

Exploring the Portability of Skills and the Precarity of Work in Youth Digital Skilling and Uneven Labour-Market Opportunities in Emerging Economies

Craig Kensley

Executive Director, GrowZA Social Investment Agency, Johannesburg, South Africa

Research collaborator with Malmö University, Cape Peninsula University of Technology and the Central University of Haryana

ORCID: 0009-0009-0704-1060

Abstract

Young workers are increasingly expected to acquire skills that can travel across employers, sectors, platforms and geographies. Yet the portability of capability does not determine whether labour markets can recognise, absorb and reward it. This paper examines the institutional space between having capability and achieving sustained economic mobility through decent work. It emerges from a wider international research programme on young workers, skilling and decent work in a global, mobile and connected world, with research environments in South Africa, India, Senegal and Sweden. The paper develops a specific analytical extension from that programme: youth-employment policy and practice in high-inequality emerging economies have placed disproportionate weight on labour supply interventions while paying less attention to the quantity, quality and institutional character of labour demand. Drawing on programme documentation, practitioner inquiry and literature on skills, labour-market intermediation, platform work, decent work and changing employment relationships, the paper proposes a labour-market conversion architecture. The model links capability, recognition, foothold, accumulation, portability, decent labour demand and mobility, while treating demand as a condition surrounding every stage. South African practice around the Absa Cybersecurity Academy illustrates how a skilling institution may also construct recognition and footholds. Platform-mediated and informal work reveal the converse problem: experience may accumulate while its credible representation remains controlled by a manager, employer or platform. The paper distinguishes labour-market movement from upward mobility and develops portable precarity as a proposition for further testing. The argument is not that skills are unimportant. It is that worker capability cannot substitute for missing jobs, weak entry pathways or indecent employment relations.

Keywords: youth employment; portable skills; labour demand; decent work; platform work; labour-market intermediation; South Africa; India

1. Introduction: the portability paradox

Portability has become a promise and an obligation. Young people are urged to build transferable skills, renew them continuously and remain ready to move across firms, sectors and geographies. The advice has force. Technological change alters tasks, employers reorganise work, and many young workers cannot rely on a single organisation to carry a career. Yet the promise contains a basic analytical omission. A worker may hold a valuable capability and still lack a credible way to demonstrate it. A certificate may be recognised and still fail to produce a first opportunity. Experience may accumulate and remain trapped inside an employer, a manager's memory or a platform's database. Even perfectly legible and portable capability cannot create a vacancy where none exists. Portability may enable movement without producing mobility.

This problem is particularly sharp in high-inequality labour markets. Youth-employment interventions commonly concentrate on what can be changed in the worker: technical skill, certification, work readiness, digital literacy, adaptability and entrepreneurial behaviour. These interventions address real constraints. They also sit within a political economy in which changing the worker is often easier than changing the organisation of demand. Training providers can count enrolments and completions. Funders can procure cohorts. Employers can endorse curricula without committing to entry-level jobs, structured progression or long-term attachment. The result is a field rich in supply-side activity and often thin in evidence about whether the labour market has expanded its capacity to receive young people.

The paper emerges from an international research programme concerned with young people, skills, reskilling and decent work in a global, mobile and connected world. The programme links Malmö University, Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), GrowZA, the Central University of Haryana and other research and practice partners. Its research environments include Cape Town, Gurugram, Dakar and Malmö. The programme deliberately begins with workers aged 30 and below, their lived experience, situated technological practices, future imaginaries and agency. It does not begin with platforms as autonomous objects or with technology as destiny. That worker-centred orientation matters here because a demand-side correction must not turn young people into passive recipients of structure. Workers act, learn, improvise and move. The question is whether the institutions around them allow that agency to accumulate economic value.

The ECIC paper develops a narrower question from this foundation: under what institutional and demand-side conditions do portable skills translate into sustained economic mobility for young workers in high-inequality emerging economies, and under what conditions do they reproduce or accommodate precarious work? Subsidiary questions concern how capability becomes

legible, how young workers obtain a foothold, which forms of occupational value travel, and how employer practices and job quality condition progression.

The paper makes two contributions. First, it reframes the usual employability question. The relevant unit of analysis is not only the worker and their stock of skills, but the architecture through which capability is recognised, put to work, accumulated, transported and rewarded. Second, it proposes a provisional labour-market conversion architecture comprising capability, recognition, foothold, accumulation, portability, decent labour demand and mobility. The sequence is analytical, not mechanically linear. Demand surrounds it. Employers, clients and public institutions shape which capabilities matter, which signals they trust, who receives a first opportunity, what experience can accumulate, whether its evidence travels and whether subsequent work improves the worker's economic position.

This is a discovery-phase conceptual paper. It draws on the research programme's proposal and pilot documentation, GrowZA's practitioner engagement, official programme material concerning the Absa Cybersecurity Academy, and established research. It does not report completed multi-country fieldwork. Planned interviews, shadowing and self-documentation are described as planned. Organisation-reported outcomes are not presented as independent impact findings. The distinction is deliberate because the paper's model is intended to organise empirical inquiry, not pre-empt it.

The argument is simple enough to state but difficult to operationalise. Skilling is necessary in many pathways, but it is insufficient. Digital intermediation can improve matching without creating additional work. Work can be created without being decent. Firms may value portable workers precisely because portability permits weaker attachment, while workers value it as protection against dependence. Flexibility is therefore not inherently emancipatory or exploitative. Its distribution matters. Who gains options, who carries risk and who controls the evidence that previous work should count?

2. Skilling, employability and the supply-side bias

Human-capital theory offers a plausible starting point. Education and training can raise productivity, widen occupational choice and improve earnings. In digital fields, the content of work changes quickly enough that initial education cannot be the end of learning. The wider research programme is right to take formal and informal reskilling seriously. The problem begins when a partial explanation becomes a total diagnosis: unemployment is read primarily as evidence that workers do not possess the skills employers need.

The language of skills mismatch often conceals several different conditions. The ILO distinguishes skill shortages, skill gaps, overqualification, underqualification, field-of-study mismatch and skill obsolescence, each with different causes and policy implications (ILO, 2019). A shortage of workers with a particular capability is not the same problem as weak aggregate

demand. Nor is an employer's preference for experienced candidates proof that inexperienced workers lack relevant capability. In South Africa, the World Bank's youth-employment analysis identifies supply constraints such as weak educational outcomes and high job-entry requirements, but also demand constraints including slow growth, weak small-business expansion and changes in the skill intensity of jobs (World Bank, 2021). The labour market can contain skill shortages in selected occupations and a shortage of jobs in aggregate at the same time.

Skills policy easily slips into a deficit account of the unemployed person. The intervention then asks whether the worker is trained, certified, punctual, digitally literate, emotionally resilient and ready to adapt. Less attention falls on whether firms create genuine entry pathways, tolerate the learning curve of a first job, invest in supervision or offer roles in which capability can deepen. The asymmetry is material. Workers are asked to become ready for the labour market, while labour-market institutions are rarely assessed for their readiness to absorb workers.

This does not make employability meaningless. It makes it relational. Employability is sometimes treated as a portable individual attribute, but the opportunity to employ is produced by interactions among worker capability, employer practices, networks, location, regulation, public infrastructure and the volume of vacancies. An individual can improve their position relative to other job seekers through training while the cohort as a whole faces the same number of jobs. A programme may produce positive participant outcomes through selection, displacement or preferential access without increasing labour demand. These outcomes may still matter to participants, but they answer a different question from job creation.

The first distinction needed is between capability and certification. Capability is what a person can do. It may be acquired through a degree, vocational programme or corporate academy, but also through repeated work, family enterprise, peer learning, online tutorials, community activity and self-directed practice. Certification is one mechanism for signalling capability. It can reduce uncertainty for an employer, particularly when the issuing institution is trusted. It can also screen out workers whose capability was acquired outside approved routes. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) seeks to close this gap by translating informal and non-formal learning into recognised credentials. OECD research describes this as a bridge between skills and qualifications, although participation remains limited where processes are complex, costly or poorly understood (OECD, 2023; OECD, 2026a).

The worker with capability but no trusted signal faces capability without recognition. This is not a marginal condition. Informal workers commonly learn through experience, informal apprenticeships and community or household practice. Yet the absence of recognised evidence can block access to further training and formal work (OECD, 2023). Inequality is therefore reproduced not only through unequal access to learning and employment, but through unequal access to the institutions that make learning credible. Professionals carry degrees, registrations, portfolios, publications, branded employers and networks. Workers lower in the occupational hierarchy often carry thinner evidence.

Recognition still does not guarantee entry. Young people confront an experience trap: employers value evidence of successful application but a worker needs an opportunity to produce that evidence. A foothold is the first credible economic opportunity through which capability becomes visible and begins to accumulate labour-market value. It may be an apprenticeship, internship, paid project, verified portfolio, first client or first employer. What matters is not permanence but convertibility. A foothold allows a claim about capability to become a record of performance.

Footholds are produced institutionally. Employers decide whether entry-level roles exist and how much uncertainty they will carry. Training organisations broker relationships and vouch for candidates. Public programmes can subsidise work experience. Networks determine who hears about opportunities and whose potential receives the benefit of doubt. The ILO has stated the point bluntly: employment services and transition policies can improve matching, but they work only when vacancies exist (ILO, 2016). The supply-side bias begins to break once the foothold is treated as shared infrastructure rather than the final test of an individual's readiness.

3. Portability: what actually travels?

Portability is often invoked as though a skill either travels or it does not. In practice, at least six different objects may need to move.

Skill portability concerns whether capability remains useful in another context. A programming language may be recognised across firms, while workplace routines may be organisation-specific. Credential portability concerns whether formal proof is understood and trusted elsewhere. Experience portability concerns whether previous work is treated as relevant to a new role. Reputation portability concerns whether evidence of reliable performance travels. Data portability concerns whether the worker can obtain and transmit the digital record of work. Network portability concerns whether relationships built through work continue to generate information, endorsement or opportunity.

These dimensions can diverge. A worker may possess a transferable capability but a locally unfamiliar certificate. Experience may be relevant but described in a job title that another sector does not understand. A platform may record thousands of successful transactions, yet a competing platform may not accept the rating as evidence. A professional network may travel across firms while a domestic worker's clients remain accessible only through an intermediary. Portability is therefore not a property of skills alone. It is an institutional achievement involving standards, trust, data formats and power.

Three recognition regimes clarify the problem. The first is institutionally mediated recognition. A university, professional body, academy or reputable employer certifies or vouches for capability. Its value depends on the institution's standing and on the receiving organisation's willingness to trust it. The second is human-mediated recognition. Consider an experienced waiter whose

portable evidence may amount to a curriculum vitae and the request, “call my manager”. Years of tacit skill in timing, customer judgement, conflict handling and team coordination travel through a fragile human relationship. Managerial turnover, bias, conflict, memory or the circumstances of departure may determine whether that work counts. The waiter is an analytical illustration here, not a finding from this study, but hospitality research has long shown that service work combines tacit, embodied and relational capabilities that formal credentials capture poorly.

The third regime is platform-mediated recognition. Platforms can make work unusually visible by recording tasks, ratings, reviews, tenure, acceptance and completion. That record can reduce information asymmetry inside the platform. It can also deepen dependence if the platform controls access to the credible representation of the worker's history. Research on reputation portability finds that workers typically cannot transfer ratings seamlessly between platforms, creating switching costs, and that imported ratings build trust only under particular conditions, including similarity between the source and target tasks (Corten et al., 2023; Tran Nhat, Thäter and Teubner, 2024). The European Commission identified the inability to port reputation as a competition and worker-mobility problem. The EU Platform Work Directive now provides that people performing platform work should be able to receive machine-readable personal data generated through their work, including ratings and reviews, and transmit it to a third party (European Union, 2024).

This does not prove that any particular Uber rating can or cannot be imported into Bolt in South Africa or India. Platform policies and technical interfaces vary. The defensible claim is narrower: occupational reputation can be digitally extensive and still institutionally bounded. Legal access to raw data also does not ensure that another platform will interpret, trust or operationalise it. Data portability is necessary for reputation portability, but it is not sufficient.

Control over evidence affects bargaining power. A worker who can take an independently verified portfolio, client history or credential to another employer has a credible exit option. A worker whose record is locked inside one organisation may have accumulated value that cannot be realised elsewhere. This is stranded occupational value. The distinction helps explain why the portability of work itself is ambiguous. Employers may value workers who can enter quickly and leave cheaply. Workers value the ability to leave an abusive or stagnant relationship. The same institutional feature can increase firm flexibility and worker agency, but not necessarily in equal measure.

This leads to a necessary distinction between movement and mobility. A worker can move repeatedly among restaurants, short contracts, gigs or platforms without improving income security, social protection, voice or prospects. Movement records change of position. Economic mobility records improvement in position. A labour market that produces constant circulation may appear flexible and dynamic while workers remain stationary in economic terms. Portability should therefore be evaluated by what workers accumulate and retain, not by the frequency with which they change engagements.

4. Labour demand, flexibility and disposability

The demand-side turn asks youth-employment actors to subject firms and labour-market institutions to the same scrutiny applied to workers. Are enough opportunities being created? Are they new opportunities or existing transactions routed through a new intermediary? Do employers maintain entry-level roles? Who finances training after entry? Which party bears demand volatility, equipment costs, illness and downtime? Can workers progress, organise and leave with evidence of their contribution?

The first test is conceptual: digitisation of work is not the same as creation of work, and creation of work is not the same as creation of decent work. Digital systems can make matching faster, payments traceable and dispersed markets accessible. These gains may be substantial. Yet a platform that moves an existing taxi trip, cleaning job or repair task onto an app has digitised intermediation. It has not necessarily increased the total demand for transport, cleaning or repair. New convenience, lower prices or geographic reach may expand demand, but this is an empirical question, not an automatic consequence of platform scale.

Aleksynska's ILO study of digital work in Eastern Europe provides unusually clear evidence. For app-mediated, on-location work, many workers were already present in transport, care and other traditional sectors. The apps changed how existing labour supply and client demand were matched, not the underlying activity. They could also enable new entrants and reveal previously invisible informal work. The report explicitly notes that evidence was insufficient to determine whether app growth raised informality or merely exposed it (Aleksynska, 2021). The correct conclusion is therefore disciplined: digital intermediation can reorganise and make visible existing activity, and any additional-employment effect must be demonstrated separately.

The second test concerns the employment relationship. Work may increase while its quality remains poor. The ILO's decent work agenda treats productive work, fair income, security, social protection, rights, voice and prospects for development as integrated concerns. Fairwork operationalises related principles for platforms through fair pay, conditions, contracts, management and representation (Graham et al., 2020; Fairwork, 2023). In South Africa, Fairwork's ratings have shown that platforms can provide accessible work while failing to evidence stronger thresholds on income protection, algorithmic transparency or worker influence. The issue is not whether a placement or gig exists, but what kind of work it is, who carries its risks and whether participation increases future options.

Osterman's Disposable Workers: The Transformation of Employment sharpens the employer side of the analysis. His account groups contractors, organisational freelancers and "marginal employees" whose formal employment lacks meaningful investment or progression. The argument is not confined to headcount reduction. Organisations gain access to labour while avoiding some obligations and constraints associated with durable attachment. The strategy can extend across occupational hierarchies, and Osterman's US survey suggests it covers a substantial share of workers (Osterman, 2026).

The relevance to youth skilling lies in the asymmetry of adaptation. On the worker side, policy celebrates continuous learning, mobility and responsibility for employability. On the firm side, flexibility may mean externalisation, contingent hiring and weaker investment in career ladders. Workers are asked to become increasingly portable at the same time that organisations reduce the value of attachment. Portability can therefore coexist with disposability.

Osterman's analysis cannot simply be exported. It describes the erosion of a US employment settlement that provided a significant group of workers with benefits, training and internal advancement. Many young people in South Africa and India have never entered such a settlement. Informality, own-account work, labour broking, household service and insecure employment long predate digital platforms. For these workers, contingency is not necessarily a fall from standard employment. It may be the labour market at entry. This difference makes the concept more, not less, demanding. The emerging-economy question is not only how to restore a lost bargain but how to build institutions of recognition, protection and progression where secure organisational attachment has never been broadly available.

The concept of scale without commitment names a related possibility. Digital organisations can scale customer acquisition, transactions, geographic reach, revenue and access to labour without proportionately scaling employment security, training, social protection, worker voice or responsibility for progression. The term is used here as an analytical formulation, not a settled construct. It directs attention to a mismatch between the scale of organisational benefit and the scale of obligation.

Scale without commitment is not unique to platforms. Franchising, subcontracting, labour broking and fissured workplaces can separate the organisation benefiting from labour from the entity formally employing it. Platforms make the separation visible because their technical systems coordinate work closely while contractual forms may deny an employment relationship. Algorithmic management can allocate tasks, set prices, monitor performance and deactivate access. The firm may exercise functional control without accepting the full institutional duties traditionally associated with control. Current ILO analysis treats platform work as part of a broader history of non-standardisation, outsourcing and weakened labour protection rather than as a technological exception.

Labour demand also shapes recognition upstream. Employers influence curricula, define entry requirements and decide which credentials carry weight. When firms demand prior experience for entry-level roles, they narrow the foothold. When they participate in work-integrated learning or guarantee interview and internship pathways, they help create it. When they fund training but avoid expanding roles, they may improve the ranking of selected participants without altering the volume of opportunity. Demand does not wait at the end of the conversion chain. It determines the chain's design.

5. Research foundation and method

The wider programme asks how young workers experience present work, structural and technological constraints, skilling needs and future imaginaries across four contexts: Cape Town, Gurugram, Dakar and Malmö. Its conceptual lenses include agency, situated technological practice, global connectedness, decent work, Fairwork, FemWork and meaningful work. The team recorded pilot visits and secured access during the research-development phase. The proposed empirical design combines multi-sited observation, semi-structured interviews, participant self-documentation and analysis of policies, training materials, platform rules and work artefacts.

The proposal anticipates shadowing 10 to 15 workers in each context, conducting 25 to 30 interviews per context and supporting at least 10 participants in each context to document their own experience through writing, audio or video. These numbers describe intended fieldwork, not the dataset analysed in this paper. The ECIC manuscript uses the proposal as evidence of research architecture and intended inquiry. It does not convert future methods into completed findings.

The institutional collaboration includes Professor Jakob Svensson and colleagues at Malmö University's Digital Work Futures environment; Dr Errol Francke at CPUT, the principal investigator for the Cape Town context; Professor Vikas Kumar at the Central University of Haryana, the principal investigator for the Gurugram context; other Indian and Swedish research partners; and Craig Kensley of GrowZA as a South African practitioner collaborator. The submitted abstract locates the ECIC contribution within this collaboration and identifies the Absa Cybersecurity Academy and university/NGO-linked initiatives in India as early sites. Exact roles are drawn from the supplied research plan. This single-authored paper does not imply sole ownership of the wider programme.

The present analysis uses three bodies of material. First are programme documents: the submitted ECIC abstract, the international research plan, Malmö workshop material and a GrowZA practice library. Second are official programme sources concerning the Absa Cybersecurity Academy. These establish programme design and reported outputs but cannot independently establish impact. Third is scholarly and institutional literature on skills mismatch, recognition of prior learning, platform work, reputation portability, decent work, informality and changing employment relations.

Craig Kensley's position is that of practitioner-researcher inside youth skilling and social investment. This proximity provides visibility into programme design, employer engagement and measurement incentives. It also creates interests and possible bias. Practice-based observations are therefore used to formulate questions and interpret institutional design, not to stand in for participant testimony or independent evaluation. No interview quotation appears in the paper because the audited materials did not include a completed participant dataset suitable for this analysis.

The method is abductive and model-building. The submitted proposition supplies the puzzle: portable skills collide with uneven opportunities. The literature identifies mechanisms including signalling, intermediation, employer attachment, platform control and decent-work deficits. Practice material tests whether the emerging concepts illuminate actual institutional arrangements. The resulting conversion architecture is a sensitising model for later fieldwork. It is not a causal model validated across South Africa and India.

Three limitations follow. First, the paper cannot estimate the independent effect of a skilling programme on employment, earnings or mobility. Second, South Africa and India are not treated as matched comparative cases. They illuminate different aspects of recognition and intermediation within a wider programme. Third, the model risks presenting a clean sequence where labour-market trajectories are recursive. Workers may return to training, combine jobs, lose reputation, cross sectors or accept downward mobility. Later research should trace these movements longitudinally rather than force them into a single pathway.

6. From skilling to foothold: South African practice

The Absa Cybersecurity Academy is analytically useful because its design extends beyond classroom training. Absa reports that it established the Academy in 2019 with Maharishi Invincibility Institute, later extending the partnership to the Hein Wagner Academy. The three-year programme combines formal technical education, practical experience, personal development, soft skills and financial support. Its stated pathway includes a 12-month internship after completion. The curriculum leads to an undergraduate diploma and additional technology certifications (Absa Group, 2024a; 2024b).

These features constitute more than a skills bundle. Maharishi and Absa provide institutional reputation, recognised credentials, exposure to a corporate environment, practical evidence and a potential first employer. The Academy can therefore be read as conversion architecture. It helps capability become legible, creates a possible foothold and lowers employer uncertainty through prolonged engagement. Its value may lie as much in constructing the market around the learner as in transmitting technical content.

Official reporting suggests the pathway has converted into employment for some participants. Absa reports that 19 young people entered permanent employment at the bank in 2023, that a second group of 19 entered internships, and that 17 of those interns were absorbed in October 2024. It also reports 33 graduates in 2024 and 20 starting workplace exposure, while its 2024 integrated report records 74 students across four cohorts since inception (Absa Group, 2024a; 2025). These are useful programme-reported outputs. They are not independent evidence of net job creation, long-term retention, earnings growth or counterfactual impact.

That distinction matters. Absorption by Absa may represent additional hiring, filling existing vacancies through a new pipeline, or a combination. Each can be valuable, but only the first directly increases labour demand. Permanent employment is a stronger foothold than an unstructured placement, yet sustained mobility requires evidence about role quality, income, learning, progression, security and future portability. The available sources do not provide longitudinal outcomes. A credible account should resist converting a successful first transition into proof of a career trajectory.

The Academy nonetheless reveals how demand-side participation changes a skilling intervention. Absa is not merely an end-user consulted about curriculum. It helps shape the training, supplies practical exposure and receives interns. This creates a more credible signal because the receiving employer has participated in producing it. The institution bears some cost of selection, development and transition. Such arrangements can break the experience trap that confronts young entrants.

Maharishi's role points towards labour-market intermediation. A training institution serving excluded youth may perform selection, foundation learning, credential brokerage, social support, employer translation, work-integrated learning and placement. Calling it a “training provider” understates the institutional work required to convert capability. Yet expansion presents a governance problem. If success depends on intensive relationships and employer trust, scaling enrolment faster than footholds could weaken conversion. The relevant denominator is not how many people enter training but how many reach decent, sustained mobility, at what cost, and with what distribution of risk.

This reading avoids both promotion and dismissal. The Academy provides evidence that skilling programmes can build more than skills. Its official outcomes justify further study. They do not settle whether the model increases aggregate opportunity or produces durable mobility. The appropriate next step is longitudinal research with graduates, non-completers, programme staff and employers, including contract quality, earnings, role progression, occupational switching and the portability of certifications and experience beyond Absa.

7. Platform-mediated and informal work

India's Gurugram environment brings a different part of the conversion problem into view. The research programme describes a global technology hub alongside migrant settlements, informal work and NGO-linked digital learning. Its planned fieldwork includes engagement with the Mobile Innovation School and platform-mediated livelihoods. At this stage, these materials establish a setting and research access, not findings about participant outcomes. The value of the Indian site is analytical: rapid digital expansion can coexist with deep inequality, and digitally mediated access can coexist with informal or insecure work.

Platformisation can reduce search frictions. It aggregates demand, handles payments, provides navigation and creates a record where informal transactions may previously have been opaque. For workers excluded from formal recruitment, low entry barriers can create income opportunities. This is not trivial. Yet the ILO's distinction remains important. In on-location platform work, the underlying service often predates the app. Driving remains driving; cleaning remains cleaning. Technology changes how the worker is found, priced, monitored and evaluated (Aleksynska, 2021).

The platform's occupational record is both asset and instrument of control. Completed jobs and ratings can demonstrate reliability more systematically than a manager's telephone reference. The same metrics can allocate future work, discipline behaviour or trigger deactivation. Customers participate in management through ratings, while the platform defines thresholds and appeal procedures. Fairwork's emphasis on due process, transparency and representation follows from this asymmetry.

Reputation portability exposes the ownership question. If a worker completes thousands of jobs, who controls the credible version of that history? The worker generated the performance, customers supplied evaluations, and the platform assembled the data and made it meaningful through its rules. Research shows that cross-platform reputation can affect trust, but only when the source and target contexts are sufficiently comparable (Corten et al., 2023). Portability therefore requires governance as well as export functionality: common definitions, verification, dispute mechanisms and limits on discriminatory or inaccurate data.

The EU's emerging rules are instructive even outside Europe. Directive 2024/2831 recognises ratings and reviews as work-generated personal data that should be available in a structured, machine-readable form for transfer, including to another platform. The principle matters for South Africa and India because it reframes reputation as part of the worker's occupational assets rather than a platform's exclusive property. But transplantation requires caution. Data-protection regimes, enforcement capacity and platform markets differ. A right that cannot be exercised cheaply, understood by receiving organisations or enforced against transnational firms may remain formal.

Offline work shows that the underlying problem is older than platforms. The experienced waiter, domestic worker, tradesperson or retail employee may hold sophisticated tacit and relational capability. Their evidence can depend on a supervisor's goodwill or scattered clients. Informal digital learners face a related problem when portfolios lack trusted verification. RPL can translate some capability into credentials, but formalisation may impose cost, time and standards that do not fit the work. Recognition systems can include and exclude at the same time.

The India and platform lens also complicates the meaning of progression. A worker may increase platform tenure and ratings while income remains volatile. Switching platforms may widen access to gigs without producing stronger bargaining power. A digitally skilled young person may use an app competently in a role that offers little scope to develop the capability for

which they trained. These are forms of movement without mobility. Whether they amount to portable precarity must be established through longitudinal fieldwork on income, security, voice, learning and exit options.

8. Discussion: the labour-market conversion architecture

The proposed architecture consists of seven linked functions:

1. Capability: What can the worker actually do?
2. Recognition: Can that capability be credibly seen and validated?
3. Foothold: Can recognised capability produce a meaningful first economic opportunity?
4. Accumulation: Can work generate further experience, reputation, networks and occupational value?
5. Portability: Can that accumulated value travel across organisations, sectors, platforms and places?
6. Decent labour demand: Are sufficient quality opportunities available, and how are risk, protection and voice organised?
7. Mobility: Does participation improve the worker's economic position, agency and prospects over time?

The ordering clarifies distinct conversion problems, but demand must not be pictured as a gate encountered only after portability. Labour demand surrounds the architecture. It shapes which capabilities are rewarded, which credentials are trusted, how many footholds exist, what workers can learn on the job, whether experience travels and what mobility is possible. The model therefore rejects a pipeline logic in which training pushes workers towards a passive market. Conversion is co-produced by workers, employers, training institutions, platforms, regulators, funders and networks.

Seven failure modes make the model testable. Capability without recognition produces invisible skill. Recognition without foothold produces an employable but excluded worker. Foothold without accumulation produces episodic work that adds little occupational value. Accumulation without portability strands value inside an employer, manager or platform. Portability without sufficient demand produces skilled unemployment or underemployment. Demand without decent work produces precarity. Repeated work without progression produces movement without mobility.

These failures are not mutually exclusive. A platform worker may have a foothold and a visible within-platform reputation, but weak data portability and poor conditions. A graduate may hold a recognised qualification but face too few entry roles. An intern may accumulate experience but exit without a reference that another employer trusts. The diagnostic value lies in identifying where conversion breaks rather than prescribing more training by default.

The architecture also distinguishes portable mobility from portable precarity. Under portable mobility, successive engagements allow a worker to accumulate capability, earnings, reputation, networks, agency and bargaining power. Exit becomes more credible because previous work increases access to better work. Under portable precarity, the worker becomes highly adaptable and moves repeatedly while absorbing volatility, rebuilding standing and receiving limited protection. Activity accumulates, but occupational power does not.

Portable precarity is a proposition, not an empirical conclusion of this discovery phase. It should be tested against worker trajectories rather than inferred from contract labels. A freelancer with multiple clients may have high autonomy and strong earnings. A formally permanent employee may be marginal, poorly trained and easily displaced. The relevant measures are control over time, income stability, social protection, learning, voice, bargaining power, recognition and future options. Employment status matters, but it does not exhaust job quality.

The model adds a demand-side correction to worker-centred research without displacing workers from view. It asks how workers experience each conversion and how they act upon it. A credential may be officially portable but socially distrusted. A platform record may be technically exportable but practically useless. An internship may be designed as a foothold but experienced as cheap labour. Only worker-centred inquiry can reveal whether institutional design produces the agency it claims.

Further research should test five propositions. First, recognition infrastructure is distributed unequally and mediates the return to capability. Second, programmes that integrate employers into curriculum, work exposure and hiring produce stronger footholds than training-only models, but may create employer-specific dependence. Third, worker-controlled occupational evidence improves exit options only when receiving institutions trust and interpret it. Fourth, platform scale can expand transaction volume without a proportional increase in organisational responsibility. Fifth, portability produces mobility only where demand is sufficient and work enables accumulation rather than repeated reset.

9. Implications

For youth-skilling organisations, the practical shift is from delivering training to governing conversion. Programmes should map each stage explicitly: the capability developed, the signal employers trust, the foothold available, the occupational value expected to accumulate, the evidence a participant can take away and the quality of likely work. Where a stage has no credible institutional mechanism, the programme has a design gap.

Measurement should follow the same logic. Enrolment, completion and certification remain useful operational indicators. Placement should be disaggregated by contract type, duration, pay, hours, social protection and occupational relevance. Follow-up should test retention and progression rather than recording a single point-in-time job. Counterfactual or comparison

designs are needed before claiming job creation or programme impact. At minimum, organisations should distinguish gross placement, absorption into existing vacancies and additional labour demand.

Employers should be treated as intervention subjects, not only partners. Corporate commitments can include maintaining entry-level roles, reducing unnecessary experience requirements, providing paid work-integrated learning, training supervisors, recognising alternative evidence and funding continuing development. Firms that benefit from public or philanthropic skilling pipelines should report their own conversion contribution: interviews offered, internships created, permanent roles added, progression supported and occupational records made portable.

Platforms should provide workers with usable records of tasks, tenure, ratings, reviews and earnings, together with correction and appeal rights. Portability standards should be developed with workers, regulators and receiving platforms, not imposed as a purely technical schema. Data minimisation matters because a portable record can carry discrimination as easily as merit. Fair pay, conditions, contracts, management and representation remain separate tests. A portable rating cannot compensate for an indecent job.

Universities and qualification authorities should strengthen recognition of prior and informal learning while monitoring whose evidence remains expensive or difficult to validate. RPL systems need employer legitimacy, accessible assessment and routes into further learning. They should not turn every capability into another credential or create new gatekeepers. Portfolios, practical assessment, occupational standards and verified project work may sometimes be more appropriate than full qualifications.

Social investors should fund conversion infrastructure rather than buying training outputs alone. This may include employer brokerage, paid footholds, portable portfolios, alumni networks, data systems, worker support, longitudinal tracking and independent job-quality evaluation. Funding agreements should make employer obligations visible. Otherwise, social investment can subsidise the supply of screened candidates while private organisations retain discretion over whether to create work.

Policy must connect skills systems to an explicit account of labour demand and job quality. Skills anticipation is useful, but forecasts should not be confused with vacancies. Industrial, digital, procurement, competition, social-protection and labour policy all shape whether capability converts. Public employment programmes and wage subsidies can create footholds, but their value depends on additionality and progression. Platform regulation should address classification, algorithmic management, data rights and representation alongside innovation and market access.

The wider research programme should now operationalise the architecture in fieldwork. Worker interviews can trace where capability was acquired, which evidence mattered, how first opportunities arose, what accumulated and what travelled. Employer interviews can test

vacancy formation, screening, risk and attachment. Programme and platform documents can reveal who owns occupational records and which claims of mobility are actually measured. South Africa and India should remain connected research environments rather than be forced into symmetry. Their differences are analytically productive.

10. Conclusion

Young workers are being prepared for labour markets that demand adaptability while often withholding attachment. The response cannot be to abandon skilling. Capability matters, particularly where technological change and historical exclusion restrict access to emerging occupations. But capability has no independent economic force. It requires institutions that can recognise it, footholds that can activate it, work that allows it to accumulate, mechanisms that let its value travel and sufficient demand for decent labour.

The labour-market conversion architecture makes those dependencies visible. It explains why certification can coexist with exclusion, why repeated work can coexist with stagnation and why a rich digital work history can remain trapped inside a platform. It also explains what institutions such as the Absa Cybersecurity Academy may be doing when they work well: not merely producing skills, but constructing recognition, employer access and a first credible opportunity. Whether that foothold becomes sustained mobility remains an empirical question.

The central demand-side correction is therefore not a rejection of worker agency. It is a refusal to make workers responsible for conditions they cannot produce alone. Training cannot create a vacancy by itself. Portability cannot make a job decent. Digital matching cannot substitute for additional demand. Youth-employment policy should stop treating the worker as the primary site of repair and examine the architecture that receives the worker with equal discipline.

The proposition for the next phase is clear. A highly skilled and highly portable worker can remain economically precarious when recognition is weak, footholds are scarce, occupational value is stranded or demand is indecent. The relevant measure of success is not how far or often the worker moves. It is whether work increases income, security, agency, bargaining power and future options. The paper therefore ends where youth-employment interventions should begin: with the conditions required to convert capability into decent and sustained economic mobility.

References

Absa Group (2024a) 'Absa Cybersecurity Academy'. Available at:

<https://www.absa.africa/a-force-for-good/cybersecurity-academy/academy/> (Accessed: 4 September 2026).

Absa Group (2024b) 'Absa Cybersecurity Academy curriculum'. Available at:

<https://www.absa.africa/a-force-for-good/cybersecurity-academy/curriculum/> (Accessed: 4 September 2026).

Absa Group (2025) Absa Group Limited Integrated Report 2024. Johannesburg: Absa Group. Available at:

<https://www.absa.africa/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Absa-Group-Limited-Integrated-Report.pdf> (Accessed: 4 September 2026).

Aleksynska, M. (2021) Digital Work in Eastern Europe: Overview of Trends, Outcomes and Policy Responses. ILO Working Paper 32. Geneva: International Labour Organization. Available at:

<https://www.ilo.org/publications/digital-work-eastern-europe-overview-trends-outcomes-and-policy-responses-1>.

Arora, P. and Raman, U. (2024) 'The case for FemWork: Feminist design principles in tech and tech-enabled work', *Computer*, 57(1), pp. 100-104. doi: 10.1109/MC.2023.3325593.

Corten, R., Kas, J., Teubner, T. and Arets, M. (2023) 'The role of contextual and contentual signals for online trust: Evidence from a crowd work experiment', *Electronic Markets*, 33, 41. doi: 10.1007/s12525-023-00655-2.

De Stefano, V. (2016) The Rise of the "Just-in-Time Workforce": On-Demand Work, Crowdsourcing and Labour Protection in the Gig-Economy. Conditions of Work and Employment Series No. 71. Geneva: International Labour Organization.

European Union (2024) Directive (EU) 2024/2831 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2024 on improving working conditions in platform work. Official Journal of the European Union. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/2831/oj/eng>.

Fairwork (2023) Fairwork South Africa Ratings 2023: Advocating for Safety and Dignity in the Platform Economy. Oxford: Fairwork. Available at:

<https://fair.work/en/fw/publications/fairwork-south-africa-ratings-2023-advocating-for-safety-and-dignity-in-the-platform-economy/>.

Graham, M., Woodcock, J., Heeks, R., Mungai, P., Van Belle, J-P., du Toit, D., Fredman, S., Osiki, A., van der Spuy, A. and Silberman, M.S. (2020) 'The Fairwork Foundation: Strategies for improving platform work in a global context', *Geoforum*, 112, pp. 100-103. doi: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.01.023.

Heeks, R., Gomez-Morantes, J.E., Graham, M., Howson, K., Mungai, P., Nicholson, B. and Van Belle, J-P. (2021) 'Digital platforms and institutional voids in developing countries: The case of ride-hailing markets', *World Development*, 145, 105528. doi: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105528.

ILO (2016) 'Promoting decent work and sustainable development for youth', statement to Y20 China 2016. Geneva: International Labour Organization. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/resource/statement/promoting-decent-work-and-sustainable-development-youth-%E2%80%94-y20-china-2016>.

ILO (2019) *Skills and Jobs Mismatches in Low- and Middle-Income Countries*. Geneva: International Labour Organization. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-publications/skills-and-jobs-mismatches-low-and-middle-income-countries>.

ILO (2021) *World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.

ILO (2026) *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2026: Back to the Future*. Geneva: International Labour Organization. doi: 10.54394/00033788.

Marcus, G.E. (1995) 'Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, pp. 95-117. doi: 10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.000523.

OECD (2023) *Breaking the Vicious Circles of Informal Employment and Low-Paying Work*. Paris: OECD Publishing. doi: 10.1787/f95c5a74-en.

OECD (2026a) *A Skills-First Labour Market*. Paris: OECD Publishing. doi: 10.1787/2e1b85f0-en.

OECD (2026b) *Giving Informal Learning the Recognition It Deserves*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/giving-informal-learning-the-recognition-it-deserves_63eda72e-en.html.

Osterman, P. (2026) *Disposable Workers: The Transformation of Employment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tran Nhat, D., Thäter, L. and Teubner, T. (2024) 'The duality of reputation portability: Investigating the demand effect of imported ratings across online labour markets', *Electronic Markets*, 34(1). doi: 10.1007/s12525-024-00706-2.

Van Belle, J-P., Howson, K., Graham, M., Heeks, R., Bezuidenhout, L., Tsibolane, P., du Toit, D., Fredman, S. and Mungai, P. (2023) 'Fair work in South Africa's gig economy: A journey of engaged scholarship', *Digital Geography and Society*, 5, 100064. doi: 10.1016/j.diggeo.2023.100064.

van Doorn, N. (2017) 'Platform labor: On the gendered and racialized exploitation of low-income service work in the "on-demand" economy', *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(6), pp. 898-914. doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2017.1294194.

World Bank (2021) *South Africa Economic Update: Building Back Better from COVID-19 with a Special Focus on Jobs*. Washington, DC: World Bank.