2026 European Quality Assurance Forum

Quality Assurance for Skills, Entrepreneurship and Innovation:
Partnering with the World of Work

Hosted by National Polytechnic University of Armenia, Yerevan
18-20 November 2026

ISSN: 1375-3797

Author(s)

Name: Berta Paz-Lourido

Position: Associate Professor; Vice-President, European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE)

Organisation: Universitat de les Illes Balears (UIB)

Country: Spain

Short bio

Berta Paz-Lourido is Associate Professor of Physiotherapy at the Universitat de les Illes Balears (UIB), Spain, where she founded the institutional service-learning programme and, subsequently, the Innovation Unit in Sustainable Development, Health and Global Justice through Service-Learning (iApS2030). She is Vice-President of the European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE) and Director of the European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EOSLHE). She co-authored the European guidelines for the institutionalisation of service-learning and coordinated the European Service-Learning Public Declaration and the EASLHE green paper on service-learning policy. She works regularly with quality assurance and accreditation agencies to align service-learning with quality systems. She is principal investigator of the Education, Communication and Quality in Health (ECYCS) research group at the UIB Institute for Educational Research and Innovation (IRIE). Her research addresses service-learning, quality assurance, sustainability and planetary health in higher education.

Paper

Beyond Linear Measurements: Recognising Complex Capabilities for Future-Proof Employability in Higher Education

Abstract

Employability is a central concern of higher education policy and quality assurance across Europe. Universities are increasingly expected to demonstrate how they prepare graduates for labour markets characterised by technological disruption, ecological transitions and growing societal complexity. Yet these transformations raise an important question: are quality assurance arrangements recognising the

full range of capabilities required in an AI-mediated, ecologically constrained and socially complex world?

This paper presents a conceptual and policy analysis of tensions between evolving understandings of employability and the forms of evidence mobilised within quality assurance. Drawing on European debates surrounding the revision of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), selected European QA approaches and literature on graduate employability and future-oriented capabilities, it develops the concept of the Employability Recognition Gap (ERG): the potential discrepancy between the complex capabilities higher education seeks to develop and those that ultimately become visible, interpretable and actionable through QA evidence.

The paper introduces the Future-Proof Employability Pentagon (FPEP), a five-dimensional heuristic comprising capabilities, evidence, stakeholder engagement, learning contexts and enhancement processes. Rather than proposing additional indicators or a new accreditation model, the FPEP examines how evidence already generated in higher education might be recognised, connected and interpreted. Its analytical value is explored bidirectionally: by following evidence upwards from a longitudinal educational case and recognition downwards from selected European QA practices.

The paper argues that future-proofing employability evidence may require less additional measurement than more deliberate recognition and connection of existing evidence. Particular attention is paid to transparency, comparability, feasibility and reporting burden. It proposes two principles for discussion: recognise more, not necessarily measure more; and standardise the questions, not necessarily the evidence.

1. Introduction: from employability measurement to recognition

Employability is a central concern of European higher education policy and quality assurance (QA). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to prepare graduates for professional environments shaped by artificial intelligence, ecological transition and increasing societal complexity. Such environments require capacities for adaptation, judgement, collaboration, responsible action and continued learning.

This paper builds on a contribution to the 2024 Forum that examined how QA could recognise and support service-learning as a socially engaged pedagogy (Paz-Lourido, 2024). The present contribution takes a broader step: from the recognition of a pedagogy to the recognition of complex capability, and from the visibility of service-learning to the visibility and mobility of evidence.

Its starting point is not that QA fails to address employability. European QA systems already mobilise graduate outcomes, employer perspectives, graduate attributes, work-integrated learning and other forms of evidence. Nor is the argument that quantitative indicators should be replaced by qualitative evidence: employment outcomes and graduate surveys remain legitimate and valuable. 'Linear measurements' refers here to inferring complex capability from a single downstream outcome; the argument concerns not the legitimacy of such measures, but the limits of what they can substantiate.

The problem is more specific. QA necessarily simplifies complexity in order to make credible and sufficiently consistent judgements at scale. The question is what may be lost through that necessary simplification. As expectations of graduate preparedness become more complex, are the evidentiary

arrangements through which that preparedness becomes visible evolving at the same pace? The paper addresses this question through the Employability Recognition Gap (ERG) and the Future-Proof Employability Pentagon (FPEP). It also clarifies how the framework was developed, examines two contrasting applications and considers comparability and reporting burden explicitly.

2. Developing the framework

The initial structure of the FPEP emerged from an exploratory reading of European policy documents and literature on employability, graduate capabilities and QA. This suggested five recurrent functional questions, which provided a provisional structure rather than predetermined dimensions.

The structure was then interrogated through targeted policy and conceptual analysis. The policy strand compared provisions on employability, stakeholders and evidence across the ESG 2015, the third draft of the revised ESG (July 2026) and the final draft approved by the Bologna Follow-Up Group on 5 November 2026 (ENQA et al., 2026), and examined publicly available work from five agencies or systems active in this area. The conceptual strand was organised around four functions: understandings of employability; future-oriented capabilities; evidence and assessment of complex learning; and conceptions of quality, enhancement and trust.

Finally, the provisional framework was stress-tested bidirectionally: by following evidence upwards from learning in a longitudinal educational case and by following recognition downwards from selected QA practices. The purpose was not to demonstrate that the five dimensions had 'emerged' retrospectively from these cases, but to examine whether they remained analytically useful, where they overlapped and whether important elements of the recognition problem fell outside them. The FPEP is therefore a heuristic grounded in policy, literature and practice, not a validated instrument.

3. Rethinking employability evidence

3.1 Employability as relational and processual

Employability has long been understood as more than obtaining a job (Hillage & Pollard, 1998), and curriculum-oriented work has examined how it can be embedded in teaching and learning (Yorke & Knight, 2006). Relational and processual accounts go further: employability is shaped by graduate identity, forms of capital, individual behaviours and labour-market context (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012, 2017; Clarke, 2018). Evidence of transition into employment therefore does not necessarily substantiate claims about graduates' capacity to adapt, exercise judgement or continue learning.

3.2 Future capabilities without another universal skills list

European and international frameworks reinforce a broader conception of preparedness without converging on a single list. LifeComp foregrounds flexibility, collaboration, critical thinking and managing learning (Sala et al., 2020); GreenComp incorporates systems thinking, futures-oriented sustainability and agency (Bianchi et al., 2022); the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture integrates values, attitudes, skills and critical understanding (Council of Europe,

2018); and DigComp 2.2 addresses critical and responsible engagement with digital technologies, including AI-related systems (Vuorikari et al., 2022). For QA, the implication is not that every programme should demonstrate an identical set of future skills, but that programme claims about graduate preparedness should be explicit, educationally meaningful and supported by credible evidence.

3.3 Evidence: fitness for purpose

The resulting challenge is evidentiary rather than definitional, but it should not be framed as quantitative versus qualitative evidence. Research on authentic assessment and evaluative judgement provides useful approaches for making complex capability visible through consequential and situated assessment (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014; Tai et al., 2018). An employment rate may provide strong evidence of labour-market transition and weak evidence of ethical judgement. A reflective narrative may illuminate ethical reasoning but be unsuitable for system-level comparison. Partner feedback may provide situated evidence of relevance and collaboration, but its value depends on how systematically it is generated and interpreted.

The relevant principle is therefore claim-evidence alignment. Diverse evidence becomes useful for QA when the evidentiary chain is sufficiently legible: what is claimed, what supports that claim, how the evidence was generated, whose perspectives are represented and how the resulting judgement contributes to enhancement. More evidence is not necessarily better evidence.

4. European QA is already evolving

The analysis deliberately avoids a deficit account of European QA. The final draft of the revised ESG, approved by the Bologna Follow-Up Group on 5 November 2026 and awaiting ministerial adoption in May 2027, retains accountability and enhancement as central purposes. In programme design and review, it asks that programmes respond to the needs of students, society and the labour market, "supporting graduates' employability and active citizenship", a reference to active citizenship added after the third draft. It also treats students as equal partners in programme design and review and requires other stakeholders to be systematically and meaningfully involved (ENQA et al., 2026, Standard 1.2).

Agency practices similarly show that employability is not confined to employment rates. In Spain, ANECA's Observatory on the Quality of the Spanish University System has developed a sequence of thematic frameworks on the broader purposes of higher education: employability, for both self-assessment and external evaluation (ANECA, 2021, 2024), inclusion (ANECA, 2023) and, most recently, active, critical and responsible citizenship (ANECA, 2026). This trajectory shows QA expanding beyond employment outcomes towards wider educational and societal purposes. NVAO's system-wide analysis of future-proof curricula addresses interdisciplinarity, flexibility, innovation and curriculum development (NVAO, 2024). QAA Scotland's thematic work on employability and graduate attributes suggests that relevant activity may not be fully visible in review documentation (QAA Scotland, 2018). Research commissioned by QQI on work-integrated learning, undertaken to inform statutory QA guidelines, highlights transversal skills and the distributed roles of providers, learners, employers and

other stakeholders (QQI, 2025a, 2025b). AQU Catalunya provides a complementary example of long-standing, comparable graduate outcome evidence (AQU Catalunya, 2017).

These examples challenge the hypothesis that QA fails to recognise complex capability and suggest a more precise question: how does evidence of complex graduate capability become visible, interpretable and usable across the different layers of the quality system?

5. The Employability Recognition Gap and the FPEP

The ERG is defined here as the potential discrepancy between the complex capabilities higher education seeks to develop for changing professional and societal environments and those that ultimately become visible, interpretable and actionable through QA evidence. It may arise at different points along an evidence pathway: capability claim → learning opportunity → evidence generation → evidence connection → transparency and traceability → QA recognition → enhancement.

Three provisional points of disconnection can be distinguished. An evidence generation gap occurs when a claimed capability is not supported by meaningful learning opportunities or assessment. An evidence connection gap occurs when relevant evidence exists but remains fragmented across courses, placements or projects and does not inform programme-level interpretation. An evidence recognition gap occurs when connected evidence cannot readily support formal QA judgement because it lacks sufficient transparency, credibility, comparability or proportionality. This distinction distributes responsibility across programme design, teaching and assessment, institutional QA and external QA.

The evidence pathway locates where recognition may weaken; the FPEP provides a structured way of examining what needs to be considered at those points (Figure 1, Table 1). Its five dimensions form a pentagon because they are interdependent rather than sequential. Capabilities without evidence remain claims. Evidence without learning context can lose meaning. Learning contexts without explicit capability claims can generate rich experiences whose educational significance is difficult to interpret. Stakeholder engagement without evidentiary influence may remain procedural. Evidence without enhancement risks becoming reporting rather than learning. The FPEP therefore asks QA to examine the coherence of the relationships among the dimensions rather than to maximise any one of them.

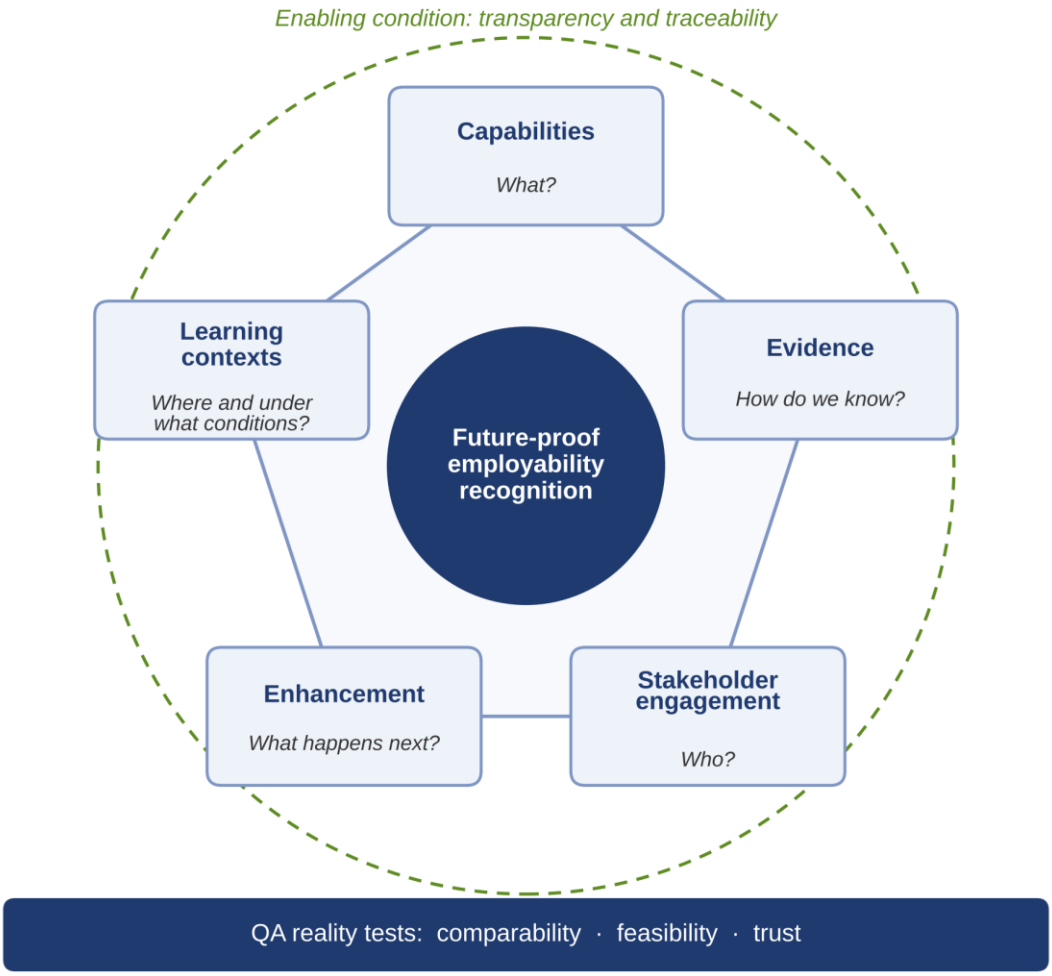

Figure 1. The Future-Proof Employability Pentagon (FPEP). Source: Author's elaboration.

Two further layers surround the pentagon. Transparency and traceability are enabling conditions across all five dimensions. Three QA reality tests then ask whether broader recognition remains viable: comparability (can judgement remain sufficiently consistent?), feasibility (can evidence be recognised without disproportionate reporting or stakeholder burden?) and trust (is the evidentiary argument credible enough to support judgement?). The FPEP is not an accreditation model, a competence taxonomy or an evidence portfolio. It asks whether existing evidence is sufficiently connected and interpretable to support the claims being made.

Table 1. The FPEP dimensions: guiding questions, ESG anchors and examples of evidence already generated

Dimension	Guiding question	Anchor in the ESG 2027 final draft	Examples of evidence already generated
Capabilities	What? What complex capabilities does the programme claim to develop?	Standard 1.2: transferable knowledge and skills; employability and active citizenship	Learning outcomes; programme profiles; competence frameworks
Evidence	How do we know? How is their development evidenced?	Standards 1.3 (assessment) and 1.7 (information management)	Authentic assessment; portfolios; project outputs; graduate surveys

Dimension	Guiding question	Anchor in the ESG 2027 final draft	Examples of evidence already generated
Stakeholder engagement	Who? Whose perspectives contribute to interpretation?	Standards 1.1 and 1.2: students as partners; structured role of external stakeholders	Students; graduates; employers; professional bodies; public services; community partners
Learning contexts	Where and under what conditions?	Standard 1.2: placements and research-based learning; Standard 1.3: variety of methods	Work-integrated, challenge-based, interdisciplinary and community-engaged learning
Enhancement processes	What happens next? How does evidence inform improvement?	Standard 1.2: monitoring and periodic review; Standard 3.3: agency enhancement activities	Programme monitoring; periodic review; partner review; thematic analyses

Source: Author's elaboration based on ENQA et al. (2026).

6. Stress-testing the framework

6.1 Following evidence upwards: a longitudinal educational case

The first application follows evidence upwards from learning. An educational innovation project at the Universitat de les Illes Balears (PID252733, 2025–2027) connects undergraduate physiotherapy, master's education in health research and innovation, doctoral education in global health and pre-university education with public health services, primary care and community organisations. Students have, for example, analysed regional climate vulnerability documents and used them to advise a primary health care centre on community and nature-based activities. The initiative has also been selected for inclusion in the repository of the Erasmus+ project Service-Learning to promote Competences for Democratic Culture (SL4DC), providing an additional example of how educational practices can gain visibility beyond their institutional context.

Read through the FPEP, the initiative links capability claims (systems thinking, collaborative judgement and socially responsible professional practice), authentic contexts and heterogeneous evidence: guided reflection, peer evaluation across educational levels, collaborative outputs, presentations, rubrics and feedback from community partners on relevance, applicability and social usefulness. The case does not demonstrate that service-learning develops employability by definition, nor that all such evidence should enter external QA. It raises a more consequential question: how far should evidence travel? Some evidence may appropriately remain close to learning; selected evidence may inform programme monitoring and enhancement; only a smaller, synthesised subset may need to become visible in external QA.

6.2 Following recognition downwards: QA practice

The second application reverses the direction. The QA practices in Section 4 show that several FPEP dimensions are already present within contemporary QA. The FPEP therefore adds value not by introducing these topics as new requirements, but by focusing attention on their interfaces. Where does institutional employability work connect with evidence generated through learning, and what needs to be externally visible? The two applications meet at this interface.

7. Comparability, burden and trust

Broader recognition is credible only if it respects the operational conditions of QA. Comparability does not necessarily require identical evidence. Consistency may instead reside partly in the questions asked and in the criteria used to assess the coherence of the resulting evidentiary argument. Programmes might be asked the same five FPEP questions while retaining flexibility in how credible answers are demonstrated. Shared reference frameworks and comparable outcome data can support this consistency.

Reporting burden is equally important. If the FPEP becomes five additional categories of indicators, it will have failed. Existing evidence should first be mapped, its fitness for purpose assessed and genuine gaps identified before additional collection is considered: selection and substitution rather than addition. Partner burden and compliance drift should also be avoided.

Trust raises a further question in an AI-mediated environment, where written artefacts such as reflective narratives are increasingly easy to produce without the underlying capability. The final draft of the ESG asks that the use of AI in learning, teaching and assessment be responsible, transparent and subject to human verification (ENQA et al., 2026, Standard 1.3). This strengthens the case for evidence that is situated, observed and triangulated, rather than for more documentation.

A further implication concerns who produces evidence and for whom. Rather than generating evidence for agencies, institutions can generate evidence routinely for their own enhancement, in standardised and traceable forms. Work-integrated learning assessed with workplace mentors, capstone projects reviewed by external panels or institutionalised service-learning projects reviewed by subject experts are examples. Their credibility rests on transparency: when reviews are public and open to comparison by peers from other institutions and scientific associations, such transparency may strengthen accountability and support more rigorous peer scrutiny. Agencies can then consult, sample and question this evidence instead of requesting additional documentation.

Two propositions follow: recognise more, not necessarily measure more; and standardise the questions, not necessarily the evidence. Neither resolves the tension between contextual richness and comparability. They make that tension explicit and therefore open to QA judgement.

8. Implications for HEIs and QA agencies

For HEIs, the framework helps distinguish curriculum problems from evidence problems. If a claimed capability is not meaningfully developed or assessed, no change in QA reporting will solve the problem. Where credible evidence exists, institutions can examine whether it remains fragmented and who helps interpret it.

For QA agencies, the FPEP raises rather than prescribes practical questions. Under what conditions can contextual or stakeholder-generated evidence contribute to credible judgement? Could institutions explain their evidence pathways without producing additional indicators? How much evidence needs external visibility? How might thematic analyses under Standard 3.3 support enhancement without turning diverse evidence into uniform reporting?

9. Limitations and next steps

The FPEP is a heuristic developed through documentary analysis and one educational case; it has not been validated. The agency practices were selected for relevance rather than representativeness, and QA arrangements differ across national systems. The three-gap typology is therefore provisional. A subsequent study will examine empirically how evidence of complex graduate capability travels across the layers of QA, and under what conditions it retains sufficient meaning, credibility and usability to inform judgement and enhancement.

10. Conclusion

The ERG provides a language for identifying where meaningful evidence may disappear without assuming that the problem originates in one actor. The FPEP provides five interdependent questions, three QA reality tests and an enabling condition of transparency and traceability. As European QA is already evolving, the issue is not whether QA should suddenly become capable of seeing complexity, but how complexity can be progressively translated into evidence without undermining feasibility, comparability or trust.

Not all evidence needs to travel equally far. Not everything that matters needs to become an external QA indicator. And not every recognition gap requires additional measurement. QA necessarily simplifies complexity; the FPEP is not designed to eliminate that simplification, but to make its consequences more visible. The challenge is not to make QA see everything, but to ensure that what matters does not disappear simply because evidence has to travel.

References

Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación. (2021). *Marco para la autoevaluación de las universidades en la mejora de sus actuaciones en materia de empleo y empleabilidad de sus egresados y egresadas*. Ministerio de Universidades.

Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación. (2023). *Marco para la autoevaluación de las universidades en la mejora de sus actuaciones en materia de inclusión de personas con discapacidad y personas con necesidades de apoyo en el ámbito académico*. ANECA.

Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación. (2024). *Marco de orientaciones y directrices para la evaluación externa de las universidades en materia empleabilidad y emprendimiento*. ANECA.

Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación. (2026). *Marco para la autoevaluación de las universidades en la mejora de sus actuaciones encaminadas al impulso de una ciudadanía activa, crítica y responsable*. ANECA. https://www.aneca.es/documents/d/guest/informe_ciudadania_20260724

AQU Catalunya. (2017). La inserció laboral dels graduats i graduades de les universitats catalanes. https://www.aqu.cat/content/download/7560/file/La%20inserci%C3%B3%20laboral%20dels%20graduats%20i%20graduades%20de%20les%20universitats%20catalanes%20%282017%29.pdf?version=2

Ashford-Rowe, K., Herrington, J., & Brown, C. (2014). Establishing the critical elements that determine authentic assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 39*(2), 205–222. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2013.819566

Bianchi, G., Pisiotis, U., & Cabrera Giraldez, M. (2022). *GreenComp: The European sustainability competence framework*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://doi.org/10.2760/13286

Clarke, M. (2018). Rethinking graduate employability: The role of capital, individual attributes and context. *Studies in Higher Education, 43*(11), 1923–1937. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1294152

Council of Europe. (2018). *Reference framework of competences for democratic culture* (Vols. 1–3). Council of Europe.

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, European Students' Union, European University Association, European Association for the Applied Sciences in Higher Education, Education International, BusinessEurope, & European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education. (2026). *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2027)* [Final draft approved by the Bologna Follow-Up Group on 5 November 2026]. https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/ESG-2027-approved-by-BFUG.pdf

Hillage, J., & Pollard, E. (1998). *Employability: Developing a framework for policy analysis* (Research Report RR85). Department for Education and Employment.

Holmes, L. (2013). Competing perspectives on graduate employability: Possession, position or process? *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(4), 538–554. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.587140

Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie. (2024). *Futureproof curricula: Stepping stones for futureproof higher education*. NVAO. https://www.nvao.net/en/publications/futureproof-curricula-stepping-stones-for-futureproof-higher-education

Paz-Lourido, B. (2024). *More than words: An integrative approach to cooperation and quality assurance in higher education through service-learning* [Conference paper]. European Quality Assurance Forum 2024. European University Association. ISSN 1375-3797.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland. (2025a). *Quality assuring work-integrated learning in Irish tertiary education: A thematic analysis of stakeholder perspectives*. QQI. https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2025-05/quality-assuring-work-integrated-learning-in-irish-tertiary-education.pdf

Quality and Qualifications Ireland. (2025b). *Work-integrated learning practice in Ireland: A typology of work-integrated learning practice in Ireland based on practitioner submissions*. QQI. https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2025-05/work-integrated-learning-practice-in-ireland.pdf

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Scotland. (2018). *Employability and graduate attributes: Thematic report update 2018*. QAA Scotland. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/graduate-skills

Sala, A., Punie, Y., Garkov, V., & Cabrera Giraldez, M. (2020). *LifeComp: The European framework for personal, social and learning to learn key competence*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://doi.org/10.2760/302967

Tai, J., Ajjawi, R., Boud, D., Dawson, P., & Panadero, E. (2018). Developing evaluative judgement: Enabling students to make decisions about the quality of work. *Higher Education, 76*(3), 467–481. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0220-3

Tomlinson, M. (2012). Graduate employability: A review of conceptual and empirical themes. *Higher Education Policy, 25*(4), 407–431. https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2011.26

Tomlinson, M. (2017). Forms of graduate capital and their relationship to graduate employability. *Education + Training, 59*(4), 338–352. https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-05-2016-0090

Vuorikari, R., Kluzer, S., & Punie, Y. (2022). *DigComp 2.2: The digital competence framework for citizens* (EUR 31006 EN). Publications Office of the European Union. https://doi.org/10.2760/115376

Yorke, M., & Knight, P. T. (2006). *Embedding employability into the curriculum*. Higher Education Academy.