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Youth Employability Pathways: A Theoretical Perspective on South Africa's Labour Market Challenges

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A B S T R A C T

South Africa's youth unemployment remains high and many young people struggle to move from first opportunities into stable work. This article offers a conceptual synthesis and proposes a Youth Employability Pathways Model, which explains outcomes as the interaction of three pillars: Human capital, institutional intermediation and market absorption. Drawing on recent South African evidence and theory, the paper argues that each pillar is individually insufficient yet jointly necessary and mutually reinforcing. The model treats equity as a structural parameter and emphasises feedback loops to raise conversion from placement to progression. The study contribution to literature is a testable, system-level account that reframes goals from short-term access to durable progression. Policy and practice implications include bundling credible signals with coordinated intermediation and sectoral absorption mechanisms, supported by transport, childcare, mentoring and health services. The paper sets an agenda for empirical testing using linked administrative and platform data to estimate the added value of integrated bundles over single-channel interventions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

South Africa's youth unemployment crisis remains deeply entrenched, with recent data indicating that the unemployment rate for young people aged 15-24 has risen to 62.4 % in the first quarter of 2025 (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], (2025a). This statistic accentuates the persistent gap between the idea of inclusive youth employment and the reality of labour-market outcomes, thus revealing a deeper structural stress reflected in the large number of young people excluded from stable job opportunities. One of the key dimensions of the problem is the mismatch between the skills young people bring and the demands of the labour market (Graham

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et al., 2019; Habiyaremye et al., 2022). Research studies on African economies has highlighted that skill and educational mismatches significantly hinder youth employment prospects (Morsy & Mukasa, 2019; SSACI, 2024). In the South African context, a recent report showed that foundational, soft and cognitive skills are among the most pronounced gaps in the supply of youth labour (SSACI, 2024). In the same timeframe, the transition from higher education to the labour market is fraught with institutional and structural barriers, as internships, work placements and learnerships do not always translate into long-term employment (Mseleku, 2024).

Beyond the individual skills dimension, institutional factors and intermediary platforms play a significant role in shaping youth employability (Stats SA, 2025a). Evaluations of youth employment programmes in South Africa have found that matching infrastructure, employer engagement incentives and sustained support mechanisms remain inconsistent across regions and economic sectors (Stats SA, 2025a). While initiatives like the national youth employment stimulus programmes expand entry pathways, evidence on their long-term impact and systemic absorption remains uneven (Stats SA, 2025a). The ideal labour-market pathway envisages a sequence wherein youth complete education or training, acquire relevant skills, secure first employment and then progress into stable careers (Blokker et al., 2023). In reality, many South African young people instead experience cycles of short-term training, informal or precarious work and unemployment or inactivity (de Jongh et al., 2024). These patterns suggest that the constraints are not only about individual capabilities, but also about opportunity structures (availability of jobs and employer hiring practices) and institutional alignment (education-to-work matching, policy frameworks and labour-market signalling) (Stats SA, 2025a).

This illustrates a clear conceptual gap within the literature. While prior literature treats employability either as a set of individual attributes or as the output of discrete programmes, without comprehensively integrating capabilities, opportunity structures and institutional matching mechanisms into a unified theoretical perspective. Recent evaluations provide valuable fragments, yet a consolidated theory-led account tailored to South Africa's youth labour market remains limited. This paper aims to contributes to the literature by theorising youth employability as a dynamic interaction among human capital, institutional intermediation and market absorption. By adopting this theoretical lens, the paper aims to (i) clarify the nature of youth unemployment in South Africa using up-to-date evidence, (ii) synthesise theory and recent research on skills mismatch, work readiness and institutional matching, (iii) propose a coherent theoretical perspective connecting human capital, institutional intermediation and market absorption, incorporating equity-aware supports, feedback loops and (iv) outline implications for policy and practice in aligning education systems, intermediary platforms and employer engagement to improve absorption rather than merely access.

2. METHOD

This research adopted a conceptual and theoretical approach designed to reinterpret youth employability within South Africa's evolving labour-market context. The focus is not on empirical data collection but on the systematic integration of existing theoretical and empirical literature to develop a coherent framework that explains how human capital, institutional factors and market absorption interact to shape youth employment outcomes.

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a conceptual synthesis design (Grant & Booth, 2009), which involves the critical review, categorisation and integration of prior research into an explanatory model. This approach enables the identification of recurring constructs, theoretical gaps and interrelationships that have not been sufficiently articulated in the South African context. It also

allows the researcher to combine multiple perspectives such as labour economics, human capital theory (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1962), institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977;DiMaggio & Powell, 1983;North, 1991) and employability frameworks into a unified analytical lens suitable for policy and academic application.

2.2 Data Sources and Selection

The analysis drew on two evidence streams: (i) peer-reviewed journal articles and (ii) policy and statistical publications. Peer-reviewed studies were sourced through structured searches of Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using combinations of the following keywords: "youth unemployment" AND "South Africa," "employability," "skills mismatch," "work readiness," "labour-market institutions," "labour-market intermediation," and "school-to-work transition." The search window was limited to 2019–2025 to ensure coverage of both pre-pandemic and post-pandemic labour-market dynamics and to reflect the most recent evidence shaping youth employability debates. Policy and statistical documents were selected from reputable, high-authority South African institutions that regularly publish national labour-market evidence or evaluate youth-employment initiatives. These included Stats SA (notably the Quarterly Labour Force Survey and youth-focused outputs), the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) and other relevant government departments and institutes responsible for labour-market monitoring and programme evaluation. These documents were included to (a) anchor the analysis in current institutional and labour-market conditions, (b) triangulate themes emerging from the peer-reviewed literature, and (c) strengthen the transparency of the evidence base by relying on traceable, publicly accessible publications. Selection prioritised sources that directly addressed youth employability conditions, school-to-work transitions, labour-market matching processes, demand-side absorption constraints, or institutional arrangements shaping youth employment outcomes. Sources were retained where they provided empirical findings, evaluative insights, or theoretically relevant arguments aligned with the study's conceptual focus on employability pathways in South Africa.

2.3 Analytical Procedure

Following established conceptual analysis techniques (Jabareen, 2009), sources were reviewed and coded to identify recurring constructs related to youth employability. These constructs such as skills, networks, opportunity structures and institutional factors were grouped into three overarching categories: human capital, Institutional intermediation and market absorption mechanisms. Each category was then examined for its theoretical contribution and its relevance to South Africa's youth labour market. The synthesis sought to reveal how these elements interact dynamically, rather than functioning as independent determinants of employability.

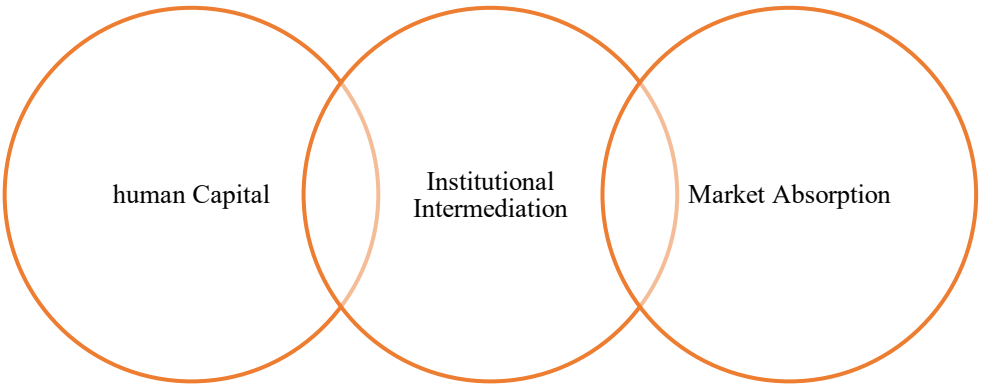

Figure 1. Overarching Categories
Source: Authors' Illustration

2.4 Reliability and Validity Considerations

Although the study is conceptual, academic rigour was strengthened through clear source selection, documented data origins, and consistent use of an explicit synthesis framework, in line with guidance on designing conceptual review articles and conducting literature reviews as a research method (Jaakkola, 2020; Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). Reliability was supported by drawing on peer-reviewed studies identified through structured database searching and transparent search reporting principles (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021). The evidence base also included traceable policy and statistical publications from recognised South African institutions that routinely publish labour-market statistics and youth development reporting (e.g., Statistics South Africa QLFS outputs and the NYDA annual report), alongside relevant research outputs from national research bodies (NYDA, 2023; Stats SA, 2025a). Validity was enhanced through triangulation by comparing themes from academic studies with official labour-market statistics and policy/programme evaluations, which helps reduce reliance on single-source interpretations and strengthens contextual grounding (Lincoln, 1990; Patton, 1999). Construct validity was further supported by aligning key categories with established theoretical perspectives and by treating concepts as theory-linked constructs rather than ad hoc labels (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955).

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Since this paper relied heavily and solely on secondary data and publicly available literature, no ethical clearance was required. However, all sources used within this study have been acknowledged appropriately and interpretations are grounded in credible, verifiable scholarship.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This analysis integrates theoretical and empirical evidence to model youth employability in South Africa's labour market. It identifies how human capital, institutions and market dynamics work together, and proposes a conceptual framework that treats employability as a systemic, interactive process, rather than an individual trait. The write-up proceeds in two parts: results that set out the components and logic of the Youth Employability Pathways Model, and a discussion that positions these insights within current theory, policy and debate.

3.1 Results

The analysis culminated in the development of a Youth Employability Pathways Model that integrates three interdependent dimensions, namely, human capital, institutional intermediation and market absorption mechanisms to explain the structural foundations of youth employability in South Africa, rather than treating employability as a static individual trait, the model conceptualises it as a dynamic system shaped by the interaction between educational preparation, institutional coordination and labour-market responsiveness. This multidimensional framing highlights that improving employability requires alignment among education systems that build capability, institutions that broker access and legitimacy and markets that absorb young labour efficiently.

3.1.1. Core Dimensions of the Youth Employability Pathways Model

Drawing on peer-reviewed studies retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar (2019–2025), together with official South African policy and statistical publications (e.g., Statistics South Africa labour-force outputs, NYDA reports and other relevant publications), the synthesis identified three overarching components that jointly shape youth employability outcomes in South Africa.

Table 1. Key Dimensions of the Youth Employability Pathways Model

Dimension	Description	Core Elements	Illustrative Mechanisms
Human capital	Refers to the accumulation of knowledge, technical skills and transferable abilities that enhance a young person's productive capacity.	Education quality, digital and cognitive skills, work readiness, soft skills.	Curriculum alignment with market demand; vocational and work-integrated learning; skills certification systems.
Institutional Intermediation	Encompass of formal and informal systems that mediate access to opportunity, including government policies, universities, intermediaries and employer networks.	Policy coherence, institutional coordination, university–industry partnerships, labour-market intermediaries.	Youth employment services, national development plans, career centres and entrepreneurship hubs.
Market Absorption Mechanisms	Captures the structure and responsiveness of the labour market in absorbing young entrants into sustainable employment.	Sectoral demand, firm incentives, regional disparities and digital labour platforms.	Employment stimulus programmes, private-sector participation, wage subsidies and platform-based work opportunities.

Source: Author synthesis based on peer-reviewed studies (2019–2025) and key South African institutional evidence, including Stats SA labour-market publications, DPME/DWYPD evaluation reports, NYDA programme updates, SSACI skills-gap reports, and Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator reports.

3.1.2. Interaction Between the Dimensions

Based on the reviewed research studies, reports and policies, youth employability in South Africa emerges from the alignment or misalignment of three moving parts: human capital, institutional intermediation and market absorption (Habiyaremye et al., 2022; Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation / Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities (DPME/DWYPD) (2024). Recent labour force evidence shows how weak alignment translates into high exclusion at the point of entry: among youth, unemployment has remained persistently elevated, with the 15-24 cohort experiencing the highest barriers and a large share reporting no prior work experience, which compounds the "no job–no experience" trap (Stats SA, 2025a, 2025b). On the human capability side, empirical studies and reviews document skills mismatch, including work-readiness gaps and the misalignment between qualifications and job requirements as a key friction in the school-to-work transition (Harry & Chinyamurindi, 2020; Mncayi & Meyer, 2022; Mseleku, 2024; Beretu & Charles, 2025). With regards to the institutional side, government evaluations point to variability in design, coordination and employer engagement across youth employment programmes, which affects how effectively young people are matched into opportunities (Motala et al., 2023; DPME/DWYPD, 2024). At the absorption margin, macro and firm-level conditions also matter. Evidence around COVID-era and post-pandemic dynamics highlights slow formal job recovery and high churning at the bottom of the labour market, which limits the conversion of first opportunities into stable employment (Ranchhod & Daniels, 2021).

Bridging mechanisms can partially reduce frictions, as evaluations and implementation reports on the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES) / Presidential Youth Employment Initiative PYEI show large-scale placement effects (e.g., education assistants) and local income multipliers, while emphasising that long-term absorption depends on pathway design and employer incentives (NYDA, 2023; (DPME/DWYPD, 2024). Parallel platform infrastructure, most notably, South African Youth employment accelerator, Harambee, has demonstrated that lower-cost matching, inclusive screening and work-readiness support, can expand access at scale, especially for young women; though sustained outcomes still hinge on downstream demand and progression routes (Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, 2023). Distributional evidence also shows the interaction is equity-sensitive as not in employment, education or training (NEET) shares remain high and outcomes vary by gender and location,

thus indicating that capability signals and matching systems interact with household resources and geography (Stats SA, 2024). While programme-level studies on learnerships and internships show that poverty-related constraints (e.g., transport, caregiving, income volatility) directly affect completion and placement success, implying that human-capital investments require bundled institutional supports to translate into employability (Gibberd & Hankwebe, 2022; Mtotywa & Motaung, 2024; Chitiga-Mabugu et al., 2025).

3.2.3. Emerging Themes from the Conceptual Synthesis

The patterns in Table 2 confirm four things, (i) persistent skills–demand mismatches at entry, (ii) coordination gaps that weaken matching, (iii) limited absorptive capacity in the formal sector, and (iv) equity-sensitive barriers that raise NEET risks. Bridging mechanisms (PES / PYEI and Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator programmes) widen access but needs pathway design, employer incentives and wrap-around supports to convert exposure into progression.

Table 2. Emerging Themes from the Conceptual Synthesis

Theme	Core issue	Sources	Policy / practice implication
Skills–Demand Mismatch	Qualifications don't match job needs; work-readiness gaps block entry.	Graham et al. (2019); Habiyaremye et al. (2022); Harry and Chinyamurindi (2020); Mncayi and Meyer (2022) Mseleku (2024); Beretu and Charles (2025)	Align curricula and WIL with sector demand; strengthen signalling/assessment of soft and technical skills.
Institutional Fragmentation	Programme design, coordination and employer engagement vary, weakening matching.	Motala et al. (2023); (DPME/DWYPD, 2024)	Create joint targets and shared data systems; standardise employer incentives and placement protocols.
Weak Absorptive Capacity	Slow formal job recovery and high churn limit conversion of first jobs to stable work.	Ranchhod and Daniels (2021); Stats SA (2025a, 2025b).	Pair entry programmes with sectoral pathways; use wage subsidies and progression agreements with firms.
Equity, Geography and NEET Risk	NEET rates remain high; outcomes differ by gender and location.	Stats SA (2024); de Jongh et al. (2024).	Target by place and gender; add transport/childcare supports; expand rural matching infrastructure.
Bridging Mechanisms & Design for Absorption	PES / PYEI and Harambee's Youth Employment Accelerator widen access, but lasting absorption needs pathway design and incentives.	NYDA (2023); (DPME/DWYPD (2024); Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator (2023).	Build "placement-to-progression" ladders; tie subsidies to retention; integrate coaching and employer commitments.
Poverty-Related Constraints in Pathways	Transport, caregiving, income volatility cut completion and placement success.	Gibberd and Hankwebe (2022); Mtotywa & Motaung, (2024). Chitiga-Mabugu et al. (2025).	Bundle stipends, transport and wrap-around supports into learnerships/internships; monitor completion barriers.

Source: Author synthesis based on peer-reviewed studies (2019–2025) and key South African institutional evidence, including Stats SA labour-market publications, DPME/DWYPD evaluation reports, NYDA programme updates, SSACI skills-gap reports, and Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator reports.

These patterns motivate the analysis that follows and culminate in the Youth Employability Pathways Model presented in Figure 2, which consists of three interlinked dimensions: human capital (skills, work-readiness and credible signalling), institutional intermediation (coordinated policies, platforms and pathway design) and market absorption (sectoral demand, employer incentives and progression routes), operating within equity-sensitive contexts and reinforced by feedback loops from outcomes back to education, programmes and firms to improve matching over time.

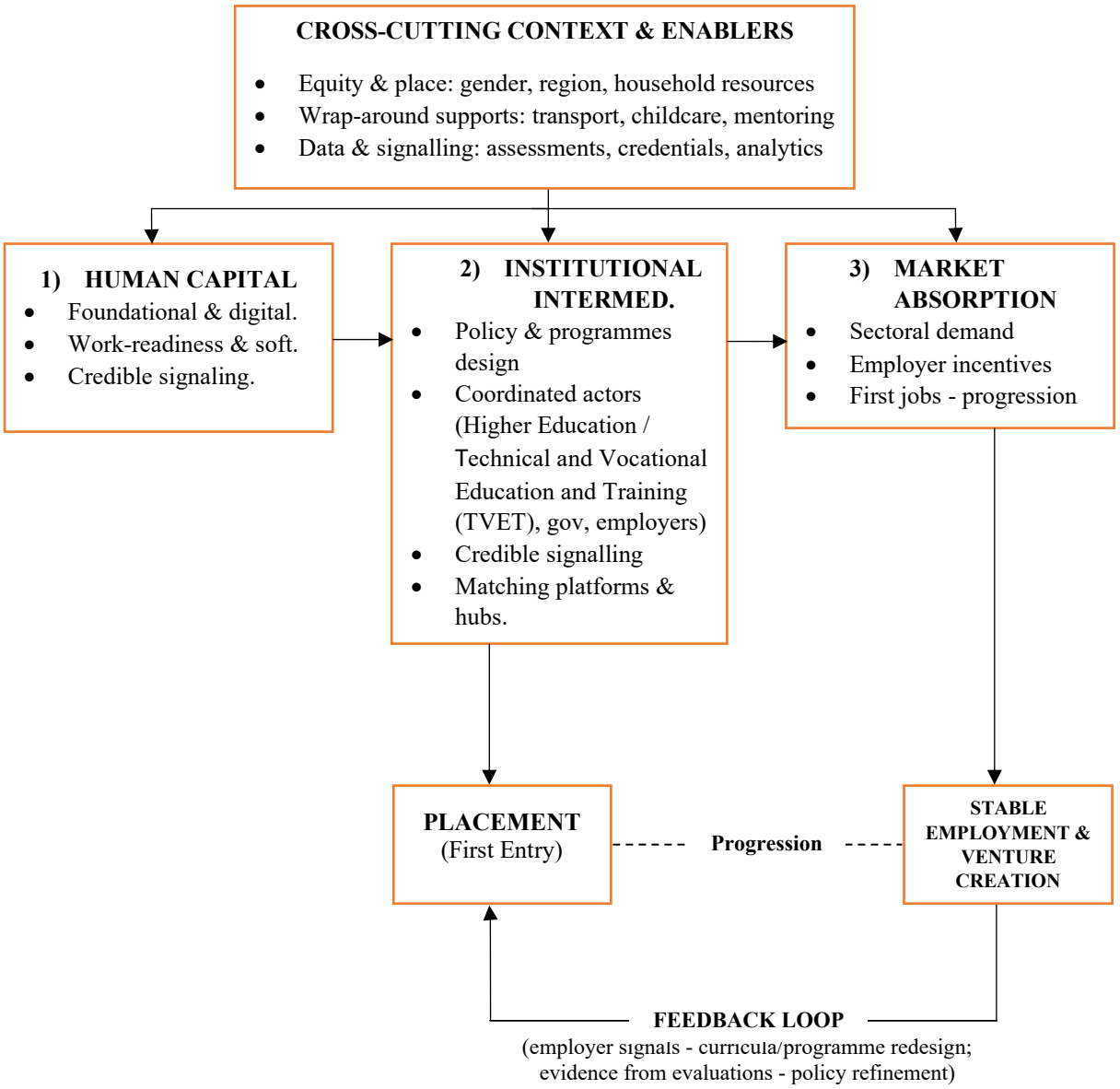

Figure 2. The Youth Employability Pathways Model.
Source: Authors' Illustration

The model posits that sustainable youth employment arises only when three pillars operate together and in sequence: (i) credible capability signals that make a young person's skills, work-readiness and behaviours legible to employers, (ii) coordinated intermediation in the form of policies, platforms and pathway design that reduce search frictions, target opportunities and align actors, and (ii) demand-side absorption in which sectoral pathways, employer incentives, and clear progression routes convert entry into retention and advancement. Each pillar is individually insufficient but jointly necessary and mutually reinforcing weak capability signals raise screening costs; poor coordination misallocates scarce opportunities; thin demand stalls conversion from first placement to stable work. Cross-cutting, equity-aware supports (e.g., transport, childcare, mentoring, wellbeing) are required to neutralize non-skill constraints that otherwise block completion and progression. Continuous feedback loops such as employer signals into curricula, platform data into programme redesign and evaluation

findings into policy, tighten calibration over time and increase conversion rates from placement to progression. The model yields clear, testable implications: when any pillar degrades, conversion, retention and wage growth should fall; when all three are strengthened together, these metrics should improve.

3.2 Discussion

The finding of this study suggests that youth employability in South Africa is best understood as a systemic property that emerges when human capabilities', institutional intermediation and market absorption move in step, rather than as an individual trait located solely in the young person. This interpretation is consistent with evidence of persistent skills–demand mismatches and work-readiness gaps (Graham et al., 2019; Habiyaremye et al., 2022), uneven programme design and coordination (Motala et al., 2023; DPME/DWYPD, 2024) and a post-pandemic labour market marked by slow formal job recovery and high churning at the point of entry (Ranchhod & Daniels, 2021). In short, employability outcomes are co-produced by signals (what young people can credibly show), systems (how actors and platforms match them to opportunities) and slots (how firms absorb and progress entrants), which aligns with the paper's model and the broader literature. From a human capital perspective, the model refines conventional views by emphasising that capability must be not only built, but also signalled in ways legible to employers, thus echoing the findings prior research on qualification job mismatch and soft-skills gaps in South Africa (Graham et al., 2019; SSACI, 2024; Mseleku, 2024). Here, internships and work-integrated learning matter primarily as signal-enhancing mechanisms rather than endpoints, which helps to explain why exposure without credible signalling or mentoring often fails to convert into stable employment (Mseleku, 2024). Seen in this manner, the model integrates human-capital accumulation with signal credibility such as assessment, certification, references and wrap-around supports in the form of transport and coaching that reduce non-skill constraints on completion and early retention (Gibberd & Hankwebe, 2022; Mtotywa & Motaung, 2024).

From an institutional standpoint, the model foregrounds intermediation quality as rules, incentives and collaborative architectures that structure matching, extending programme-level insight into a system-level account (Motala et al., 2023; DPME/DWYPD, 2024). Evidence that large initiatives (e.g., the PES/PYEI) can deliver scale but uneven longer-term absorption supports the model's claim that pathway design (e.g., progression ladders, employer incentives and post-placement support) is the binding margin for durable outcomes (NYDA, 2023; DPME/DWYPD, 2024). Similarly, Harambee's inclusive matching and screening illustrate how platforms can lower search costs and expand access, while still depending on downstream demand and sectoral progression routes to sustain gains (Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, 2023). At the market absorption margin, the model interprets high youth unemployment and limited conversion from first placements to stable roles as symptoms of thin demand and employer risk at entry level, especially after COVID-19 disruptions (Ranchhod & Daniels, 2021; Stats SA, 2025a, 2025b). This helps reconcile two observations that can appear contradictory in isolation: (i) programmes achieve large placements (scale) and (ii) many participants revert to unemployment after contracts expire. The model explains both by positing that, in the absence of sectoral pathways and retention-linked incentives, placements raise short-run participation without necessarily shifting firm-side hiring thresholds or progression practices (DPME/DWYPD, 2024; NYDA, 2023).

The model also modifies prevailing employability framings by making equity and geography structural parameters rather than background conditions. Persistent NEET differentials by gender and location indicate that capability signals and matching systems interact with household resources and place-based opportunity sets, which shape both entry and

progression (Stats SA, 2024; de Jongh et al., 2024). This supports a pathway view in which transport costs, caregiving burdens and income volatility depress completion and early retention, implying that human-capital investments require bundled institutional supports to become effective (Gibberd & Hankwebe, 2022; Mtotywa & Motaung, 2024).

These arguments integrate established perspectives from the human capital (Becker, 1962; Schultz, 1961) and institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; North, 1991), into a single pathway logic that is empirically anchored in recent South African evidence (Graham et al., 2019; Habiyaremye et al., 2022; Motala et al., 2023; DPME/DWYPD, 2024; (Ranchhod & Daniels, 2021; Stats SA, 2025a, 2025b). The discussion therefore advances a few testable propositions as illustrated in table 3:

Table 3. Proposed testable propositions

Pillars	Proposition	Testable claim
Human Capital	P1. Capability Signals → Hiring	Stronger, credible capability signals increase first-job hiring.
	P2. Work-Readiness → Early Retention	Higher work-readiness improves retention through the first six months.
	P3. Education–Job Match → Wage & Retention	Better education–job match raises entry wages and 12-month retention.
Institutional Intermediation	P4. Coordinated Intermediation → Conversion	Coordinated intermediation increases placement-to-progression conversion.
	P5. Retention-Linked Incentives → Progression	Incentives tied to retention milestones increase progression and reduce churn.
	P6. Platform Matching Quality → Inclusion	Inclusive platform matching raises placement rates for women and NEET youth.
Market Absorption	P7. Sectoral Pathways → Stability	Defined sectoral pathways increase stable employment at 12 months.
	P8. Absorptive Capacity → Conversion	Higher local demand and firm growth raise conversion to permanent roles.
Cross-cutting Enablers	P9. Equity Supports → Completion & Retention	Bundled equity supports increase completion and early retention, especially for low-income groups and women.
Complementarity (All Three Pillars)	P10. Complementarity of Pillars → Super-Additive Gains	Joint strengthening of signals, intermediation and absorption outperforms any single component.

Source: Authors (2025).

Thus, framed this way, the Youth Employability Pathways Model offers a coherent lens that both synthesises disparate findings and generates falsifiable expectations for future empirical work in South Africa.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper argues that youth employability in South Africa is a system property and not an individual attribute: outcomes improve when human capital, institutional intermediation and market absorption move in step, and they deteriorate when any one of the pillars weakens. Framed in this way, the Youth Employability Pathways Model explains why well-intended, stand-alone interventions such as skills courses without credible signalling, placements without progression routes or incentives without coordination, often yield temporary gains that fade at exit.

The study's main theoretical contribution is to integrate human-capital logics with institutional perspectives and demand-side considerations. Based on the study results, two refinements follow. Firstly, equity is structural: gender, place and household constraints shape both entry and progression, and therefore must be treated as design parameters, not afterthoughts. Secondly, feedback loops matter: employer signals into curricula, platform data into programme redesign and evaluation results into policy create a learning system that raises conversion from first placement to stable work overtime. From policy and practice perspective,

the model reorients the goal from placement to progression. In practice, effective interventions bundle: (i) credible signals (assessments, micro-credentials and verified work samples), (ii) coordinated intermediation (shared targets, data-driven matching and retention-linked incentives across government, universities/TVET, platforms and employers), and (iii) absorption mechanisms (sector-specific pathways with clear advancement steps, structured mentoring and employer commitments). Equity-aware supports such as transport, childcare, coaching and health, are integral to completion and early retention, not ancillary welfare items.

This is a conceptual synthesis and that is its key limitation: Thus, causal claims are proposed as testable propositions, and not as established facts. Nevertheless, the framework is practically actionable and sets a clear agenda for evidence building. Hence, future research should consider: (i) empirically test the three-pillar alignment using linked administrative and platform data to track placement-to-progression conversions, (ii) use quasi-experimental and longitudinal designs to estimate the added value of bundles (signals + intermediation + absorption) relative to single-channel interventions, (iii) pilot sectoral progression agreements that tie subsidies or tax incentives to retention and wage growth milestones, (iv) quantify equity-sensitive design by testing transport/childcare stipends and mentoring at scale, and (v) extend the model to entrepreneurship pathways, which measure venture survival and job creation as alternative absorption outcomes. The model offers a coherent roadmap: align what youth can credibly signal, how systems match them, and where firms will absorb and progress them, while hard-wiring equity supports and feedback loops. If actors organise around these levers simultaneously and not sequentially, South Africa can shift youth employment from short-term access to durable progression and over time, bend the curve on exclusion.

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