competitiveness scores, placing it at the lower end of the MENA spectrum in the correlation between foreign student share and global competitiveness (Marchesini, 2020).

3.4- Civic engagement

Employability extends beyond technical qualifications to encompass soft skills such as leadership, teamwork, and communication. Evidence from regional surveys reveals that civic engagement and extracurricular participation in Algeria remain limited compared to neighboring countries. This underlines a missed opportunity to institutionalize student associations, community service, and volunteering as complementary arenas for employability development. Structured support for extracurricular initiatives would help graduates acquire competencies increasingly valued in dynamic labor markets.

Figure number (9): Membership in civil associations in Arab countries



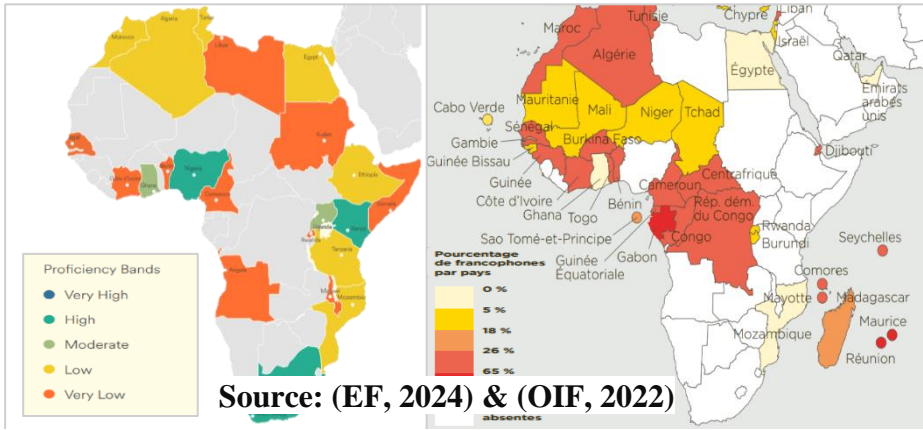
Source : (Thomas, 2018)

Survey evidence shows that only 9% of Algerians report membership in civil associations, compared to 22% in Morocco and 18% in Palestine, underscoring Algeria’s relative weakness in fostering civic engagement (Thomas, 2018).

3.5- Languages proficiency

Linguistic capital constitutes a strategic determinant of employability in both regional and global contexts. While French remains a dominant medium in higher education and professional sectors, English proficiency levels remain below international standards, restricting access to global research, innovation, and business opportunities. The coexistence of these two languages creates potential advantages for graduates, but disparities in mastery across regions and socioeconomic groups reduce their employability leverage. A comprehensive language policy—balancing French for regional integration and English for global competitiveness—is therefore essential to strengthening graduates’ professional trajectories.

Figure number (10): English and French proficiency across African countries



Source: (EF, 2024) & (OIF, 2022)

According to the English Proficiency Index published by Education First (EF, 2024), Algeria is ranked in the low-proficiency band for English compared to other African countries. In contrast, French remains widely spoken, with Algeria among the countries where more than 50% of the population uses French; however, proficiency levels are uneven and marked by significant regional and socio-economic disparities (OIF, 2022).

4- Conclusion and recommendations

This study confirms that young graduates' employability in Algeria is influenced by multiple interconnected factors. The findings support all five hypotheses: higher education quality enhances employability (H1), skills mismatch impedes labor market integration (H2), student mobility strengthens competencies and employability (H3), participation in extracurricular and civic activities develops soft skills (H4), and proficiency in French and English improves graduates' competitiveness (H5).

Recommendations

-Consolidate university development: Strengthen universities' capacities based on internal resources and skills, update the legislative framework, and reform funding mechanisms to ensure alignment with labor market needs.

-Revise the national training map: Align vocational training with real market demands rather than social demand, addressing skills imbalances.

-Institutionalize university–enterprise collaboration: Promote innovation through startups, doctoral programs, and company-based research projects.

-Refocus international cooperation: Prioritize win-win partnerships and expand international mobility schemes for students.

-Enhance student life: Improve cultural, and scientific club activities; modernize scholarships, transportation, accommodation, and catering systems.

-Strengthen local government involvement: Empower municipalities, wilayas, and regions to influence skills development and adapt training to local needs.

Limitations and future research

- The study relies primarily on secondary data, limiting insights into graduates' lived experiences. Future research should include longitudinal surveys and interviews.
- The focus on higher education graduates excludes vocational and informal labor market participants; future studies should explore broader workforce segments to assess the interplay between education, skills, and employability outcomes.

In conclusion, enhancing graduate employability in Algeria requires an integrated approach combining educational reform, market-aligned training, institutional collaboration, and supportive student and regional frameworks, fostering sustainable and adaptive career pathways.

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The Employability of Young Graduates in Algeria: Critical Determinants for Building Sustainable Career Pathways

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