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ORIGINAL PAPER

The Ethics of Employability: Accountability, Justice, and Responsibility in Racialised Graduate Labour Markets

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Abstract

Persistent racialised inequalities continue to shape graduate outcomes in the United Kingdom, despite decades of policy reform, institutional initiatives, and employability-focussed interventions. Racially minoritised graduates consistently experience ethnic penalties in hiring, earnings, and career progression, even when controlling for educational attainment and institutional prestige, with UK-born and international racially minoritised graduates facing structurally distinct but compounding forms of disadvantage. Yet, dominant employability frameworks have positioned employability as an individual responsibility, centred on skills, capitals, and adaptability, thereby obscuring the structural injustices embedded in higher education and labour markets. This paper reframes employability as an ethical domain of pressing importance for both higher education and business ethics. Drawing on an integrated theoretical architecture comprising normative foundations of justice (distributive, procedural, recognition, and epistemic), race-centred lenses (Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, and Bourdieu's theory of capitals), an accountability spine, and the capabilities approach, it develops the Ethical Employability Framework (race-centred), which redistributes responsibility across universities, employers, and the state within the UK. The framework exposes how employability discourses can function as a form of "misframing", legitimising inequality by shifting responsibility onto graduates while neglecting systemic exclusion. The paper's theoretical contributions are hierarchically organised: it reframes employability as an ethical construct; integrates race as a constitutive theoretical concern through a race-centred explanatory architecture; develops an accountability spine that operationalises shared institutional responsibility; adopts the capabilities approach as the evaluative standard for substantive flourishing; and maps these elements into a coherent multi-level framework connecting normative theory to institutional practice. In doing so, the paper advances a justice-oriented agenda for employability scholarship, policy, and practice that places racially minoritised graduates at its centre.

Keywords Employability · Business ethics · Racial inequality · Accountability · Graduate labour markets · Justice

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Introduction

Racialised disparities in graduate employment remain deeply embedded within the United Kingdom's higher education and labour market systems, despite sustained policy attention to widening participation, equality, diversity, and graduate employability (Ajibade et al., 2025). Evidence consistently demonstrates that racially minoritised graduates, defined here as those from Black, Asian, Mixed heritage, and other communities structurally positioned as ethnic minorities in the UK, experience systemic penalties in recruitment and career progression, including lower employment rates, occupational downgrading, and discriminatory barriers to advancement (Heath & Di Stasio, 2019; Li & Heath, 2020; Zwysen & Longhi, 2018). While these penalties affect both UK-born and international racially minoritised graduates, the mechanisms through which exclusion operates differ. International graduates additionally navigate visa restrictions, credential recognition barriers, and post-study work limitations (Foster & George, 2025), and the analysis attends to this distinction where relevant. These inequities persist even when controlling for academic performance, institutional prestige, and subject of study, highlighting that racial disparities cannot be explained by individual characteristics alone (Di Stasio et al., 2021; Khattab, 2018). More recent longitudinal and scarring analyses confirm that such disadvantages compound over time, constraining progression and embedding precarity (Dickson et al., 2024; Tomlinson, 2024). Structural injustices within both higher education and employment systems therefore remain powerful determinants of graduate outcomes (Bhopal, 2024a; Foster & George, 2025; Mirza & Warwick, 2022; Abdul Aziz 2026). These persisting inequalities also raise a critical question of organisational legitimacy and accountability, making employability a pressing concern for business ethics as well as higher education.

Despite this evidence, the dominant framing of employability in both scholarship and policy has long emphasised the cultivation of skills, attributes, and individual agency. Foundational models such as Knight's and Yorke (2006) USEM framework, Dacre Pool and Sewell's (2007) CareerEDGE model, and Holmes' (2013) emphasis on identity and performance, conceptualised employability as a function of personal capital accumulation and self-presentation. Later frameworks extended this perspective through accounts of graduate capitals (Tomlinson, 2017), sustainable careers (Clarke, 2018), and career adaptability (Donald et al., 2019), which highlighted how individuals can navigate increasingly complex labour markets. These models have been influential in shaping higher education curricula and careers support, yet they risk individualising responsibility, obscuring the extent to which discrimination, exclusionary networks, and unequal opportunity structures shape graduate trajectories (Ingram & Allen, 2019; Santos, 2020). For racially minoritised graduates in particular, this individualised framing is especially problematic, as it renders invisible the structural and racialised barriers that shape their labour market outcomes regardless of the capitals they accumulate.

Recent research has sought to move beyond this narrow focus, emphasising the need for ecosystemic, relational, and multi-level understandings of employability (Abdul Aziz et al., 2026c). The Employability Capital Growth model (Donald et al., 2023) integrates multiple capitals with external conditions to show employability as a developmental process requiring institutional and employer support, and its more recent elaboration in Donald's (2025) book further consolidates this shift beyond individualism. Yet, even the most sophisticated ecosystemic frameworks remain developmental rather than ethical in orientation, stopping short of interrogating whether existing systems are just or who bears moral responsibility for their inequitable outcomes. Similarly, the sustainable career ecosystem approach positions careers practitioners and technologies such as AI as liminal actors within interconnected systems that mediate graduate opportunities (Donald et al., 2025). National and cross-context analyses demonstrate how structured opportunities like work-integrated learning enhance outcomes but are inequitably accessed, reproducing disadvantage (Jackson, 2024; Jackson et al., 2023). Meanwhile, large-scale reviews of the field find fragmentation, weak theoretical integration, and limited attention to social justice, calling for frameworks that explicitly address structural inequality (Akkermans et al., 2024; Healy et al., 2025). Notably, however, race and racialised inequality remain peripheral concerns within this evolving literature, with few frameworks explicitly addressing how structural racism shapes graduate outcomes or how responsibility for racial equity should be distributed across institutional actors. Taken together, this evolving literature highlights that employability cannot be reduced to individual skills but must be understood within broader opportunity structures and relational contexts, and that a race-centred ethical reframing remains absent.

This tension exposes a significant gap: employability has not yet been systematically theorised as a matter of ethics, justice, and accountability. While a growing body of research has documented the racialised and intersectional disadvantages embedded within higher education and labour markets (Beigi et al., 2025; Bhopal, 2024b; Naseem, 2019; Pilkington, 2020), these insights have rarely been integrated into employability theory or the field of business ethics. Conversely, the employability literature, even in its more recent iterations, has often remained inattentive to the ethical dimensions of inequality, focussing instead on graduate

attributes, dispositions, and adaptability. This has produced a significant conceptual gap: the persistence of racialised disadvantage is well evidenced but insufficiently addressed as an ethical failure that demands accountability from employers, universities, and policymakers alike.

This paper seeks to address this gap by reframing employability as an ethical and relational domain. It develops the Ethical Employability Framework (race-centred) (see Fig. 2), a multi-level model that situates employability within questions of accountability, justice, and responsibility, bridging the divide between employability studies and critical race-informed analyses of racially minoritised graduate inequality. The framework draws on an integrated theoretical architecture organised across four distinct layers: distributive, procedural, recognition, and epistemic justice provide *the normative foundations for what fairness requires*; Critical Race Theory (CRT), intersectionality, and Bourdieu's theory of capitals explain *why racial inequality persists despite apparently neutral systems*; a five-stage accountability spine, applied to racialised graduate outcomes, specifies *who is responsible and how that responsibility is discharged* across universities, employers, and the state; and the capabilities approach establishes *what substantive flourishing requires beyond the mere removal of barriers* (see Fig. 1). At the structural level, the framework maps how racialised labour regimes, visa barriers, biased AI in hiring, and accreditation systems set the macro-level conditions under which employability is defined and

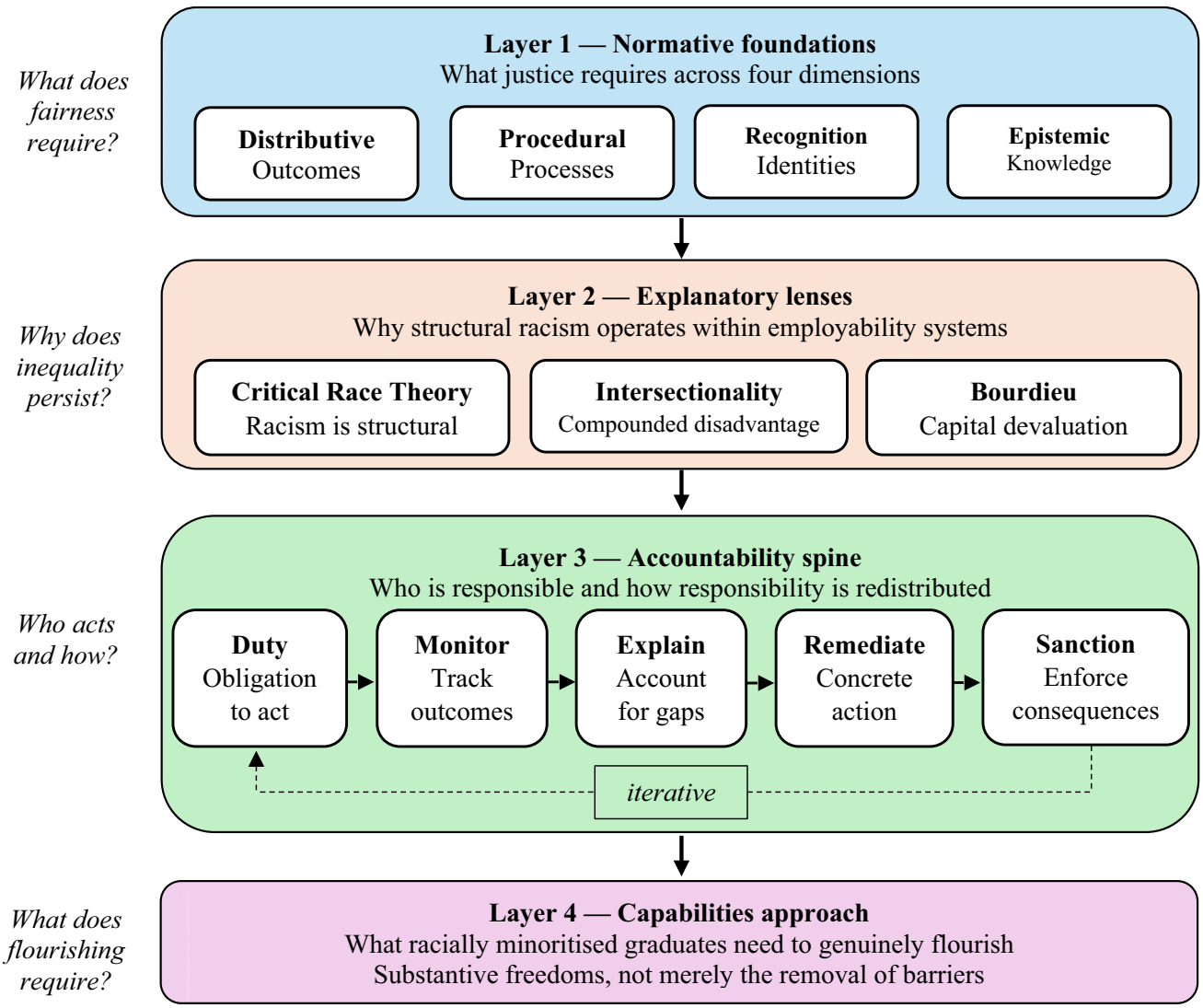


Fig. 1 Theoretical architecture of the Ethical Employability Framework (race-centred)

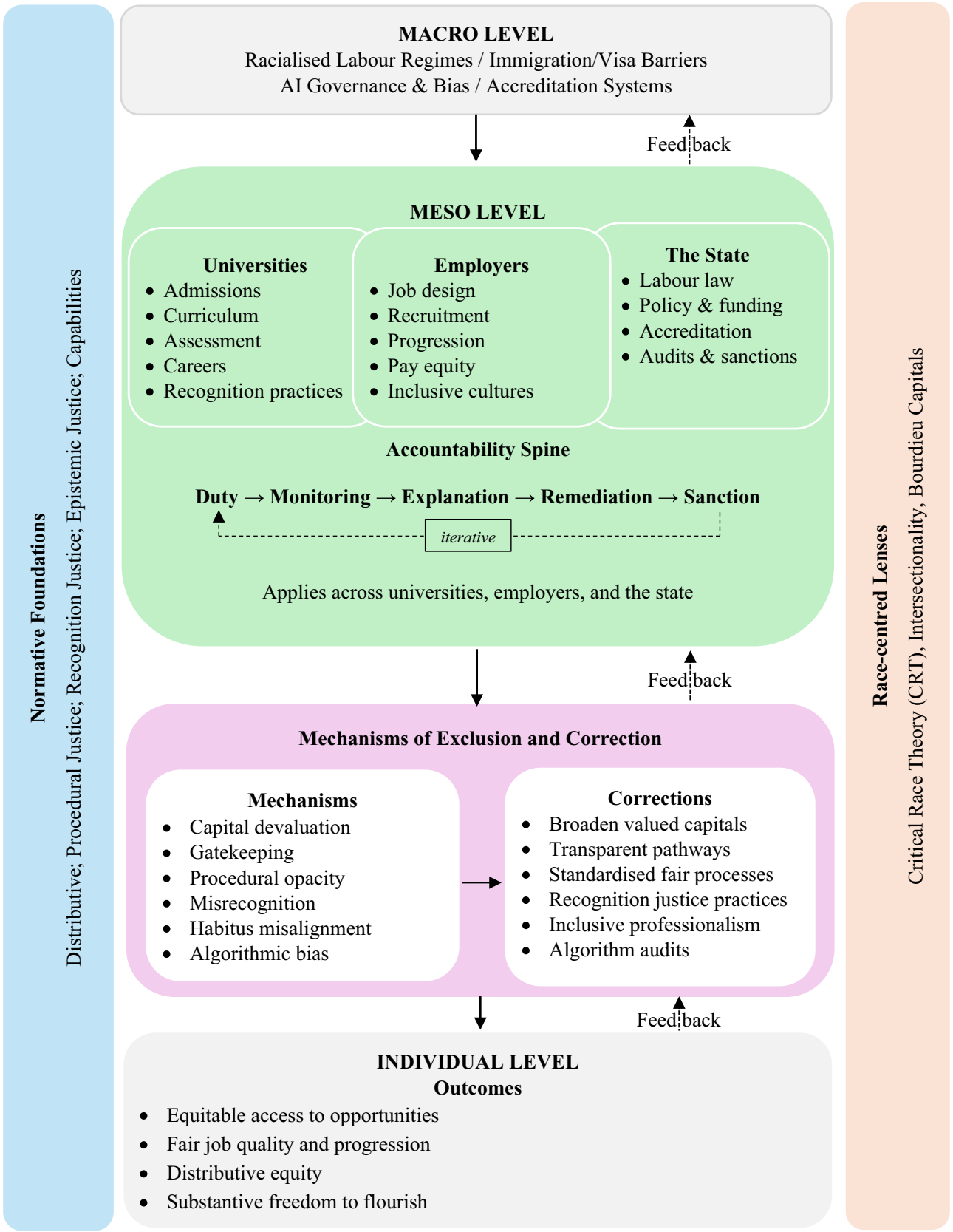


Fig. 2 Ethical employability framework (race-centred)

contested, conditions governed by national governments, parliaments, regulatory bodies, and international governance institutions whose authority operates at the level of structural design rather than institutional implementation. At the meso (institutional) level, it identifies how universities, employers, and the state enact or obstruct equitable graduate outcomes through admissions, recruitment, and policy. At the individual level, it foregrounds the outcomes racially minoritised graduates are entitled to expect (see Fig. 2). This resonates with critiques in the business ethics literature that problematise the ethical assumptions underpinning employability discourses in Human Resource Management (Costea et al., 2012). In doing so, the paper advances a new agenda for business ethics scholarship that foregrounds racial justice in the theorisation of graduate employability, establishing accountability as a shared institutional obligation rather than a matter of individual graduate deficit.

Literature Review: Employability and Inequality

The study of graduate employability has developed substantially over the past 2 decades, particularly within UK higher education, beginning with a focus on the skills, attributes, and dispositions deemed necessary for labour market success. Early frameworks such as Knight and Yorke's (2006) USEM model and Dacre Pool and Sewell's (2007) CareerEDGE model presented employability as an accumulation of human capital and personal qualities that enhance labour market prospects. Holmes (2013) extended this by emphasising employability as a process of identity formation and external validation, shifting attention from fixed attributes to the relational and performative aspects of graduate labour market entry. Subsequent elaborations, such as Tomlinson's (2017) graduate capitals framework and Clarke's (2018) sustainable career perspective, sought to integrate human, social, cultural, and psychological resources with broader contextual considerations. Together, these models shaped policy and institutional practice by framing employability as an individualised project of skills acquisition, adaptability, and self-presentation. However, despite their increasing sophistication, these frameworks have remained largely inattentive to how race and structural inequality shape which graduates can effectively deploy and convert their capitals in the labour market (Cheng et al., 2022; Fakunle & Higson, 2021), a silence that obscures the structural racism documented in graduate outcomes research (Beigi et al., 2025; Ingram & Allen, 2019).

While these frameworks advanced understanding of graduate transitions, they have been critiqued for obscuring the structural and systemic factors that shape employability. By foregrounding individual agency, they risk naturalising inequality and placing the burden of responsibility on graduates themselves (Santos, 2020). This individualising logic is particularly problematic for racially minoritised graduates, for whom structural barriers, including hiring discrimination, exclusion from professional networks, and organisational cultures that demand additional identity work, constrain labour market outcomes regardless of the capitals they accumulate (Beigi et al., 2025; Foster & George, 2025). Research on employer recruitment practices highlights how cultural fit, credentialism, and reliance on networks advantage privileged groups while excluding others (Burke et al., 2020; Ingram & Allen, 2019; Umar et al., 2026). More broadly, employer expectations often remain misaligned with higher education provision, producing a discourse of graduate deficit that intensifies individual responsibility without addressing structural barriers (Cheng et al., 2022). Similar limitations are also evident in CSR-linked employability programmes, which may enhance participants' confidence and self-efficacy but show limited impact on structural inequalities and longer-term employment outcomes (Walker et al., 2017). These critiques underscore that employability cannot be treated as a neutral descriptor but must be interrogated for the ways it legitimises exclusion, particularly for racially minoritised graduates, raising fundamental questions of justice, recognition, and accountability.

Recent contributions have sought to move beyond these limitations by developing multi-level and ecosystemic perspectives. Donald et al.'s (2023) Employability Capital Growth model conceptualises employability as a cumulative process shaped by nine capitals and external opportunity structures, with implications for universities, employers, and policymakers. Building on this, the sustainable career ecosystem framework highlights the interdependence of diverse stakeholders, including the growing role of technological change such as AI and the liminal role of career practitioners (Donald et al., 2025). Yet, even these valuable advances remain developmental in focus rather than explicitly ethical. They are concerned with how graduates can grow and accumulate capital within existing systems but stop short of interrogating whether those systems are just, who bears responsibility for their inequitable outcomes, or what institutions are morally obligated to do when structural racism shapes graduate trajectories regardless of individual effort or capital accumulation. Empirical studies of graduate transitions underscore the uneven distribution of opportunity structures: structured experiences such as work-integrated learning consistently predict stronger outcomes but remain inequitably accessed, disproportionately disadvantaging racially minoritised graduates and reinforcing racial as well as class stratification (Jackson, 2024; Jackson et al., 2023; Zhong et al., 2025). At the field level, recent meta-analyses and mappings confirm the fragmentation of employability research across disciplines, with limited integration and

insufficient attention to inequality, justice, or ethics, calling for conceptual work that explicitly connects employability with fairness, accountability, and social responsibility (Abdul Aziz et al., 2026b; Akkermans et al., 2024; Eimer & Bohndick, 2023; Healy et al., 2025).

The racial inequality evidence reveals precisely what these employability frameworks have failed to theorise. Quantitative studies show enduring ethnic penalties in employment probabilities and earnings among racially minoritised graduates in the UK, with early disadvantages compounding into long-term scarring effects that persist regardless of educational attainment (Dickson et al., 2024; Li & Heath, 2020; Zwysen & Longhi, 2018). Field experiments confirm the persistence of discrimination, with racially minoritised applicants significantly less likely to receive interview invitations despite equivalent qualifications, and applicants signalling Muslim identity facing particular penalties (Di Stasio et al., 2021; Heath & Di Stasio, 2019; Zwysen et al., 2021). Beyond hiring, racially minoritised graduates face exclusion from informal networks, weaker access to mentors, and organisational climates that compel additional identity work (Beigi et al., 2025; Foster & George, 2025). Within universities, inequalities manifest through curriculum design, pedagogy, and leadership practices that reproduce whiteness and marginalisation, often under the guise of performative inclusion (Bhopal, 2024a, 2024b; Miller et al., 2025; Pilkington, 2020; Seuwou et al., 2023). These disadvantages cannot be attributed to individual deficiencies but reflect entrenched patterns of systemic exclusion that dominant employability frameworks have neither theorised nor addressed (Mirza & Warwick, 2022). CRT illuminates how such exclusions are sustained and legitimised through discourses of meritocracy that present racially unequal outcomes as the product of individual effort rather than structural racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Wong et al., 2021). Intersectionality shows how disadvantages compound across race, gender, class, and religion, meaning that racially minoritised graduates who are also women, from working-class backgrounds, or of Muslim faith face mutually reinforcing forms of exclusion that single-axis analyses cannot capture (Beigi et al., 2025; Manley et al., 2020; Naseem, 2019). Bourdieu's theory of capitals explains the mechanism through which this exclusion operates: employers valorise dominant forms of cultural capital and social capital, including elite professional networks, while devaluing the capitals held by racially minoritised graduates, rendering their academic achievements insufficient to overcome structural disadvantage, a process compounded for international racially minoritised graduates by the non-recognition of foreign credentials and qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986; Foster & George, 2025; Ingram & Allen, 2019).

The preceding evidence exposes a significant conceptual gap at the intersection of these two literatures, namely graduate employability scholarship and critical race-informed analyses of labour market inequality. Employability frameworks, even in their latest ecosystemic iterations, rarely centre race, ethnicity, or intersectionality as structuring forces in graduate outcomes, treating these as peripheral concerns rather than as constitutive of the conditions under which employability is produced and evaluated. Conversely, sociological and critical race-informed accounts of inequality often highlight exclusion and discrimination without situating these within the employability discourse that dominates higher education and career development policy. This disconnect means that the normative resources most needed to theorise racially just employability, including recognition justice, epistemic justice, and the capabilities approach, have not yet been brought to bear on the specific problem of racially minoritised graduate labour market outcomes, despite their established relevance to questions of identity, voice, and substantive freedom in institutional contexts. Work in business ethics points to the value of treating employability as a relational and ethical responsibility shaped by organisational practices and social goals, particularly in relation to vulnerable groups (Audenaert et al., 2020; Greene & Kirton, 2024), yet this insight has not been systematically developed in relation to racial inequality. The persistence of racial disadvantage in graduate labour markets is therefore well documented but insufficiently theorised as an ethical failure, as employability continues to be framed as a neutral construct rather than a morally charged domain of justice and accountability. Recent calls for greater attention to accountability, justice, and stakeholder alignment (e.g. Akkermans et al., 2024; Donald et al., 2024; Tomlinson & Tholen, 2023) remain underdeveloped in relation to racial inequality, leaving a gap this paper directly addresses.

The evidence reviewed here establishes the need for a fundamental conceptual shift in how employability is theorised and governed. Employability must be reimagined not only as an individual or institutional concern, but also as an ethical responsibility distributed across employers, universities, and the state, one that cannot be discharged by placing the burden of labour market success on graduates who face structural racism regardless of their qualifications or capitals (Hooley et al., 2016; Young, 2006). Such a shift requires a framework that connects macro-level structures, including racialised labour market regimes, immigration and visa barriers applicable specifically to international racially minoritised graduates, AI governance and algorithmic bias in hiring and accreditation systems, with meso-level institutional practices in universities, employers, and the state, and with individual-level outcomes including distributional equity, access to opportunities, and job quality. It also requires explicit attention to the mechanisms through which exclusion operates (e.g. gatekeeping, misrecognition, procedural opacity, habitus misalignment, and structural constraints),

and to the accountability processes through which responsibility can be redistributed away from graduates and onto the institutions that shape their opportunities (Heath & Di Stasio, 2019; Ingram & Allen, 2019). In the absence of such an ethical framing, employability risks functioning as a discourse that legitimises racial exclusion while obscuring the institutional structures and power relations that sustain it. The following section develops this ethical framework, drawing on the normative and explanatory resources identified in this review to construct a coherent and race-centred account of employability as a domain of justice, accountability, and shared institutional responsibility.

Conceptual Lens: Ethics, Justice, and Responsibility

Employability has long been approached as a matter of skills, capital accumulation, and individual adaptability, but such framings insufficiently account for the ethical implications of how opportunities are structured and distributed within the UK graduate labour market. When employability is positioned as the sole responsibility of the graduate, systemic disadvantage is naturalised, and the accountability of institutions, employers, and the state is obscured (Ingram & Allen, 2019; Santos, 2020). This is not to suggest that individual agency is analytically irrelevant. Scholars working within graduate capitals and career development frameworks have rightly shown that graduates actively navigate labour markets, deploy capitals strategically, and exercise meaningful agency in shaping their trajectories (Akkermans et al., 2024; Donald et al., 2023; Tomlinson, 2017). The question is not whether agency exists but whether placing the burden of structural racism on individual agency is analytically adequate or ethically defensible. When structural conditions systematically constrain the capacity of racially minoritised graduates to exercise agency regardless of their qualifications, capitals, or adaptive strategies, the primary locus of analytical and ethical attention must shift to the institutional arrangements that produce and sustain those constraints. The capabilities approach captures this precisely: the relevant question is not whether graduates can formally exercise agency but whether they have the substantive freedom to convert that agency into meaningful outcomes (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). This is consequential for racially minoritised graduates, for whom individualised employability framings render invisible the structural racism that shapes their labour market outcomes regardless of their qualifications or capitals (Beigi et al., 2025; Mirza & Warwick, 2022). To reframe employability as an ethical domain requires engagement with the concepts of accountability, justice, and responsibility, which are foundational to business ethics and central to evaluating the fairness of graduate labour market outcomes (Greene & Kirton, 2024; Hooley et al., 2016). Ethics encompasses a wide range of normative frameworks, from virtue ethics and deontology to consequentialism and care ethics. This paper adopts justice as its primary ethical lens because the problem it addresses is fundamentally structural and distributional: it concerns who receives what, through what processes, under what recognition conditions, and with what freedom to pursue meaningful lives. Justice, understood across its distributive, procedural, recognition, and epistemic dimensions, is uniquely suited to this task because it orients ethical analysis towards the fairness of social arrangements rather than the character of individuals or the aggregate consequences of actions, making it the appropriate framework for evaluating institutional obligations towards racially minoritised graduates (Fraser, 1995; Fricker, 2007; Young, 1990). Yet, fairness must be understood in multidimensional terms: not only the allocation of resources and the integrity of procedures, but also the recognition of identities, the legitimacy of knowledge, and the real freedoms individuals have to pursue meaningful lives. This paper organises its ethical architecture across four distinct layers, each addressing a dimension of the problem: *normative foundations of justice* establish what fairness requires; *race-centred explanatory lenses* explain why racial inequality persists despite apparently neutral systems; *an accountability spine* specifies who is responsible and how that responsibility is discharged; and *the capabilities approach* establishes what substantive flourishing requires beyond the removal of barriers (see Fig. 1). The following subsections develop each layer before showing how they work together as an integrated framework.

Normative Foundations: What Fairness Requires

From the perspective of *distributive justice*, the unequal employment outcomes of racially minoritised graduates in the UK reflect structural patterns of unfair allocation that cannot be attributed to individual effort or merit. Ethnic penalties in hiring and pay persist even when controlling for merit-based factors such as degree subject and attainment (Dickson et al., 2024; Li & Heath, 2020; Zwysen & Longhi, 2018). For UK-born racially minoritised graduates, these penalties include hiring discrimination and occupational downgrading; for international racially minoritised graduates, they are compounded by the additional non-recognition of foreign credentials and post-study visa restrictions that further constrain labour market access (Foster & George, 2025). Ethically, these penalties constitute unjust outcomes attributable not to individual deficit but to systemic discrimination and the unequal distribution of opportunity across the graduate labour market (Beigi et al., 2025; Burke et al.,

2020). Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capitals illuminates the specific mechanism through which this distributive injustice operates. Employers valorise dominant forms of embodied cultural capital and elite social networks while devaluing the capitals held by racially minoritised graduates, rendering their academic achievements insufficient to overcome structural disadvantage (Foster & George, 2025; Ingram & Allen, 2019). The principle of distributive justice therefore demands that employability frameworks explicitly confront how opportunities are unequally allocated and take responsibility for redressing such inequities—a demand that has remained largely unmet in dominant employability scholarship (Cheng et al., 2022; Fakunle & Higson, 2021).

Procedural justice perspectives highlight that fairness is not only about outcomes but also about the processes through which employability is enacted and opportunity is allocated (Hooley et al., 2016; Young, 1990). Recruitment practices often rely on informal networks, cultural fit assessments, and subjective evaluations of potential that embed racialised bias within ostensibly neutral procedures (Di Stasio et al., 2021; Foster & George, 2025; Heath & Di Stasio, 2019). These procedural failures disproportionately affect UK-born racially minoritised graduates navigating domestic recruitment systems, and are compounded for international racially minoritised graduates who additionally face credential non-recognition and visa-related restrictions on labour market access (Foster & George, 2025). Within universities, processes of curriculum design, assessment, and academic support similarly perpetuate exclusion while being presented as objective and meritocratic; this embeds structural bias within the very procedures that are supposed to guarantee fair access to opportunity (Bhopal, 2024b; Miller et al., 2025; Pilkington, 2020). These dynamics expose a fundamental procedural injustice: the rules of the game are neither neutral nor equally applied, and employability discourses that ignore this reproduce rather than challenge the inequalities they claim to address. Ethical responsibility thus extends beyond outcomes to the processes through which opportunity is conferred or denied, requiring universities and employers to audit and reform the procedures that sustain racialised disadvantage.

Recognition justice adds a further dimension by focussing on the moral harm caused when certain identities, cultures, and forms of capital are systematically devalued by dominant institutions, attending the symbolic denial of equal cultural standing and the delegitimisation of non-dominant identities that distributive and procedural frameworks cannot fully capture (Fraser, 1995, 2009; Young, 1990). Racially minoritised graduates frequently find that their identities are misrecognised in both education and employment, with curricula privileging white and Eurocentric knowledge (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Bhopal, 2024b; Taylor et al., 2021) and recruitment processes rewarding middle-class cultural markers such as speech, hobbies, and "polish" (Heath & Di Stasio, 2019; Ingram & Allen, 2019). For UK-born racially minoritised graduates, this misrecognition operates primarily through the devaluation of their cultural identity and social background within domestic institutions. For international racially minoritised graduates, it extends further as their entire educational formation, cultural repertoire, and epistemic traditions may be rendered invisible or inferior within UK higher education and labour market (Foster & George, 2025; Sakata et al., 2023). This connects directly to Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital, the recognition and legitimacy accorded to those who hold culturally dominant forms of capital, which explains why racially minoritised graduates' achievements are undervalued regardless of their qualifications (Ingram & Allen, 2019). Misrecognition does not merely disadvantage individuals materially; it symbolically denies them equal standing, constituting what Fraser (1995) calls a form of status subordination that demands institutional redress.

Epistemic justice highlights a further dimension of injustice, namely the systematic exclusion of certain voices, testimonies, and ways of knowing from the frameworks that govern employability (Fricker, 2007). Fricker (2007) identifies two forms relevant to this analysis: *testimonial injustice*, where a speaker's credibility is deflated due to identity prejudice, and *hermeneutical injustice*, where gaps in collective interpretive resources place someone at an unfair disadvantage in making sense of their own experience. Racially minoritised graduates' testimonies about discrimination are frequently dismissed as anecdotal or subjective rather than as systemic evidence, a form of testimonial injustice that compounds their material disadvantage with epistemic harm (Mirza & Warwick, 2022; Naseem, 2019). Careers education and employability theory often frame disadvantage as a matter of confidence or resilience (Santos, 2020), leaving no conceptual space to interpret structural racism as a legitimate explanatory framework, a form of hermeneutical injustice embedded within the dominant discourse itself. For UK-born racially minoritised graduates, epistemic injustice reflects the dismissal of their lived experience of racism within domestic institutions (Mirza & Warwick, 2022; Naseem, 2019). For international racially minoritised graduates, it extends further as their foreign educational credentials, pedagogical traditions, and knowledge systems are frequently rendered illegitimate within UK institutions, compounding credential non-recognition with a deeper denial of epistemic standing (Foster & George, 2025). Without epistemic justice, employability frameworks risk not only failing racially minoritised graduates but also reinforcing the very exclusions they purport to challenge, by treating the testimony of those most affected as inadmissible evidence.

Race-Centred Lenses: Why Inequality Persists

While the normative foundations establish what fairness requires, they cannot by themselves explain why racial inequality persists despite decades of reform, diversity initiatives, and employability interventions. *CRT* provides this explanatory power by insisting that racism is not aberrant or incidental but structurally embedded, reproduced through apparently neutral practices, meritocratic discourses, and institutional routines that deflect attention away from systemic inequities (Bhopal, 2024a; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Pilkington, 2020). The persistence of ethnic penalties across decades of policy reform directly evidences this structural embeddedness; discrimination is not declining because the structures that produce it remain intact and are actively legitimised through the language of individual merit and equal opportunity (Heath & Di Stasio, 2019; Mirza & Warwick, 2022). Employability discourse is particularly susceptible to this critique. When framed as a neutral policy goal focussed on skills and capitals, it risks functioning as what Fraser (2009) calls a "misframing": a discourse that obscures systemic injustice while appearing to promote fairness, shifting responsibility onto graduates rather than onto the institutions and systems that reproduce their disadvantage (Shamir, 2008). *Intersectionality* deepens this analysis by demonstrating that racial disadvantage does not operate in isolation but compounds across multiple axes of identity, as race, gender, class, and religion interact to produce layered and mutually reinforcing forms of exclusion that single-axis frameworks cannot capture (Crenshaw, 1989; Manley et al., 2020; Naseem, 2019). For UK-born racially minoritised graduates, these compounded disadvantages manifest within domestic recruitment and university systems, while for international racially minoritised graduates they are further intensified by visa restrictions, credential non-recognition, and the racialisation of migrant status (Abdul Aziz et al., 2026a; Foster & George, 2025). Together CRT and intersectionality establish that racial inequality in graduate employability is neither accidental nor remediable through incremental reform; it is structurally produced, ideologically legitimised, and intersectionally differentiated.

Bourdieu's theory of capitals provides a third and complementary explanatory lens, one that moves from the ideological critique offered by CRT and intersectionality to the specific mechanisms through which cultural exclusion operates in graduate recruitment and career progression (Bourdieu, 1986). Where CRT explains why racism is structurally legitimised and intersectionality explains how disadvantage compounds across identities, Bourdieu explains precisely how exclusion is enacted in practice, through the valorisation of dominant forms of cultural and social capital that racially minoritised graduates are less likely to hold in the forms that employers and universities recognise and reward (Ingram & Allen, 2019). Bourdieu's concept of habitus deepens this analysis, as the deeply ingrained dispositions formed through social experience mean that graduates whose habitus was shaped outside dominant white middle-class norms will feel and appear out of place in recruitment environments built around those norms, not because of any personal deficiency but because the field was not constructed for them (Bourdieu, 1986). For UK-born racially minoritised graduates, this habitus misalignment appears in domestic recruitment cultures, while for international racially minoritised graduates, it is compounded by the additional non-recognition of foreign credentials and educational formations rendered invisible or inferior within UK institutions (Foster & George, 2025). This is what Bourdieu (1986) terms symbolic violence, the imposition of dominant cultural norms as universal and objective standards, such that those who do not meet them may internalise their own exclusion rather than identifying it as structural. Together CRT, intersectionality, and Bourdieu constitute the race-centred explanatory layer of the framework, showing that racial inequality in graduate employability is reproduced through structural conditions rather than individual prejudice.

The Accountability Spine: Who Is Responsible and How

The above normative and explanatory layers establish what fairness requires and why racial inequality persists, but they do not specify who bears responsibility for change or how responsibility should be discharged. This is the analytical work of the *accountability* layer, which draws on Young's (2006) social connection model of responsibility to argue that all actors whose practices contribute to structural injustice bear an obligation to act, regardless of whether they directly caused the harm. The concept of accountability is central in shifting employability from an individualised construct to a shared ethical responsibility distributed across universities, employers, and the state (Hooley et al., 2016; Young, 2006). Yet, dominant employability discourse displaces accountability onto graduates, who are urged to accumulate capitals, develop resilience, and adapt to hostile structures as though the inequalities they face are personal challenges rather than institutional failures (Cheng et al., 2022; Shamir, 2008). Recent ecosystem perspectives have begun to acknowledge that employability emerges through the interplay of multiple actors, including universities, employers, policymakers, and career practitioners (Akkermans et al., 2024; Donald et al., 2023, 2025), yet

these advances have not specified, in relation to racialised graduate outcomes, the ethical obligations that each actor bears or the mechanisms through which those obligations can be enforced. This paper argues that an ethical account of employability requires not merely acknowledging multiple actors but holding each accountable in concrete and enforceable terms—universities for inclusive curricula, equitable assessment, and racially just careers support; employers for transparent, bias-free recruitment and equitable progression practices; and the state for legislation, funding, and enforcement mechanisms that dismantle the structural barriers reproducing racialised disadvantage (Runnymede Trust, 2025; TUC, 2023; Young, 2006). Without such accountability mechanisms, diversity initiatives risk becoming as what Ahmed (2012) calls "non-performatives", statements and policies that appear to promote change while leaving structural inequality intact.

To operationalise this shared accountability, the framework introduces a *five-stage accountability spine* that specifies who is responsible and how responsibility is discharged in practice across the institutions that shape graduate employability outcomes, ensuring that accountability cannot be acknowledged in principle while being evaded in practice. *Duty* establishes that universities, employers, and the state each bear a pre-existing moral and legal obligation to ensure racially equitable graduate outcomes (Young, 2006). *Monitor* requires each actor to systematically track outcomes disaggregated by race, generating the evidential basis without which accountability cannot be exercised (Advance HE, 2023; Mirza & Warwick, 2022). *Explain* requires institutional actors to publicly account for identified gaps, acknowledging structural causes rather than deflecting to individual graduate deficit. *Remediate* requires concrete corrective action in response to identified disparities, whether through curriculum reform, blind recruitment practices, or legislative intervention. *Sanction* establishes that failure to fulfil the preceding stages must carry enforceable consequences, whether reputational, regulatory, or financial, without which the cycle risks remaining symbolic rather than a binding obligation (Ahmed, 2012).

Frameworks of stakeholder accountability, institutional responsibility, and governance have made important contributions to understanding how responsibility is distributed across organisations, but they have not been integrated into a race-centred framework of graduate employability that connects structural diagnosis to enforceable institutional obligation. The accountability spine's contribution lies in this integration, specifying who bears responsibility for racial inequality in graduate outcomes, how that responsibility is discharged in practice, and what consequences follow when it is not. Grounded in Young's (2006) social connection model, the spine derives institutional obligation from structural contribution to injustice rather than from stakeholder interest alone. It is structured and cumulative: monitoring generates the evidential basis for explanation, explanation grounds remediation, and remediation without sanction risks remaining aspirational. While the stages may operate iteratively in practice, with new monitoring data triggering further rounds of explanation and remediation as structural inequalities require ongoing intervention, their logical ordering ensures that institutions cannot claim compliance at a later stage without having discharged the obligations of earlier ones (Greenwood, 2007; Young, 2006).

The Capabilities Layer: What Flourishing Requires

The capabilities approach, developed by Sen (1999) and extended by Nussbaum (2000), evaluates human wellbeing not in terms of resources or formal rights alone but in terms of what individuals are substantively able to do and be, the real freedoms they have to pursue lives of value and dignity. Where the accountability spine specifies who must act and how, the capabilities approach establishes the positive goal towards which that action must be directed, not merely the removal of barriers but the creation of conditions in which racially minoritised graduates can flourish (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). Drawing on Sen's concept of substantive freedom, the approach shifts the question from whether opportunities formally exist to whether individuals can convert them into valued outcomes. For racially minoritised graduates, formal access to higher education and the labour market is necessary but insufficient; what matters is whether graduates have the real freedom to flourish, free from discrimination, cultural exclusion, and structural constraint. For UK-born graduates, capability constraints operate through discrimination, network exclusion, and cultural misrecognition; for international graduates, they are compounded by visa restrictions, credential non-recognition, and financial barriers to unpaid internships that function as gatekeeping (Dickson et al., 2024; Foster & George, 2025). The capabilities approach reframes institutional obligation away from formal access and towards substantive flourishing, with the accountability spine providing the mechanism through which this obligation is discharged.

Within the framework, the capabilities approach functions as the evaluative standard against which the corrective obligations specified in the accountability spine are assessed: the question is not whether institutions have acted but whether their actions have produced the conditions for substantive graduate flourishing. The relationship between the two layers is therefore dual rather than singular. The capabilities approach functions first as this evaluative standard, with the spine's five stages fulfilled not when institutions have formally acted but when their actions have

produced substantive conditions for graduate flourishing. It functions second as an independent source of positive duties that extend beyond what the accountability spine alone can generate. Where the spine specifies what institutions must stop doing or correct, the capabilities approach specifies what they must actively provide: paid placements accessible regardless of financial background, careers support that validates rather than suppresses diverse professional identities, and organisational conditions that enable racially minoritised graduates to convert formal opportunities into meaningful careers. These positive duties are not derivable from the accountability spine alone and require the capabilities standard to generate them. The two layers are therefore complementary and mutually reinforcing: the spine provides the mechanism and the capabilities approach provides both the evaluative goal and the additional obligations that follow from it (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999).

Collectively these four layers constitute an integrated ethical architecture for racially just graduate employability, each addressing a distinct dimension of the problem that the others cannot resolve alone (see Fig. 1). Together they reframe employability not as an individualised project of skills accumulation but as a morally charged domain of justice, accountability, and substantive freedom, in which universities, employers, and the state bear shared and enforceable obligations. The following sections examine how each of these institutional actors currently shapes racially minoritised graduate outcomes and what the framework demands of them in practice.

Universities and Higher Education Institutions

Universities occupy a central position in shaping racially minoritised graduate outcomes, yet their practices consistently reproduce the very inequalities they claim to address. From a *distributive justice* perspective, access to high-value internships, placements, and co-curricular activities remains deeply stratified, as racially minoritised graduates are less likely to secure prestigious placements, often due to financial barriers, selection processes that privilege elite networks, and insufficient institutional support (Burke et al., 2020; Jackson, 2024; Jackson et al., 2023). For international racially minoritised graduates these barriers are compounded by visa restrictions that limit eligibility for certain placements and by financial constraints that make unpaid internships, increasingly the gateway to competitive graduate careers, inaccessible (Foster & George, 2025). While opportunities may be formally open to all, their distribution reflects underlying social hierarchies that reinforce racial and class-based inequality, rendering formal access meaningless without the substantive conditions to benefit from it. *Procedural justice* exposes a further dimension, as curriculum design, assessment practices, and careers support appear neutral but systematically embed racialised and classed biases (Bhopal, 2024b; Miller et al., 2025; Pilkington, 2020). Curricula remain predominantly Eurocentric, assessment practices privilege dominant cultural and linguistic forms, and careers services promote conceptions of professionalism rooted in white middle-class norms, presenting as objective standards what are in practice culturally specific expectations that disadvantage racially minoritised students regardless of their academic achievement (Ingram & Allen, 2019).

Recognition justice reveals a further dimension of universities' ethical failure, racially minoritised students often find that their cultural identities, knowledge traditions, and forms of capital are devalued within higher education institutions (Fraser, 1995, 2009; Young, 1990). Networking events, mentoring schemes, and leadership programmes disproportionately valorise elite social backgrounds and white middle-class cultural markers, symbolically denying racially minoritised students equal standing within university life (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Ingram & Allen, 2019). This misrecognition is not merely symbolic; it has material consequences, as students whose identities are not validated by dominant institutional norms are less likely to engage with employability support, access high-value opportunities, or develop the professional confidence that recruitment processes reward (Bhopal, 2024b). *Epistemic justice* compounds this failure as racially minoritised students' testimonies about discrimination and exclusion are usually dismissed as individual grievances rather than as systemic evidence requiring institutional response (Mirza & Warwick, 2022; Naseem, 2019). Employability frameworks and careers guidance consistently frame disadvantage as a matter of confidence, resilience, or networking skills, leaving no conceptual space to acknowledge structural racism as a determinant of graduate outcomes which reflects a form of hermeneutical injustice embedded within the very discourse intended to support students (Fricker, 2007; Santos, 2020). Universities committed to epistemic justice must therefore do more than collect diversity data; they must centre racially minoritised voices in the design of employability policy and practice, treating their testimony as primary evidence of systemic failure rather than as anecdotal complaint.

Universities' accountability obligations derive from their epistemic and pedagogical authority: the power to define what counts as legitimate knowledge, professional identity, and career preparation, which makes them uniquely responsible for the cultural and epistemic conditions under which racially minoritised graduates develop and are assessed, and which cannot be discharged by collecting diversity data without reforming the curricular and institutional practices through which racially minoritised students' knowledge

and identities are systematically devalued. Universities bear concrete and enforceable accountability obligations that go beyond symbolic diversity commitments. Under the *duty* stage, universities bear a pre-existing moral and legal obligation to ensure racially equitable graduate outcomes, grounded in equality legislation and their own stated missions, rather than treating racial disparities as regrettable but inevitable (Young, 2006; Advance HE, 2023). Fulfilling this duty requires systematic *monitoring* of graduate outcomes disaggregated by race and ethnicity, tracking not only employment rates but also internship access, careers service engagement, and progression into graduate-level roles (Advance HE, 2023; Dickson et al., 2024). Where monitoring reveals persistent disparities, universities must publicly *explain* them, acknowledging structural causes rather than attributing gaps to individual graduate deficit or lack of aspiration. Explanation should then inform *remediation*, including curriculum decolonisation, reform of careers advice to challenge rather than reproduce dominant professional norms, paid placement schemes accessible regardless of financial background, and targeted support for international racially minoritised graduates navigating visa and credential barriers (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Foster & George, 2025). None of this is achievable without *enforcement*, whether through regulatory intervention by the Office for Students, published racial equity league tables, or withdrawal of public funding where disparities remain unaddressed. Without such consequences, university commitments to racial equality risk becoming non-performatives in Ahmed's (2012) sense, gestures that signal commitment without producing structural change.

Employers and Organisations

Employers have long been treated in employability scholarship as neutral selectors of talent, simply identifying the best candidates from available pools. The evidence does not support this. Ethnic penalties in hiring are persistent, well documented, and resistant to decades of diversity initiatives, with racially minoritised graduates significantly less likely to receive interview invitations despite equivalent qualifications, and the steepest penalties falling on those who signal Muslim identity or whose names are read as belonging to a racially minoritised group (Di Stasio et al., 2021; Heath & Di Stasio, 2019; Zwysen et al., 2021). Once in employment, the disadvantages compound: lower progression rates, concentration in precarious and lower-paid roles, and exclusion from the informal networks through which career-defining opportunities are allocated (Beigi et al., 2025; Li & Heath, 2020). What produces these outcomes is not simply individual prejudice but the structural embedding of bias within recruitment and progression practices that present themselves as objective. Cultural fit assessments, unstructured interviews, and network-based hiring consistently reward dominant forms of social and cultural capital while rendering the equally valuable capitals of racially minoritised candidates invisible or insufficient (Bourdieu, 1986; Foster & George, 2025; Ingram & Allen, 2019). For international racially minoritised graduates the situation is sharper still, as foreign credentials are frequently not recognised as equivalent, educational formations developed outside UK institutions are treated as inferior, and the cultural repertoires graduates bring from other contexts are read as deficits rather than assets (Foster & George, 2025).

Beyond the point of entry, organisational cultures impose further ethical costs on racially minoritised employees. Many find themselves subject to demands for identity work, expected to suppress or modify their racial, cultural, or religious identity to meet narrow professional norms that are rooted in whiteness and middle-class convention but presented as universal standards of competence and conduct (Beigi et al., 2025; Foster & George, 2025). This constitutes a form of recognition injustice, the systematic denial of equal cultural standing that Fraser (1995) identifies as a fundamental dimension of institutional oppression. When they raise concerns about this, or about discrimination more broadly, the typical organisational response is dismissal, as testimonies are treated as oversensitive, anecdotal, or insufficiently evidenced, while the frameworks through which organisations interpret workplace experience simply lack the conceptual vocabulary to take structural racism seriously as an explanation (Fricker, 2007; Mirza & Warwick, 2022; Naseem, 2019). Diversity programmes developed without meaningful input from those most affected reproduce this hermeneutical failure institutionally. The practical result is that even racially minoritised graduates who navigate discriminatory hiring and enter professional roles frequently find their substantive freedom to build sustainable careers sharply constrained, limited by precarious contracts, exclusion from mentoring and sponsorship, and an organisational climate that demands constant performance of belonging (Beigi et al., 2025). These compounded injustices are not experienced uniformly, as intersectionality reveals that racially minoritised graduates who are also women, Muslim, or from working-class backgrounds face layered and mutually reinforcing forms of exclusion within organisational life (Beigi et al., 2025; Crenshaw, 1989).

Employers' accountability obligations derive from their employment authority: the gatekeeping power over hiring decisions, progression structures, and organisational culture that directly determines whether racially minoritised graduates can convert their qualifications into meaningful careers. Yet, research consistently shows that when this authority is exercised through voluntarist EDI frameworks, the burden of managing racial misconduct and exclusion is delegated onto

individuals, targets and bystanders, rather than addressed systemically, producing entrenched patterns of inaction and superficial problem-solving that leave structural inequality intact (Shamir, 2008; Tomlinson et al., 2025). Accountability demands more from employers than diversity statements or training programmes alone. *Duty* requires that hiring and progression decisions do not reproduce racial hierarchy regardless of intent (Young, 2006). *Monitoring* requires recruitment, progression, and pay data disaggregated by race, made publicly available, because without that transparency accountability has nothing to grip (Advance HE, 2023). Where disparities are found they must be *explained* structurally, not attributed to pipeline problems, and acted upon through blind recruitment, standardised criteria, sponsorship schemes, and the elimination of unpaid internships that function in practice as gatekeeping mechanisms for racially minoritised graduates regardless of their qualifications. The question of *sanction* makes many employers uncomfortable, but voluntary compliance has had decades to demonstrate its adequacy and the evidence reviewed above shows it has not. Stronger *enforcement* of the Equality Act, mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting with binding targets, and reputational consequences that make racial inequity organisationally costly are not punitive measures but the minimum conditions under which the preceding obligations can be taken seriously (Runnymede Trust, 2025; TUC, 2023).

The Role of the State

UK policy discourse has long framed graduate employability as a matter of individual skills deficits and adaptability, mobilising foundational employability models to justify interventions that placed responsibility firmly on graduates while leaving employers and the state largely outside the frame of ethical accountability (Cheng et al., 2022; Clarke, 2018; Santos, 2020). The *distributive* consequences of this approach are evident in the persistence of ethnic penalties across graduate labour markets despite decades of equality legislation. Racially minoritised graduates continue to experience lower employment rates, occupational downgrading, and wage gaps even when controlling for educational attainment and institutional prestige (Li & Heath, 2020; Zwysen & Longhi, 2018), and recent labour market data show they are significantly more likely to be unemployed 6 months after graduation and disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid, insecure roles (Dickson et al., 2024; Runnymede Trust, 2025). For international racially minoritised graduates, these distributional failures are compounded by visa restrictions that constrain labour market access and by credential non-recognition that renders their qualifications effectively invisible within UK hiring systems (Foster & George, 2025; Julios-Costa & Montiel-McCann, 2025). *Procedurally*, equality legislation exists but enforcement mechanisms remain weak, leaving employers significant discretion in recruitment and progression practices that reproduce racialised disadvantage under the guise of neutrality (Di Stasio et al., 2021; Heath & Di Stasio, 2019). Higher education funding and accountability frameworks meanwhile incentivise universities to focus on generic skills provision and employability metrics rather than addressing the structural barriers of attainment gaps, unequal internship access, and discriminatory hiring (Jackson, 2024; Refugee Action and Runnymede Trust, 2024; Runnymede Trust, 2025). The overall picture is of a state that has set standards for fairness without building the enforcement architecture to make those standards meaningful.

The failure runs deeper than weak enforcement. State policy narratives consistently portray racially minoritised graduates as lacking resilience, confidence, or soft skills while leaving their systemic exclusion from opportunity structures entirely unexamined, a recognition injustice that delegitimises the cultural capitals they hold rather than interrogating the systems that devalue them (Bhopal, 2024b; Pilkington, 2020; Young, 1990). Civil society organisations such as the Runnymede Trust (2025) and the TUC (2023) consistently document racialised disadvantage in graduate employment, yet these insights rarely shape policy design, as policymaking continues to rely on narrow statistical indicators that obscure lived experiences of discrimination, and lack the conceptual resources to recognise structural racism as a policy problem rather than an individual one (Fricker, 2007; Mirza & Warwick, 2022). The result is policy that measures whether graduates are employed 6 months after graduation without asking whether they have the substantive freedom to pursue meaningful careers, leaving invisible the precarity, underemployment, and constrained progression that racially minoritised graduates disproportionately experience (Beigi et al., 2025). From a CRT perspective, racial inequality is not a policy oversight but reflects entrenched institutional logics, and intersectionality shows that the graduates most severely affected, including migrant graduates, Muslim women, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, remain largely invisible within aggregate policy frameworks that cannot capture compounded disadvantage (Beigi et al., 2025; Bhopal, 2024a; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

Unlike universities or employers, the state possesses a power that neither can match: the legislative authority to compel rather than merely encourage structural change. The question is whether it is willing to use it. Its *duty* under the framework is not merely to set equality standards but to accept responsibility as a structural actor whose policy choices directly determine whether racially equitable graduate outcomes are achievable (Young, 2006). That responsibility requires systematic *monitoring*: the state must mandate

disaggregated data collection and publication across higher education and employment sectors as a legal requirement rather than an optional transparency measure, because without that evidential foundation accountability cannot function (Advance HE, 2023; Mirza & Warwick, 2022). Where data reveals persistent disparities the state must *explain* them publicly and structurally, resisting the habitual retreat to narratives of individual graduate deficit. *Remediation* demands concrete legislative intervention, including funding for paid placements, targeted progression schemes, and a reformed anti-discrimination framework that imposes positive duties on employers and universities rather than relying on individual complaint mechanisms that place the burden of enforcement on those already most disadvantaged (Runnymede Trust, 2025; TUC, 2023). The *sanction* question is where state accountability is most distinctively powerful and most consistently evaded; withdrawing funding from institutions that persistently fail on racial equity, imposing binding ethnicity pay gap reporting with improvement targets, and using regulatory powers to compel the structural changes that voluntary compliance has consistently failed to deliver are the basic conditions under which the preceding obligations become more than aspirational statements.

Developing the Ethical Employability Framework (Race-Centred)

The Ethical Employability Framework (race-centred) (see Fig. 2) builds on the ethical architecture developed in the preceding sections (see Fig. 1) to offer an integrated account of how racially minoritised graduate outcomes are produced, sustained, and potentially transformed across three interconnected levels of social organisation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Young, 1990). The framework begins at the *macro-level*, where structural conditions set the field before graduates ever encounter a university or a recruiter, including *racialised labour market regimes* that historically privilege white workers in access to professional roles (Li & Heath, 2020), *immigration and visa barriers* that disproportionately constrain international racially minoritised graduates (Foster & George, 2025), *algorithmic bias in AI-driven hiring systems* that reproduces discrimination at scale (Köchling & Wehner, 2020), and *accreditation frameworks* that privilege particular credentialled knowledge while rendering others invisible. The agents who govern these macro-level conditions include national governments and parliaments, which set immigration and visa policy and legislate the equality framework within which employers and universities operate; regulatory and professional bodies, which determine accreditation standards and credential recognition; and international governance institutions, which are only beginning to develop frameworks for the ethical regulation of AI in hiring. Unlike the meso-level actors who implement policy within existing structures, macro-level agents have the authority to reshape the structural field itself, making their role in the framework analytically distinct from that of universities, employers, and state enforcement agencies. These are active mechanisms of racialised exclusion that shape what is possible at the levels below.

The downward arrow from macro to meso in Fig. 2 captures this causal logic, as macro-structures constrain and enable what institutional actors can and choose to do. At the *meso-level*, universities, employers, and the state translate these conditions into concrete practices. *Universities* shape outcomes through *admissions*, *curriculum design*, *assessment*, *placement brokerage*, *careers provision*, and *recognition practices* (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Pilkington, 2020); *employers* through *job design*, *recruitment criteria*, *progression decisions*, and o*rganisational cultures* (Heath & Di Stasio, 2019; Ingram & Allen, 2019); the *state* through *labour law*, *immigration rules*, *funding*, *accreditation*, and critically *audits and sanctions* that determine whether equality obligations are enforced or remain aspirational (Runnymede Trust, 2025; Young, 2006). Running horizontally across all three is the *accountability spine*, comprising *Duty*, *Monitoring*, *Explanation*, *Remediation*, and *Sanction*, which are structured and cumulative but may operate iteratively, as the return arrow in Fig. 2 indicates, redistributing responsibility away from graduates and onto the institutions whose decisions determine whether racially equitable outcomes are achievable.

The second downward arrow from meso to mechanisms of exclusion shows how institutional practices generate the specific processes through which racially minoritised graduates are disadvantaged, with each *mechanism* demanding a specific *correction*. Capital devaluation requires broadening the forms of capital universities and employers recognise and reward, operationalised through portfolio-based assessment, competency frameworks that value diverse professional backgrounds, and recruitment criteria that do not privilege elite educational credentials (Bourdieu, 1986; Ingram & Allen, 2019). Gatekeeping and procedural opacity require transparent selection criteria and standardised fair processes that resist subjective cultural bias, implemented through blind application screening, structured interviews with predetermined criteria, and publicly available selection rubrics (Di Stasio et al., 2021; Heath & Di Stasio, 2019). Misrecognition of racially minoritised graduates' identities requires recognition justice practices embedded in curricula, recruitment, and organisational culture, achieved through curriculum decolonisation, inclusive professional development programmes, and organisational cultures that validate rather than suppress diverse identities (Fraser, 1995, 2009; Young, 1990). Habitus misalignment requires inclusive conceptions of professionalism that challenge rather than reproduce white middle-class norms, enacted

through redesigned careers guidance, mentoring by professionals from racially minoritised backgrounds, and employer education on the cultural specificity of dominant professional norms (Bourdieu, 1986; Ingram & Allen, 2019). Algorithmic bias in hiring systems requires regular audits of AI-driven tools to identify and remove discriminatory patterns, with findings made publicly available and remediation tied to procurement and accreditation conditions (Köchling & Wehner, 2020). The third downward arrow from mechanisms to the *individual level* shows how, when corrective actions are properly implemented, graduates can achieve the *positive outcomes* the framework identifies as its goal, namely equitable access to opportunities, fair job quality and progression, and the substantive freedom to flourish in the graduate labour market (Beigi et al., 2025; Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999).

Although Fig. 2 presents the framework as a downward progression from macro to meso to individual, the relationships between levels run in both directions through *three feedback loops* that make the system dynamic rather than deterministic. The first runs from the individual level back to the mechanisms of exclusion; when patterns of inequality are documented at the graduate level, they provide evidence that specific mechanisms are operating and should trigger the corresponding corrections rather than being absorbed as normal variation in outcomes (Advance HE, 2023; Mirza & Warwick, 2022). The second runs from the mechanisms of exclusion back to the meso-level; once corrections are identified, institutional actors at universities, employers, and the state bear responsibility for implementing them through the accountability spine, moving through explanation and remediation rather than allowing the mechanisms that produce disadvantage to persist unchallenged (Ahmed, 2012; Young, 2006). The third runs from the meso-level back to the macro-level; institutional reform, accumulated evidence of systemic failure, and advocacy from civil society organisations can generate policy debates and legislative change that reshape the structural conditions within which all three levels operate (Runnymede Trust, 2025; TUC, 2023). Taken together these feedback loops mean that graduate testimony about discrimination, when epistemic justice is honoured rather than violated, becomes the evidential foundation for accountability at every level of the framework (Fricker, 2007). The framework is therefore processual rather than fixed; it does not simply diagnose racialised inequality but specifies the mechanisms, obligations, and feedback pathways through which employability systems can be transformed to enabling genuine equity.

Theoretical Contributions

This paper makes several theoretical contributions at the intersection of employability scholarship and business ethics. These contributions are hierarchically organised rather than parallel: the first is the foundational claim from which the others follow, each operationalising a distinct dimension of the normative reframing that the first contribution establishes. The primary and most fundamental contribution is the normative reframing of employability as an ethical construct rather than a neutral assemblage of skills, attributes, and capitals. Dominant employability frameworks have provided sophisticated accounts of what graduates need to compete in labour markets but have largely left unexamined the moral legitimacy of the processes through which opportunities are allocated and outcomes are shaped (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Knight and Yorke, 2006; Tomlinson, 2017). By embedding distributive, procedural, recognition, and epistemic justice within the first layer of the theoretical architecture (see Fig. 1), this paper introduces a normative foundation that enables employability scholarship to ask not only what graduates need but also whether the systems within which they compete are fair (Fraser, 1995; Fricker, 2007; Young, 1990). This connects employability studies to ethical and normative traditions central to business ethics that have rarely been brought to bear on graduate labour market outcomes (Costea et al., 2012; Greene & Kirton, 2024; Greenwood, 2002). The contribution is not that ethics has been absent from all employability scholarship but that it has not been systematically integrated into the foundational theoretical architecture of the field, a gap this paper addresses by treating justice not as a supplementary lens but as the organising principle of the framework itself.

The second contribution addresses the question of why racial inequality persists despite decades of diversity initiatives. Mainstream employability frameworks have developed sophisticated accounts of capitals, ecosystems, and career development while leaving unaddressed the question of why racially minoritised graduates consistently experience worse outcomes than their white peers despite equivalent qualifications. This paper builds a race-centred explanatory layer from the ground up, integrating CRT, intersectionality, and Bourdieu's theory of capitals as the second layer of the theoretical architecture (see Fig. 1) (Bourdieu, 1986; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). CRT reveals how meritocratic employability discourses obscure structural racism by presenting racially unequal outcomes as the product of individual deficits rather than institutional failures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Intersectionality shows that racial disadvantage compounds across gender, class, and religion in ways that single-axis frameworks cannot capture (Beigi et al., 2025; Naseem, 2019). Bourdieu explains the specific mechanism through which cultural exclusion operates, namely the systematic devaluation of racially minoritised graduates' capitals in favour of dominant white middle-class norms (Ingram & Allen, 2019). The paper also distinguishes between UK-born and international racially minoritised graduates, whose experiences of racial

inequality are structurally distinct in ways that previous frameworks have conflated (Foster & George, 2025).

The third contribution addresses the question of who bears responsibility and how that responsibility is discharged. This paper develops a five-stage accountability spine comprising Duty, Monitoring, Explanation, Remediation, and Sanction, positioned as the third layer of the theoretical architecture (see Fig. 1). Duty establishes pre-existing moral and legal obligations to ensure racially equitable graduate outcomes, while Monitoring requires systematic disaggregation of outcome data by race. Explanation requires public acknowledgement of structural causes, Remediation requires concrete corrective action, and Sanction establishes that failure to fulfil the preceding stages must carry enforceable consequences, without which the cycle risks remaining aspirational rather than binding (Ahmed, 2012; Young, 2006). Frameworks of stakeholder accountability, institutional responsibility, and governance have made important contributions to understanding how responsibility is distributed, but they have not been integrated into a race-centred framework of graduate employability that connects structural diagnosis to enforceable institutional obligation. The spine's contribution lies in this integration. Grounded in Young's (2006) social connection model, it derives institutional obligation from structural contribution to injustice rather than from stakeholder interest alone, and it is structured and cumulative rather than strictly sequential: the stages may operate iteratively in practice, but their logical ordering ensures that institutions cannot claim compliance at a later stage without having discharged earlier obligations (Greenwood, 2007; Young, 2006). In doing so the spine shifts the burden of employability away from graduates and onto the institutional actors whose decisions collectively determine whether racially equitable outcomes are achievable (Cheng et al., 2022; Shamir, 2008).

The fourth contribution addresses the question of what substantive flourishing requires beyond the removal of barriers. The capabilities approach is integrated as the framework's evaluative standard, shifting the question from whether opportunities are formally available to whether racially minoritised graduates have the substantive freedom to convert them into meaningful careers (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). Existing employability frameworks evaluate success primarily through employment rates and graduate outcome measures that obscure whether graduates are able to flourish, a limitation the capabilities approach directly addresses by insisting that access alone is insufficient without the real conditions for its exercise (Burke et al., 2020; Jackson, 2024). For UK-born racially minoritised graduates, those conditions are systematically undermined by discrimination, misrecognition, and cultural exclusion within domestic institutions; for international racially minoritised graduates, they are further constrained by visa restrictions, credential non-recognition, and financial barriers that prevent participation in the unpaid placements and co-curricular activities through which graduate career capital is accumulated (Dickson et al., 2024; Foster & George, 2025).

The fifth contribution is integrative rather than additive. It brings together the normative foundations, the race-centred explanatory lenses, the accountability spine, and the capabilities approach into a coherent operational framework that maps how racially minoritised graduate outcomes are produced, sustained, and transformed across macro-, meso-, and individual levels of social organisation (see Fig. 2). While Fig. 1 presents the theoretical architecture, Fig. 2 shows how it operates in practice, tracing the causal pathways through which macro-level structural conditions shape meso-level institutional practices, which generate the mechanisms of exclusion that produce racially unequal outcomes, and specifying the corrections and feedback loops through which those outcomes can be transformed. Existing frameworks have tended to theorise levels in relative isolation (Clarke, 2018; Donald et al., 2023; Tomlinson, 2017), despite long-standing arguments in social science for attending to how macro, meso, and individual levels interact and shape each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Young, 1990). The framework extends leading capital-based models, including Donald et al.'s Employability Capital Growth Model (Donald et al., 2023), by introducing justice, accountability, and race as constitutive rather than supplementary theoretical concerns. Thus, it connects graduate labour market scholarship to broader debates about fairness, responsibility, and human flourishing that are central to business ethics (Costea et al., 2012; Greene & Kirton, 2024; Nussbaum, 2000; Rhodes & Harvey, 2012; Sen, 1999).

Implications for Policy and Practice

The Ethical Employability Framework (see Fig. 2) reframes employability as a domain of institutional obligation, with direct consequences for how policy is designed, how institutions are held accountable, and how practice is evaluated. Structural conditions at the *macro-level* require legislative intervention. Immigration and visa frameworks that disproportionately constrain international racially minoritised graduates require reform that decouples graduate employability from immigration status (Foster & George, 2025). AI governance frameworks must impose binding audit requirements on algorithmic hiring tools rather than relying on voluntary industry codes (Köchling & Wehner, 2020). Accreditation systems must be redesigned to recognise diverse educational formations rather than privileging narrow credentialled knowledge (Foster & George, 2025).

For *universities*, the framework demands curriculum decolonisation, reform of assessment practices that

privilege dominant cultural and linguistic norms, and redesign of careers services to validate diverse professional identities rather than demanding assimilation into white middle-class conceptions of professionalism (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Bhopal, 2024b; Pilkington, 2020). Paid placement schemes accessible regardless of financial background are a remediation obligation rather than a discretionary enhancement, particularly for international racially minoritised graduates for whom unpaid internships are financially and legally inaccessible (Dickson et al., 2024; Foster & George, 2025).

For *employers*, the minimum conditions of accountability include blind recruitment, standardised interview criteria, sponsorship programmes targeting racially minoritised employees, mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting, and regular audits of AI-driven hiring tools (Heath & Di Stasio, 2019; Ingram & Allen, 2019; Köchling & Wehner, 2020). The sanction stage of the accountability spine establishes that failure to fulfil these obligations must carry enforceable consequences, whether through regulatory intervention, reputational accountability, or withdrawal of public funding where persistent disparities remain unaddressed (Ahmed, 2012; Young, 2006).

For the *state*, the accountability spine specifies concrete obligations that go beyond setting equality standards to enforcing them. The state bears a duty to ensure racially equitable graduate outcomes grounded in existing equality legislation. Monitoring requires mandating disaggregated outcome data as a legal requirement across higher education and employment sectors. Where data reveal persistent racial disparities, explanation must acknowledge structural causes publicly rather than attributing gaps to graduate deficit. Remediation demands funding for paid placements, targeted progression schemes, and a reformed anti-discrimination framework that imposes positive duties on employers and universities rather than relying on individual complaint mechanisms. Sanction requires that failure to act carries regulatory and financial consequences rather than remaining a matter of voluntary compliance (Runnymede Trust, 2025; TUC, 2023; Young, 2006).

The capabilities approach provides the evaluative standard against which all these interventions must be assessed. The question is not whether opportunities formally exist but whether racially minoritised graduates have the substantive freedom to convert them into meaningful and dignified careers (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). For UK-born graduates, this means freedom from discrimination, misrecognition, and cultural exclusion within domestic institutions. For international graduates, it means freedom from the additional constraints of visa restrictions, credential non-recognition, and financial barriers that prevent participation in the activities through which graduate career capital is accumulated (Dickson et al., 2024; Foster & George, 2025).

Limitations and Future Research

As a conceptual paper, the framework has not been empirically tested, and this represents its primary limitation. The theoretical architecture offers a diagnostic and evaluative tool rather than a set of empirically verified propositions. Future research should prioritise the operationalisation and testing of the framework across different institutional contexts, examining whether the five-stage accountability spine reduces ethnic penalties in graduate recruitment and progression when implemented in practice (Heath & Di Stasio, 2019; Li & Heath, 2020).

The framework is primarily grounded in the UK context, and while the theoretical architecture draws on scholarship with broader international relevance, the empirical evidence base and regulatory landscape are specific to the UK graduate labour market (Foster & George, 2025). Comparative research examining how accountability mechanisms operate under different legislative and regulatory conditions would significantly extend its analytical reach.

While the paper acknowledges that racial disadvantage compounds across gender, class, and religion (Beigi et al., 2025; Crenshaw, 1989), the framework does not fully theorise how the accountability spine should be differentiated to address the compounded disadvantages of specific intersectional groups. Future research might develop more granular accountability mechanisms sensitive to intersectional complexity rather than treating racially minoritised graduates as a homogeneous category.

Finally, the effectiveness of the corrective mechanisms specified in Fig. 2 can be evaluated through a set of observable institutional indicators: reductions in ethnic penalties in hiring and progression rates, increases in racially disaggregated data publication, shifts in the proportion of racially minoritised graduates accessing paid placements, and changes in organisational culture measures across universities and employers. The framework also yields testable propositions including how institutional monitoring and public explanation of racial disparities influences employer behaviour, whether the capabilities approach provides a more robust evaluative standard than conventional employment rate measures, and how the feedback loops identified in Fig. 2 operate across different sectors and institutional contexts (Akkermans et al., 2024; Donald et al., 2023).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that employability cannot be adequately understood or addressed without confronting its ethical dimensions. Racially minoritised graduates in the

UK face persistent and well-documented inequalities in graduate labour market outcomes that dominant employability frameworks have left largely untheorised, treating them as empirical anomalies rather than as structural conditions requiring normative and institutional response. The Ethical Employability Framework developed here addresses this gap by integrating normative foundations, race-centred explanatory lenses, an accountability spine, and the capabilities approach into a coherent analytical architecture that specifies not only what justice requires but who is responsible for delivering it and how that responsibility can be enforced.

The framework's central claim is that employability is not a neutral technical problem of skills supply and demand but a morally charged domain in which universities, employers, and the state bear shared and enforceable obligations to racially minoritised graduates. If employability continues to be framed as neutral, racially minoritised graduates will continue to bear the burden of structural inequalities that are institutionally produced and institutionally perpetuated, and the scholarly tools needed to hold the relevant actors accountable will remain absent from both employability studies and business ethics. In reshaping this framing, the paper makes a direct intervention into three debates that are central to business ethics. It advances the theory of corporate moral agency by demonstrating that universities, employers, and the state bear enforceable obligations to racially minoritised graduates that cannot be discharged through voluntary diversity commitments or symbolic engagement alone (Greenwood, 2007; Young, 2006). It reframes stakeholder theory by repositioning racially minoritised graduates as rights-holders with legitimate and enforceable claims on institutional actors rather than as passive beneficiaries of goodwill (Weitzner & Deutsch, 2023). And it extends structural injustice theory by specifying the precise mechanisms through which institutional actors reproduce racial inequality in graduate labour markets and the corrective obligations that follow from each (Greene & Kirton, 2024; Young, 2006). Fulfilling those obligations requires structural change at the macro-level, institutional reform at the meso-level, and a shift in the evaluative standard from formal access to substantive freedom to flourish. Employability, long cast as an individual challenge, must be reimagined as a collective ethical responsibility, and the framework presented here offers the theoretical architecture, the accountability mechanisms, and the analytical tools to begin that reimagining in earnest.

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Declarations

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Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals This research did not involve human participants or animals. It is a conceptual and theoretical study based on secondary sources.

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