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Social Support and University Students' Employability: A Systematic Literature Review of Direct and Indirect Pathways

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This review synthesises empirical evidence on how social support relates to university students' employability and maps the underlying psychological and career-related mechanisms, addressing fragmented prior findings. **Methods:** Following PRISMA 2020 and a Population-Exposure-Outcome (PEO) framework, peer-reviewed English-language articles (2016–2026) were retrieved across Scopus, PubMed, and ERIC. Quality was appraised using the JBI checklist, and evidence was narratively synthesised using Synthesis Without Meta-analysis (SWiM) principles. **Findings:** Ten cross-sectional studies (N=186 to 1,765) met all criteria. All ten reported positive associations between social support and employability, operating directly or via mediators such as self-efficacy, psychological capital, and career adaptability. A significant indirect pathway was reported in every study, which partly reflects the models tested by the original authors, whereas direct associations were non-significant in three studies and weaker than indirect routes in three others. Coefficients were reported on different metrics, so effect sizes were neither pooled nor compared. **Limitations**: The evidence is exclusively cross-sectional and self-reported data from three databases, precluding causal inference; selection and appraisal were not independently duplicated, and the protocol was not registered. **Research Implications:** Findings are consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory, whereas evidence for Social Capital Theory remains limited, suggesting university interventions targeting psychological capital, mentoring, and career counselling warrant longitudinal and experimental evaluation. **Originality:** Complementing a recent meta-analysis of the overall association, this review maps the mediating mechanisms and sources of support and shows how model specification, measurement, and methodological quality shape the reported direct and indirect associations across diverse disciplines and geographies.

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INTRODUCTION

Amid growing uncertainty in the global labour market and an increasing number of higher education graduates, employability has become an important concern in the transition from education to work. Intensifying competition, changing job structures, and evolving competency requirements mean that academic knowledge alone may be insufficient to prepare students for employment; students also need the capacity to obtain, maintain, and develop employment throughout their careers (Abelha et al., 2020; Akkermans et al., 2024). Consequently, higher education institutions are expected not only to develop graduates' disciplinary knowledge but also to prepare them to navigate the demands and uncertainties of the labour market. However, employability remains a conceptually diverse and rapidly developing field. A structural topic-modelling analysis of more than 7,500 employability-related abstracts published between 1942 and 2024 demonstrates that employability research encompasses heterogeneous disciplinary perspectives, ranging from psychology to human resource management, which complicates the development of an integrated understanding of the construct (Healy et al., 2025). Within this context, social support has emerged as a potentially important resource associated with students' employability, particularly during their transition from university to work (Schettino et al., 2026; Yang & Wang, 2026).

Employability is commonly defined as a person's ability to find, keep, and progress in work within a shifting labour market. Fugate et al. (2004) framed employability as a psychosocial construct made up of career identity, personal adaptability, and human and social capital. On this view, employability goes beyond knowledge and

technical skill: it also involves a clear sense of career identity, flexibility when circumstances change, and access to supportive networks. Nevertheless, higher education institutions continue to face challenges in aligning graduate development strategies with the multidimensional nature of employability, particularly because of persistent discrepancies between graduate competencies and employer expectations (Abelha et al., 2020). Recent conceptual work likewise argues that research on graduate and worker employability should be better connected, so that the development of employability beyond the first school-to-work transition can be understood more fully (Akkermans et al., 2024). One potentially relevant resource in this process is social support, defined as the emotional, informational, or instrumental assistance that individuals perceive as available or receive from their social networks (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Studies commonly operationalise social support as help from family members, friends, and significant others (Zimet et al., 1988). For university students, these sources may provide encouragement, career-related information, guidance, and access to opportunities relevant to their preparation for employment.

Two theoretical lenses, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Social Capital Theory, help explain how social support and student employability may be linked. SCCT holds that contextual influences such as social support relate to a person's self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career goals (Lent et al., 1994). For university students, support from family members, peers, lecturers, and the academic environment may be associated with greater confidence in their capabilities and stronger readiness to pursue career goals. Social Capital Theory complements this by focusing on the resources embedded in social ties, such as information, networks, help, and career openings (Lin, 2001). In addition, career adaptability represents a relevant psychological and career-related resource in the development of employability. Meta-analytic findings show that contextual resources, social support among them, are related to career adaptability (Rudolph et al., 2017; Stead et al., 2026), a construct usually assessed with the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Together, these perspectives justify asking how social support relates to student employability via psychological resources such as self-efficacy and via social resources such as career information and networks.

A growing body of empirical work has looked at how social support and employability are related in university students. Yang & Wang (2026), in a meta-analysis of 26 studies involving 14,524 participants, reported a positive association between social support and student employability, alongside differences related to gender composition, measurement instruments, and dimensions of employability. Other empirical studies have investigated specific psychological and career-related pathways. For example, social support has been associated with employment anxiety through self-efficacy (Zhang et al., 2023), job-search behaviour through work values (Wang & Qu, 2022), and employment confidence through self-efficacy among students from different social-class backgrounds (Zuo et al., 2025). More recent work has also tested mediation by psychological capital and career adaptability (Yang et al., 2026), as well as occupational self-efficacy and personal brand equity (Wang & Wang, 2026). Other research has explored employment anxiety associated with intensive social-media use (Li et al., 2025) and psychological resilience among vocational students (Xiong et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies indicate that the relationship between social support and employability has been investigated through diverse psychological, behavioural, and career-related mechanisms.

Despite these contributions, further synthesis is warranted. The meta-analysis by Yang & Wang (2026) provides quantitative evidence of the overall association between social support and student employability and examines selected moderators. However, the pooled bivariate estimate does not show through which psychological or career-related mechanisms social support is associated with employability, from which sources the support originates, or whether direct and indirect associations are consistent across studies, and the meta-analysis did not synthesise mediating pathways. The present review addresses this gap by systematically mapping the mechanisms, support sources, student characteristics, geographic contexts, and measurement approaches represented in the eligible empirical studies. Although individual studies have investigated particular mediating mechanisms, their findings need to be considered collectively to clarify the range of pathways examined and the extent to which the available evidence converges or differs. Furthermore, the predominance of research conducted in China raises questions about the geographic representation of the available evidence and the extent to which findings are situated within particular educational and labour-market contexts. Broader reviews of employability programme evaluations have similarly highlighted the importance of contextualising evidence across different settings (Scandurra et al., 2024). Differences in study populations, conceptualisations, and measurement instruments also warrant attention when interpreting and comparing findings. These issues support the need for a systematic synthesis that complements existing quantitative evidence by providing a structured account of the scope and characteristics of the empirical literature. Specifically, beyond the pooled association reported by Yang & Wang (2026), this review (a) compares the mediating mechanisms and the sources of support examined across studies, (b) examines how the reported balance between direct and indirect associations varies with model specification, measurement instruments, and methodological quality, and (c) evaluates how far the available evidence supports Social Cognitive Career Theory and Social Capital Theory.

Accordingly, this systematic literature review (SLR) synthesises empirical research on the association between social support and university students' employability through the complementary perspectives of Social Cognitive Career Theory and Social Capital Theory. Its contribution lies in integrating the findings of eligible studies concerning psychological and career-related mechanisms, mapping the sources of social support investigated, and examining the contextual and measurement characteristics of the available evidence. This synthesis aims to clarify what is currently known about the association between social support and student employability, identify patterns across the mechanisms and support sources examined, and highlight areas requiring further empirical investigation. Given the cross-sectional designs of the included studies, the findings are interpreted as associations rather than evidence of causal effects. Accordingly, this review addresses four research questions: (1) How is social support associated with employability among university students based on the available empirical evidence? (2) Which psychological and career-related mechanisms have been examined in the association between social support and student employability? (3) What sources of social support have been investigated in relation to student employability? and (4) How do the geographic, contextual, measurement, and methodological quality characteristics of the included studies vary, and what do they imply for interpreting the findings?.

METHOD

Study Design and Review Framework

This study is a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and follows the reporting guidance of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). The review moved through several stages: searching the literature, screening studies, checking full texts for eligibility, appraising methodological quality, extracting data, and finally synthesising the findings narratively. The research question was built on the Population-Exposure-Outcome (PEO) framework, in which university students are the population, social support is the exposure, and employability is the outcome. The same framework also shaped how the search strategy and eligibility criteria were designed, and how the data extraction was structured. The review protocol was not prospectively registered (see Data Extraction and Synthesis). To compensate, the eligibility criteria, database-specific search strings (Table 1), appraisal decision rules, and synthesis approach are reported in full below so that each step can be audited and replicated.

Search Strategy and Eligibility Criteria

The search was performed across three electronic databases (Scopus, PubMed, and ERIC) to identify empirical studies investigating the relationship between social support and employability among university students. Scopus was chosen for its broad multidisciplinary coverage of peer-reviewed journals in psychology, education, and the social sciences; ERIC for its dedicated coverage of education research; and PubMed because constructs central to this literature, such as self-efficacy and well-being, are also published in health and psychology journals indexed in MEDLINE. PsycINFO and Web of Science, which also cover this topic, were not searched because the authors' institution does not provide access to them; this is acknowledged as a limitation, and Scopus, which indexes a large share of the psychology and education journals covered by both, was used as the main source. The search strategy combined three groups of terms related to social support, employability, and the university student population. Synonyms and related terms were incorporated to broaden the search and capture variations in terminology across studies. The database-specific search strings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Database-specific search strategies

Database	Interface and Field	Search String and Limits	Records
Scopus	Advanced search; TITLE-ABS-KEY	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("social support" OR "perceived social support" OR "career-related social support" OR "family support" OR "peer support" OR "parental support" OR "career support") AND ("employability" OR "perceived employability" OR "graduate employability") AND ("student*" OR "undergraduate*" OR "college student*" OR "university student*" OR "higher education student*" OR "university undergraduate*" OR "college undergraduate*" OR "higher education")) AND PUBYEAR > 2015 AND PUBYEAR < 2027 AND DOCTYPE (ar) AND LANGUAGE (english)	83
PubMed	Advanced search; [tiab]	("social support"[tiab] OR "perceived social support"[tiab] OR "career-related social support"[tiab] OR "family support"[tiab] OR "peer support"[tiab] OR "parental support"[tiab] OR "career support"[tiab]) AND ("employability"[tiab] OR "perceived employability"[tiab] OR "graduate employability"[tiab]) AND ("student*"[tiab] OR "undergraduate*"[tiab] OR "college student*"[tiab] OR "university student*"[tiab] OR "higher education student*"[tiab] OR "university undergraduate*"[tiab] OR "college undergraduate*"[tiab] OR "higher education"[tiab]); limits: publication date 2016-2026; English	13
ERIC	General search interface; no field restrictions	("social support" OR "perceived social support" OR "career-related social support" OR "family support" OR "peer support" OR "parental support" OR "career support") AND ("employability" OR "perceived employability" OR "graduate employability") AND ("student*" OR "undergraduate*" OR "college student*" OR "university student*" OR "higher education student*" OR "university undergraduate*" OR "college undergraduate*" OR "higher education"); limits: peer reviewed; publication date 2016-2026	47

*Note. The final search was conducted on 17 October 2026. Quotation marks denote phrase searching and * denotes truncation. Restriction to peer-reviewed journal articles in English published between 2016 and 2026 was applied through database limits where available and otherwise at screening.*

The search string was adjusted to the features of each database. In Scopus, it was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords using the TITLE-ABS-KEY code. In PubMed, it was limited to titles and abstracts using the [tiab] tag, whereas in ERIC, it was entered into the general search interface. The complete database-specific search strings, the fields searched, the limits applied, and the number of records retrieved from each database are reported in Table 1. Only peer-reviewed journal articles written in English and published between 2016-2026 were considered. The final search was conducted on 17 October 2026, and the retrieved records were subsequently screened according to the predefined eligibility criteria.

Studies were eligible for inclusion if they (1) reported empirical findings based on primary data; (2) examined university students as the primary study population; (3) measured social support as a study variable; (4) assessed employability or perceived employability as an outcome; and (5) reported findings relevant to the association between social support and employability. Studies were excluded if they (1) were conceptual, theoretical, or review articles without original empirical data; (2) focused on populations other than university students; (3) did not measure social support or employability as a construct; (4) did not report findings relevant to the relationship between the two constructs; or (5) consisted of grey literature, book chapters, conference proceedings, editorials, commentaries, or publications for which the full text was unavailable.

Study Selection

The selection of studies was guided by the PRISMA 2020 workflow, which proceeds from identification through screening to inclusion, with eligibility judged on the full text. All records exported from the databases were loaded into Rayyan (Ouzzani et al., 2016). Duplicates were first flagged by the software's automatic detection feature, verified by hand, and deleted prior to screening. Each remaining record was then judged against the eligibility criteria set in advance, beginning with a read of its title and abstract in Rayyan. Articles that appeared relevant were obtained in full for closer evaluation, and only those satisfying every inclusion criterion entered the final synthesis. The first author carried out the title and abstract screening, the full-text evaluation, and the data extraction, while the second author verified the final inclusion decisions and the extracted data. These tasks were therefore not conducted independently and in parallel by two reviewers, which is the recommended standard for systematic reviews. Instead, a single-screener-with-verification approach was used: records excluded at the title and abstract stage were screened by the first author alone, whereas the second author checked every final inclusion decision and all extracted data, and differing judgements between the authors were settled through discussion. This approach is more vulnerable to selection bias, because eligible records wrongly excluded at the title and abstract stage would not have been detected by a second reviewer, and this limitation is taken into account when interpreting the findings. The numbers of records identified, duplicates removed, records screened, full-text articles evaluated, and studies included are shown in a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1), which also lists the reasons for excluding articles at the full-text stage.

Methodological Quality Appraisal

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies (Aromataris & Munn, 2020). The tool was chosen because all included studies used cross-sectional surveys. The JBI checklist was preferred over alternatives (e.g., the AXIS tool or an adapted Newcastle-Ottawa Scale) because it was developed specifically for observational studies that relate an exposure to an outcome, it explicitly appraises sampling, measurement validity, confounding, and statistical analysis (the domains most relevant to survey-based mediation studies), and it is freely available, which facilitates replication. Because its items were developed for clinical exposures and conditions, Q3, Q4, and Q7 were adapted to psychological self-report measures as described below, and this adaptation is itself a limitation. Its eight items ask whether inclusion criteria were clearly defined (Q1); whether participants and settings were described in sufficient detail (Q2); whether exposure was measured validly and reliably (Q3); whether objective, standard criteria were used to measure the condition (Q4); whether confounders were identified (Q5); whether strategies for dealing with them were stated (Q6); whether outcomes were measured validly and reliably (Q7); and whether the statistical analysis was appropriate (Q8). Each item was rated as "Yes," "No," "Unclear," or "Not Applicable."

Items were rated "Yes" only when the criterion was explicitly reported and met; criteria that were not reported were rated "No" (the "Unclear" and "Not Applicable" options were therefore not used for any item). Q1 required that the eligible population or sampling frame be defined beyond generic enrolment (e.g., year of study, discipline, working status, income criteria, or a stratified sampling frame), and Q2 required that participants' demographic characteristics and the study setting be reported. Because all included studies measured social support and employability through self-report questionnaires, Q3, Q4, and Q7 were rated "Yes" when a standardised instrument with psychometric evidence (published previously or reported in the study itself) was used, recognising that such instruments capture perceived rather than objective status. Employability instruments originating from unpublished theses were rated "Yes" only when the primary study itself reported reliability and validity indicators. Q6 was rated "Yes" only when confounders had been identified (Q5), so the two items co-vary by design. Q8 was

rated "Yes" when the analytic approach suited the research question and data structure, for example bootstrapped indirect effects rather than the Sobel test or causal-steps approach.

Appraisal results were summarised descriptively to show the methodological strengths and weaknesses of each study. Particular attention was paid to participant selection, measurement validity and reliability, the handling of confounding factors, and statistical analysis. The number of criteria met by each study was tabulated descriptively, but no overall percentage score or numerical quality threshold was applied. The appraisal results informed the interpretation of the evidence rather than being used to classify studies according to an arbitrary cutoff. The first author conducted the initial appraisal, and the second author verified the ratings. Any disagreements were resolved through consensus. The appraisal was therefore not performed independently by two appraisers; to limit subjective judgement, the explicit decision rules described above were applied to every item, and the item-level ratings for each study are shown in Table 2 so that readers can inspect them.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data were extracted from each eligible study using a structured extraction table. The extracted information included authors and publication year, country, sample size and participant characteristics, study design, theoretical framework, measures of social support and employability, sources of social support, psychological and career-related mediators or moderators, contextual factors, analytical methods, and principal findings concerning the association between social support and employability. Where reported, the direction, statistical significance, effect estimates (standardised or unstandardised coefficients), and confidence intervals of the relationships were also recorded, together with the JBI appraisal ratings. Coefficients were recorded together with their metric (standardised β or unstandardised b) and were never converted or combined across metrics. Significance was recorded as reported by the original authors (p value or a bootstrapped confidence interval excluding zero), and mediation proportions were calculated only where the direct and indirect effects were reported on the same metric.

The extracted data were synthesised narratively, with studies organised according to their methodological characteristics, sources of social support, psychological and career-related mechanisms, and reported patterns of association with employability. The synthesis compared areas of convergence and divergence across studies while considering differences in populations, research settings, measurement instruments, and analytical approaches. Particular attention was given to distinguishing direct associations from indirect relationships involving mediating variables, without interpreting cross-sectional findings as evidence of causality.

Because the included studies differed in their sample characteristics, measurement instruments, research designs, and analytical methods, a narrative synthesis was considered more appropriate than a quantitative meta-analysis. The synthesis was guided by the principles of Synthesis Without Meta-analysis (SWiM) (Campbell et al., 2020). In line with SWiM, studies were grouped by the structure of their reported pathways (significant direct association, indirect association only, or both) and by source of support; no common standardised metric was imposed and no pooled estimate was calculated because the effect metrics and analytic models were not comparable; results were prioritised by direction and, where reported, by magnitude and confidence interval; heterogeneity was explored descriptively by population, country, instrument, and model specification; and the certainty of the body of evidence was not formally graded. The review protocol was not prospectively registered. Prospective registration reduces the risk of undisclosed post hoc changes to eligibility criteria, appraisal rules, and synthesis methods. To mitigate this limitation, these elements are reported in full in this section and in Table 1; nevertheless, readers cannot verify that no post hoc decisions influenced the review, and the findings should be interpreted with this in mind.

RESULTS

Study Selection

The search across three databases yielded 143 records (Scopus, n = 83; PubMed, n = 13; ERIC, n = 47). After 37 duplicates were removed, 106 records were screened by title and abstract, and 91 of these did not meet the predefined criteria, leaving 15 articles for full-text assessment. Five of these were then excluded for the following reasons: ineligible population (n = 1), variables not examined (n = 1), insufficient empirical data (n = 1), and ineligible study design (n = 2). Ten studies therefore met all inclusion criteria and entered the narrative synthesis. The complete study selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1).

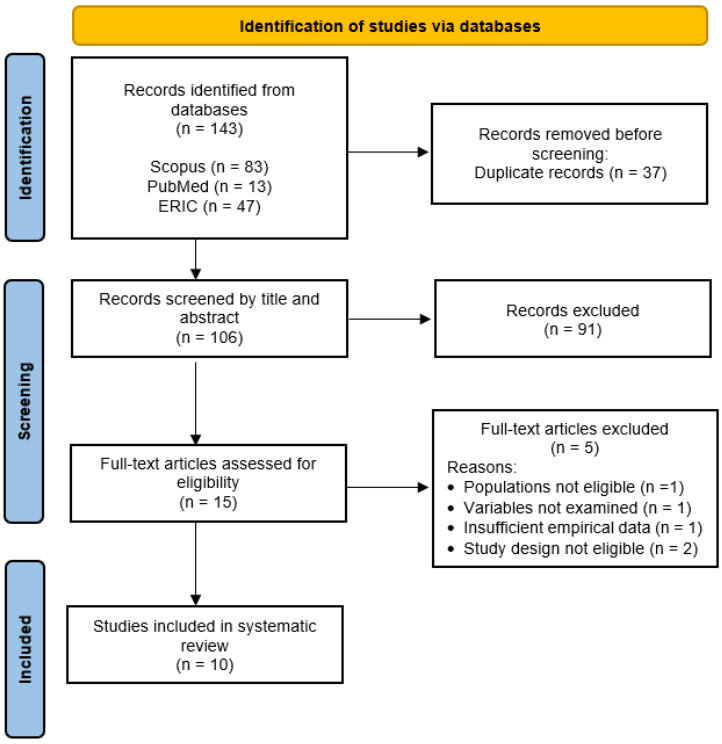

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of study selection

Methodological Quality of Included Studies

The methodological rigor of the selected studies was examined using the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies, as summarised in Table 2. Appraisal scores ranged from 5 to 8 of the 8 criteria, and no study was excluded on the basis of its score. Three studies met all eight appraisal criteria (Wang et al., 2026; Wang & Wang, 2026; Schettino et al., 2026). Xia et al. (2020) met seven, as eligibility criteria were not defined beyond enrolment at two universities (Q1). Three studies (Amissah et al., 2026; Karimi et al., 2025; Chu et al., 2021) met six criteria, failing Q5 and Q6 on confounding. Three studies met five criteria: Zhou et al. (2026) did not report participants' demographic characteristics beyond their final-year status and location (Q2) or address confounding; Oliveira et al. (2025) did not address confounding and tested mediation with the Baron and Kenny steps and the Sobel test (Q8); and Yang et al. (2026) did not define eligibility (Q1) or address confounding. Because no numerical cutoff was applied, all studies were retained, and their appraisal results are taken into account when the findings are interpreted in the Discussion.

To examine whether methodological quality was related to the findings, studies were compared by appraisal score. Among the three studies meeting all eight criteria, two reported a significant direct association between social support and employability (Wang et al., 2026; Wang & Wang, 2026) and one did not (Schettino et al., 2026). Xia et al. (2020), scoring seven, reported a significant direct association. Among the six studies meeting five or six criteria, three reported a significant direct association (Chu et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2026; Zhou et al., 2026), two reported none (Amissah et al., 2026; Karimi et al., 2025), and one reported direct associations only for selected dimensions of support (Oliveira et al., 2025). A significant indirect pathway was reported at every score level. The pattern of direct associations therefore did not clearly differ by appraisal score, although the small number of studies limits this comparison. Quality also only partly separated the mechanisms examined (Table 4): self-efficacy pathways were reported in studies scoring 6 to 8, psychological capital pathways in studies scoring 5 to 6, and career adaptability pathways in studies scoring 5 to 7. The score ranges overlap, so appraisal quality cannot account for differences between mechanisms.

Table 2. Methodological quality appraisal using the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist

Author (Year)	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Score
Xia et al. (2020)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7/8
Chu et al. (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	6/8
Karimi et al. (2025)	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	6/8
Schettino et al. (2026)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	8/8
Zhou et al. (2026)	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	5/8
Wang et al. (2026)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	8/8
Oliveira et al. (2025)	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	5/8

Author (Year)	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Score
Wang & Wang (2026)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	8/8
Yang et al. (2026)	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	5/8
Amissah et al. (2026)	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	6/8

Note. Y = Yes; N = No. Q1–Q8 refer to the items of the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies.

Characteristics of Included Studies

Table 3 summarises the ten included studies, published between 2020 and 2026. The samples comprised tourism and hospitality students (Amissah et al., 2026), agriculture students (Karimi et al., 2025), students from low-income families (Wang et al., 2026), working university students (Chu et al., 2021), general university students at various levels of study (Oliveira et al., 2025; Schettino et al., 2026; Wang & Wang, 2026; Xia et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2026) and final-year undergraduates (Zhou et al., 2026). Sample sizes ranged from 186 to 1,765 participants, and all studies used cross-sectional designs. Five studies were conducted in China (Wang et al., 2026; Wang & Wang, 2026; Xia et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2026; Zhou et al., 2026), and one each in Iran (Karimi et al., 2025), Ghana (Amissah et al., 2026), Portugal (Oliveira et al., 2025), Australia (Chu et al., 2021), and Italy (Schettino et al., 2026). In terms of theoretical framework, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) was used in four studies (Amissah et al., 2026; Oliveira et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2026; Zhou et al., 2026), Conservation of Resources (COR) theory in three (Karimi et al., 2025; Oliveira et al., 2025; Xia et al., 2020), and Career Construction Theory (CCT) in two (Karimi et al., 2025; Xia et al., 2020), with CCT and COR combined in both of the latter. Yang et al. (2026) drew on the broader social cognitive theory. Other frameworks included Signaling Theory (Wang & Wang, 2026), Social Presence Theory (Zhou et al., 2026), and Social Capital Theory (Oliveira et al., 2025).

Table 3. Characteristics of included studies

Study (author, year)	Country; sample (N)	Design and analysis	Variables and instruments	Direct association	Indirect association	Key findings
Xia et al. (2020)	China; N = 392 college students	Cross-sectional survey; PROCESS (Models 4 and 14), bootstrap	Career social support (CSSI), career adaptability (CAAS), employability (Yu et al., 2014), proactive personality	Unstandardised (b): CSS → EMP: b = 0.29 (total), 0.19 (direct); CSS → CA: b = 0.17; CA → EMP: b = 0.61	Unstandardised (b): CSS → CA → EMP: b = 0.10, 95% CI [0.04, 0.16] (partial mediation, ≈36% as reported; ≈35% from the rounded coefficients shown); proactive personality moderated CA → EMP	Career social support was associated with employability both directly and through career adaptability; the CA → EMP association was stronger at higher proactive personality.
Chu et al. (2021)	Australia; N = 401 working university students	Cross-sectional survey; latent SEM (AMOS), PROCESS Model 7	Family support (MSPSS), workplace support, work-study congruence, proactive personality, employability (Rothwell et al., 2009)	Standardised (β): Family support → EMP: β = .29 (.19 with mediator); workplace support → EMP: β = .04 (NS)	Standardised (β): Family support → congruence → EMP: 95% CI [.04, .19] (partial); no mediation for workplace support	Family support, not workplace support, was related to employability, partly via work-study congruence.
Karimi et al. (2025)	Iran; N = 200 agriculture students	Cross-sectional survey; PLS-SEM, bootstrap 5,000	Career-related social support (MSPSS), PsyCap (PCQ-12), career adaptability (CAAS-SF), self-perceived employability	Standardised (β): CRSS → SPE: β = 0.07 (NS); CRSS → PsyCap: 0.39; CRSS → CA: 0.22; PsyCap → SPE: 0.40; CA → SPE: 0.20	Standardised (β): Via PsyCap: 0.16; via CA: 0.04; chain: 0.03 (all CIs exclude 0; full mediation)	No direct association; the association was statistically mediated entirely by PsyCap and career adaptability.
Schettino et al. (2026)	Italy; N = 186 university students	Cross-sectional online survey; PLS-SEM, bootstrap 10,000	Faculty support, self-compassion (CEAS), career self-efficacy, career planning, perceived employability	Standardised (β): Support → EMPL: β = 0.12 (NS); support → career self-efficacy: 0.18; self-efficacy → EMPL: 0.36; planning → EMPL: 0.30	Standardised (β): Via self-efficacy: 0.07; via self-compassion → self-efficacy: 0.07; total effect: 0.32 as reported by the authors (the direct and listed indirect paths sum to 0.26, so paths not extracted here may contribute)	Faculty support was associated with employability only indirectly (serial mediation); career self-efficacy was pivotal.
Zhou et al. (2026)	China; N = 486 final-year undergraduates	Cross-sectional online survey; PLS-SEM	Digital social support (MSPSS: family, friends, significant others), PsyCap (PCQ-12), perceived employability (Rothwell)	Standardised (β): → EMP: family β = 0.181; friends 0.112; significant others 0.277; PsyCap → EMP: 0.525	Standardised (β): Via PsyCap: family 0.101; friends 0.080; significant others 0.135 (partial mediation)	All three sources were associated with employability both directly and through PsyCap; significant others were strongest.

Study (author, year)	Country; sample (N)	Design and analysis	Variables and instruments	Direct association	Indirect association	Key findings
Wang et al. (2026)	China; n = 1,240 low-income students (of 5,026)	Cross-sectional online survey; Mplus, PROCESS, bootstrap 5,000	Career social support (CSSI), career decision-making self-efficacy (CDMSE), career goals, Student Employability Scale	Unstandardised (b): CSS → EMP: b = 0.03 (p < .05); CSS → CDMSE: 0.42; CDMSE → EMP: 0.35; goals → EMP: 0.49	Unstandardised (b): Total indirect: 0.335 [0.286, 0.386]; via CDMSE: 0.149; via CDMSE → goals: 0.181; via goals alone: NS	The association ran mainly through CDMSE and the CDMSE → career goals chain.
Oliveira et al. (2025)	Portugal; N = 316 university students	Cross-sectional survey; regression, Baron and Kenny steps with Sobel test	Social support (ESSS), perceived employability (Rothwell), well-being (PERMA), general self-efficacy	Standardised (β): Social activities → internal EMP: β = .14; family → external EMP: .15; friends → external EMP: .21; other paths NS	Standardised (β): Well-being fully mediated two paths and partly mediated friends → external EMP; self-efficacy did not moderate	Support was only partly related to employability, mostly through well-being.
Wang & Wang (2026)	China; N = 534 university students	Cross-sectional online survey; PROCESS Model 6, bootstrap 5,000	Perceived social support (MSPSS), occupational self-efficacy, personal brand equity, employability (Zhong, 2016)	Unstandardised (b): Total: 0.538; direct: 0.198, 95% CI [0.142, 0.256] (36.8% of total)	Unstandardised (b): Total indirect: 0.340 (63.2%); via self-efficacy: 0.164; via brand equity: 0.036; chain: 0.140	Partial mediation; occupational self-efficacy was the dominant mediator.
Yang et al. (2026)	China; N = 1,765 university students	Cross-sectional online survey; PROCESS Model 6	Social support (SSRS), PsyCap, career adaptability, employability (Lyu, 2012)	Standardised (β): SS → EMP: β = .044 (p < .01); SS → PsyCap: .584; PsyCap → EMP: .506; CA → EMP: .404	Unstandardised (b): Total indirect: 1.183 (92.2% as reported by the authors; mixed metrics, not interpreted); via PsyCap: 0.662; via CA: 0.161; chain: 0.360	The association was mainly indirect via PsyCap and career adaptability; direct effect was small.
Amissah et al. (2026)	Ghana; N = 593 tourism and hospitality undergraduates	Cross-sectional survey; PLS-SEM, bootstrap 5,000	Career-related social support (PCRSS), career self-managed behavior, self-efficacy, ambition, employability	Standardised (β): PCRSS → EM: β = 0.048 (NS); PCRSS → self-efficacy: 0.176; PCRSS → ambition: 0.235; ambition → EM: 0.493	Standardised (β): Via self-efficacy: 0.030 (p = .028); via ambition: 0.116 (p < .001); total indirect: 0.146	No direct association; the association was mediated by self-efficacy and, more strongly, by ambition.

Note. β = standardised coefficient; b = unstandardised coefficient. The coefficient type is stated in each cell, and coefficients were not converted or combined across metrics. Significance and confidence intervals are reported as given by the original authors (NS = not significant; CI = 95% confidence interval), and mediation percentages are shown only where direct and indirect effects share a metric. The 92.2% reported for Yang et al. (2026) combines a standardised direct coefficient with unstandardised indirect coefficients and is therefore not interpreted as a mediation proportion. On the standardised metric alone, the product of the two reported standardised paths via psychological capital (.584 × .506 ≈ .30) is much larger than the direct coefficient (β = .044), which is consistent with the indirect pathway being the larger component in that study.

Patterns of Direct and Indirect Relationships

Every included study reported a positive association between social support and employability, either directly, through mediating variables, or both. The direct association, however, was not uniform. Five studies reported a significant direct association (Wang et al., 2026; Wang & Wang, 2026; Xia et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2026; Zhou et al., 2026), and a sixth did so for family support only (Chu et al., 2021), but its size relative to the indirect pathways differed. In Wang et al. (2026), Wang & Wang (2026), and Yang et al. (2026), the indirect pathways accounted for the larger share of the total association (approximately 92% and 63% for the first two studies, recalculated from coefficients on the same unstandardised metric, whereas the share for Yang et al. (2026) was calculated by the original authors by combining a standardised direct coefficient with unstandardised indirect coefficients and is not used as a mediation proportion in cross-study comparison), and the direct coefficients were small in Wang et al. (2026) and Yang et al. (2026) and clearly non-zero in Wang & Wang (2026) (b = 0.03, β = .044, and b = 0.198, respectively), which are on different metrics and are not compared with one another. In contrast, the direct association remained the larger component in Xia et al. (2020), where the indirect pathway through career adaptability accounted for about 35-36% of the total association (direct b = 0.19, indirect b = 0.10), and in Zhou et al. (2026), where the direct coefficient exceeded the indirect coefficient through psychological capital for each source of support (for example, β = 0.277 versus 0.135 for significant others).

Amissah et al. (2026), Karimi et al. (2025), and Schettino et al. (2026) found no significant direct association between social support and employability (β = 0.048, β = 0.07, and β = 0.12, respectively), with the relationship operating only through mediating variables. Oliveira et al. (2025) found direct associations only for specific

dimensions of support, namely social activities with internal employability and family and friends with external employability. In Chu et al. (2021), family support was directly associated with employability and partly through work–study congruence, whereas workplace support was not (β = .04, not significant). Because workplace support in that study was measured with a workplace segmentation supplies scale, which captures how far the workplace permits separating work and study rather than social support as such, this null result should be read with caution. At least one significant indirect pathway was identified in every study, which makes it the most frequently reported pattern across the set, although this partly reflects that mediation was part of the model tested in every included study rather than a comparison against alternative models. This conclusion should be read cautiously, because the studies reported different effect metrics (unstandardised and standardised coefficients), tested mediation with different procedures, namely bootstrapping in most studies, the Sobel test in (Oliveira et al. 2025), and relied on cross-sectional data. The magnitudes of these associations therefore cannot be compared directly across studies.

Mediators and Contextual Factors

The mediators examined across the included studies can be grouped into two broad categories: psychological and career-related resources, and variables related to image or well-being. Self-efficacy in various forms was the most frequently examined mediator, including career decision-making self-efficacy (Wang et al., 2026), occupational self-efficacy (Wang & Wang, 2026), career self-efficacy (Schettino et al., 2026), and self-efficacy in the career self-management model of Amissah et al. (2026), where ambition was also examined. Psychological capital was a focal variable in three studies (Karimi et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2026; Zhou et al., 2026), as was career adaptability (Karimi et al., 2025; Xia et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2026). Career goals were examined by Wang et al. (2026). In addition, two more distinctive mediators were identified: personal brand equity, which functions as an external image signal to prospective employers (Wang & Wang, 2026), and well-being, which represents students' psychological welfare (Oliveira et al., 2025).

Five studies tested ordered chain-mediation models. In these models, social support was associated with internal psychological resources such as self-efficacy or psychological capital, which were in turn associated with more distal career resources such as career adaptability, career goals, or personal brand equity, and ultimately with employability (Karimi et al., 2025; Schettino et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2026; Wang & Wang, 2026; Yang et al., 2026). The chain pathway was significant in each of these studies, for example β = 0.03 in Karimi et al. (2025), b = 0.140 in Wang & Wang (2026), and b = 0.360 in Yang et al. (2026). This pattern is consistent with the view that social support is related to employability not only directly, but also through an interrelated process of psychological and career resource development.

Contextual factors and moderating variables were examined less often. Xia et al. (2020) found that the association between career adaptability and employability was stronger among students with higher proactive personality within the mediating pathway, which suggests that individual characteristics may be related to the strength of the indirect association between social support and employability. In contrast, Oliveira et al. (2025) tested self-efficacy as a moderator of the well-being and employability link and found no significant moderation. Differences by source of support were also identified. Zhou et al. (2026) found that support from significant others was more strongly associated with employability than support from family or friends, in the context of digitally mediated support, while Oliveira et al. (2025) found that family and friends were associated with external employability but not internal employability.

Comparison by Mechanism, Source of Support, and Methodological Quality

To compare the findings systematically, the included studies were grouped by the mechanism examined (Table 4) and by the source of support investigated (Table 5), and each group was cross-referenced with the JBI appraisal scores in Table 2. The tables are descriptive; because coefficients were reported on different metrics (Table 3), they record the direction and significance of pathways rather than their magnitude.

Self-efficacy in its various forms was the most frequently examined mechanism (four studies, JBI scores 6 to 8), and a significant indirect pathway through it was reported in all four, including all three studies that met all eight appraisal criteria. Psychological capital (three studies, scores 5 to 6) and career adaptability (three studies, scores 5 to 7) also showed significant indirect pathways, but the evidence for these mediators comes from studies with lower appraisal scores, and the largest standardised mediator-outcome coefficients occurred in two of the three lowest-scoring studies, such as β = .525 in Zhou et al. (2026) and β = .506 in Yang et al. (2026). Findings for goal-related mechanisms were mixed: career goals alone did not mediate the association in Wang et al. (2026), although the chain from career decision-making self-efficacy to career goals did, whereas ambition was a significant mediator in Amissah et al. (2026). Well-being, personal brand equity, self-compassion, and work-study congruence were each examined in one study and cannot be compared across studies.

By source of support, family support was directly associated with employability in all three studies that examined it separately (Chu et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2026), although in Oliveira et al. (2025) this applied to external employability only. Friends and significant others showed direct associations in Zhou et al. (2026), and friends also did so in Oliveira et al. (2025). These studies scored 5/8 to 6/8 on the JBI checklist. In

contrast, faculty support showed no significant direct association in Schettino et al. (2026), which scored 8/8, and neither did workplace support in Chu et al. (2021), which scored 6/8. Studies that measured career-specific support without specifying its source, or general perceived support from several sources, reported significant direct associations in four of six cases (Table 5) and a significant indirect pathway in all six. Because the source of support, the instrument, and the appraisal score vary together across these studies, differences between sources cannot be separated from differences in measurement and methodological quality.

Table 4. Comparison of mediating mechanisms across included studies

Mechanism	Studies (JBI Score)	Direct Association	Indirect Pathway
Self-efficacy (career decision-making, occupational, career, or general)	Wang et al. (2026) (8); Wang & Wang (2026) (8); Schettino et al. (2026) (8); Amissah et al. (2026) (6)	Significant in two (Wang et al., 2026; Wang & Wang, 2026); not significant in two	Significant in all four, including serial paths in three studies
Psychological capital	Karimi et al. (2025) (6); Yang et al. (2026) (5); Zhou et al. (2026) (5)	Significant in two (very small in Yang et al., 2026); not significant in Karimi et al.	Significant in all three (full mediation in Karimi et al. (2025); partial in the others)
Career adaptability	Xia et al. (2020) (7); Karimi et al. (2025) (6); Yang et al. (2026) (5)	Significant in Xia et al. (2020) and Yang et al. (2026); not significant in Karimi et al. (2025)	Significant in all three
Career goals / ambition	Wang et al. (2026) (8); Amissah et al. (2026) (6)	Significant but very small in Wang et al. (2026); not significant in Amissah et al. (2026)	Goals alone not significant in Wang et al. (2026), but the self-efficacy → goals chain was; ambition significant in Amissah et al. (2026)
Well-being	Oliveira et al. (2025) (5)	Selected dimensions only	Fully mediated two paths and partly mediated one (Sobel test)
Personal brand equity	Wang & Wang (2026) (8)	Significant	Via brand equity b = 0.036; serial path via self-efficacy b = 0.140
Self-compassion	Schettino et al. (2026) (8)	Not significant	Serial path via self-compassion and self-efficacy: 0.07
Work–study congruence	Chu et al. (2021) (6)	Significant for family support; not for workplace support	Partial mediation for family support only

Note. Scores in parentheses are JBI scores (out of 8) from Table 2. Direct association refers to the direct path between social support and employability when mediators were modelled.

Table 5. Comparison of findings by source of social support

Source of Support	Studies (JBI Score)	Direct Association	Indirect Pathway
Family	Chu et al. (2021) (6); Zhou et al. (2026) (5); Oliveira et al. (2025) (5)	Significant in all three (external employability only in Oliveira et al., 2025)	Via work–study congruence (Chu et al., 2021) and psychological capital (Zhou et al., 2026); well-being mediated some paths (Oliveira et al., 2025)
Friends	Zhou et al. (2026) (5); Oliveira et al. (2025) (5)	Significant in both (external employability only in Oliveira et al., 2025)	Via psychological capital (Zhou et al., 2026); partly via well-being (Oliveira et al., 2025)
Significant others	Zhou et al. (2026) (5)	Significant; strongest of the three sources	Via psychological capital
Faculty	Schettino et al. (2026) (8)	Not significant	Via self-efficacy and via self-compassion → self-efficacy
Workplace	Chu et al. (2021) (6)	Not significant	None
Career-specific support (source not specified)	Xia et al. (2020) (7); Wang et al. (2026) (8); Karimi et al. (2025) (6); Amissah et al. (2026) (6)	Significant in Xia et al. (2020) and Wang et al. (2026) (very small); not significant in Karimi et al. (2025) and Amissah et al. (2026)	Significant in all four
General perceived support (several sources combined)	Wang & Wang (2026) (8); Yang et al. (2026) (5)	Significant in both	Significant in both

Note. Scores in parentheses are JBI scores (out of 8) from Table 2. Sources overlap with instruments (e.g., the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support for family, friends, and significant others), so the comparison is descriptive.

DISCUSSION

This review synthesised ten cross-sectional studies on the association between social support and employability among university students. All ten studies reported a positive association between the two constructs, either directly, through one or more mediating variables, or both. Because every included study used a cross-sectional design and self-reported data, the findings are discussed as patterns of association, and mediation results are treated as statistical decompositions that are consistent with, but cannot confirm, the proposed processes. The discussion first summarises the principal empirical findings and compares them with the existing meta-analysis and clarifies the distinctive contribution of this review relative to it. It then examines how consistent the direct and indirect associations are in light of methodological differences, divergent findings, and potential sources of bias. Theoretical interpretation, contextual variation, and practical implications follow, and each section separates what

the studies observed from what theory suggests. In relation to the research questions, the overall association (RQ1) is addressed under Principal Findings, the mechanisms (RQ2) under Direct and Indirect Associations and Theoretical Interpretation, the sources of support (RQ3) under Sources of Support and Individual Differences, and the geographic, contextual, measurement, and methodological quality characteristics (RQ4) under Geographic and Disciplinary Coverage, the discussion of measurement heterogeneity, and the appraisal-based comparisons in the Results.

Principal Findings and Comparison with Previous Evidence

All ten studies reported a positive association between social support and employability, and at least one significant indirect pathway was reported in every study. The relative weight of direct and indirect pathways, however, differed. In three studies the indirect pathways accounted for the larger share of the total association, while a direct association remained significant but varied in size, from very small (Wang et al., 2026; Yang et al., 2026) to larger (Wang & Wang, 2026), where it represented 36.8% of the total association. These shares are not comparable across studies because they were derived from different coefficient metrics (Table 3). In three studies the direct association was at least as large as the indirect one (Chu et al., 2021; Xia et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2026), although in Chu et al. (2021) this held for family support only. In three studies no significant direct association was found, and the association ran only through mediators (Amissah et al., 2026; Karimi et al., 2025; Schettino et al., 2026). Oliveira et al. (2025) reported direct associations only for selected dimensions of support. The direction of the association was therefore consistent across the evidence base, whereas its structure was not.

The consistently positive direction converges with the meta-analysis by Yang & Wang (2026), who pooled 29 independent effect sizes from 26 studies (N = 14,524) and reported a moderate positive association between social support and college students' employability (random-effects r = .410, 95% CI [.344, .473]). Heterogeneity was very high (I^2 = 95.3%), and the authors found limited evidence of publication bias (fail-safe N = 7,221). The two reviews answer different questions. The meta-analysis estimates the overall strength of the bivariate association and tests study-level moderators, whereas the present review maps mediators, sources of support, and the structure of pathways, which the meta-analysis did not examine. Four points of comparison follow.

First, a pooled correlation describes the overall association, whereas the direct paths in the included studies are conditional on the mediators in each model. A non-significant direct path therefore does not contradict a moderate pooled association; it indicates that little unique association remained once the psychological resources were modelled. Second, the zero-order correlations in two Chinese studies whose full texts were checked for this comparison, r = .636 (Wang & Wang, 2026) and r = .572 (Yang et al., 2026), lie above the pooled estimate and above the upper confidence limits of the corresponding subgroup estimates in the meta-analysis (.498 for the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and .373 for the Social Support Rating Scale). With I^2 above 95%, such values are not necessarily inconsistent with the pooled mean, but they show that the strength of the association varies widely, and the reasons for this variation cannot be resolved with the present data. Third, the meta-analysis found that the pooled association differed by support instrument (Q = 6.84, p = .033; r = .417 for the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, .300 for the Social Support Rating Scale, and .487 for self-developed scales) and by the number of employability dimensions (Q = 52.33, p < .001), which is consistent with the measurement heterogeneity observed here (see below). The reported advantage of three-dimensional employability measures (r = .779) rests on a single effect size and should not be generalised. The meta-analysis also reported a stronger association in samples with a higher gender ratio (b = 0.502, p < .001). Because this is a study-level moderator, it does not show that individual men and women benefit differently from support, and none of the ten studies reviewed here, as extracted, tested gender as a moderator, so the present review can neither confirm nor refute it. Fourth, the two evidence bases differ in coverage and probably overlap. The meta-analysis searched Chinese-language databases and included 15 Chinese-language studies, whereas the present review was limited to English-language records, which probably explains why the meta-analysis identified more studies. It also accepted regression and path coefficients converted to correlations, which may combine zero-order and adjusted associations, and it does not tabulate its included studies. Its introduction cites Xia et al. (2020), Wang et al. (2026), and Wang & Wang (2026), which are also included here, so the two sets of primary studies may overlap at least in part and should not be treated as independent confirmations. Like the present review, the meta-analysis rests solely on cross-sectional primary studies, as its authors acknowledge. Meta-analytic evidence linking social support with career adaptability (Stead et al., 2026) further supports the plausibility of the psychological links discussed below, although it concerns an adjacent construct rather than employability itself.

Distinctive Contribution Relative to the Existing Meta-Analysis

Relative to Yang & Wang (2026), the distinctive contribution of this review is not another estimate of the overall association but an appraisal of how that association is structured and how far the evidence supports claims about mechanisms. Four contributions can be identified. First, the direct-indirect balance in the primary studies varies with the number of mediators modelled and the measures used, so the predominance of indirect pathways cannot be treated as a robust finding (see the next section). Second, cross-tabulating mechanisms (Table 4) and sources

of support (Table 5) against appraisal scores shows that evidence for self-efficacy pathways tends to come from higher-rated studies, whereas evidence for psychological capital and career adaptability tends to come from lower-rated ones, although the score ranges overlap, and that the contrast between informal and institutional sources is confounded with study quality. Third, the review identifies conceptual overlap between mediators and employability as a threat to mechanistic interpretation, which a pooled bivariate meta-analysis cannot detect. Fourth, it shows that Social Capital Theory is largely untested, because none of the included studies measured network or information resources. These contributions are descriptive and hypothesis-generating: the review provides no new pooled estimate, and because some included studies probably overlap with those in the meta-analysis, it should be read as complementary rather than as independent confirmation.

Direct and Indirect Associations: Consistency and Methodological Considerations

The presence of a significant indirect pathway in every study should not be read as strong evidence that indirect associations predominate. Four considerations qualify this reading. First, the indirect pathways were specified by the original authors, and mediation was tested in every included study, so the finding partly reflects what was tested and published rather than a comparison against alternative models. It also did not hold for every source of support: workplace support showed no indirect association in Chu et al. (2021). Second, the share attributed to indirect pathways depends on how many mediators a model contains. All six studies that modelled two or more mediators (Amissah et al., 2026; Karimi et al., 2025; Schettino et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2026; Wang & Wang, 2026; Yang et al., 2026) reported either a non-significant direct association or one that was the smaller component of the total association, whereas the direct association was at least as large as the indirect one in the three studies that tested a single mediator (Chu et al., 2021; Xia et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2026). Oliveira et al. (2025), which also tested a single mediator (well-being), is an exception, because most of its associations ran through the mediator rather than directly, so the pattern is suggestive rather than consistent. Because mediators that correlate with both support and employability absorb variance that would otherwise be attributed to the direct path, this pattern may reflect model specification as much as a substantive difference in how support operates. Third, statistical significance and magnitude need to be distinguished. Two of the largest samples produced significant but very small direct coefficients, namely $\beta = .044$ in a sample of 1,765 (Yang et al., 2026) and $b = 0.03$ in a sample of 1,240 (Wang et al., 2026). In contrast, two of the non-significant direct paths came from the smallest samples, of 200 (Karimi et al., 2025) and 186 participants (Schettino et al., 2026), where limited statistical power cannot be excluded. This explanation does not apply to Amissah et al. (2026), whose sample comprised 593 participants. Fourth, the studies reported different effect metrics, used different analytic procedures (PROCESS, PLS-SEM, latent-variable SEM, and the Baron and Kenny steps with a Sobel test), and in some cases combined standardised and unstandardised estimates. For example, Yang et al. (2026) reported a standardised direct coefficient alongside unstandardised indirect effects. The proportions of mediation therefore cannot be compared quantitatively across studies.

Several features of the evidence base may also bias the estimates, in directions that cannot be determined from the available data. Employability was self-reported in all included studies as extracted in Table 3, and none used objective labour-market outcomes such as job offers or employment status, so perceived employability may reflect confidence and mood as much as actual labour-market position. Because Q3, Q4, and Q7 were rated "Yes" whenever a standardised, published instrument was used, these ratings indicate measurement quality rather than objectivity: the instruments capture perceived, not objective, status. The psychological mediators (self-efficacy, psychological capital, and career adaptability) are also conceptually close to the components of employability described by Fugate et al. (2004). Strong mediator-outcome coefficients, such as $\beta = .525$ for psychological capital in Zhou et al. (2026) and $\beta = .506$ in Yang et al. (2026), may therefore partly reflect construct overlap and shared-method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003) rather than distinct mechanisms. The same concern applies to Xia et al. (2020), whose employability measure (Yu et al., 2014) includes social support and network subscales with items such as "My relatives can provide resources for my job hunting", which resemble the exposure itself. In Yang et al. (2026), the correlations among psychological capital, career adaptability, and employability ranged from $r = .785$ to $r = .849$, and the first factor in the authors' Harman test explained 43.0% of the variance, above the 40% reference value they applied, which they nonetheless judged acceptable. Wang & Wang (2026), by contrast, reported a lower first-factor share (34.9%), a method-factor check, and demographic control variables, and they cautioned that supportive feedback can inflate self-assessed efficacy and brand perceptions, which implies that self-reported mediators and outcomes may reflect perceived rather than actual capability. Mediation estimates from cross-sectional data can differ substantially from those obtained longitudinally (Maxwell & Cole, 2007), and the causal ordering assumed in the models is only one of several plausible orderings. Xiong et al. (2025), for example, modelled perceived social support as a mediator between psychological resilience and employability rather than as the antecedent, and students who already feel more employable or more proactive may also perceive or mobilise more support. In addition, six studies did not identify or address confounding factors (Q5 and Q6 in Table 2): Amissah et al. (2026), Chu et al. (2021), Karimi et al. (2025), Oliveira et al. (2025), Yang et al. (2026), Zhou et al. (2026). Socioeconomic background, year and field of study, gender, and work experience could

plausibly influence support, psychological resources, and employability simultaneously. Finally, all ten studies reported positive associations. This is what would be expected if the association is real, but it is also compatible with selective reporting or publication bias, which was not assessed in this review.

Measurement heterogeneity is a further source of divergence. Social support was measured with the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support or adaptations of it (Chu et al., 2021; Karimi et al., 2025; Wang & Wang, 2026; Zhou et al., 2026), career-specific support scales (Amissah et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2026; Xia et al., 2020), a Social Support Rating Scale combining perceived support, objective support, and support utilisation (Yang et al., 2026), the Satisfaction with Social Support Scale (ESSS) (Oliveira et al., 2025), and a faculty-support measure (Schettino et al., 2026). Employability was assessed with at least five different instruments, and only three studies shared the same one (Chu et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2026). Because social support ranged from the general perceived availability of family, friends, and significant others to career-specific and institution-specific support, the studies may not be measuring the same construct, and comparisons of pathways across studies should be regarded as tentative. Taken together with the appraisal results, this means that differences between studies in the balance of direct and indirect associations cannot be attributed to a single source: they are jointly shaped by measurement, model specification, sample characteristics, and methodological quality, and the small number of studies prevents these influences from being separated.

Theoretical Interpretation

The pattern of associations is consistent with SCCT, which positions contextual supports as factors related to self-efficacy, goals, and subsequent career outcomes (Lent et al., 1994). Self-efficacy in some form was examined in four studies (Amissah et al., 2026; Schettino et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2026; Wang & Wang, 2026), and in each of them support was positively associated with self-efficacy, which was in turn positively associated with employability. The sequential path from career decision-making self-efficacy to career goals (Wang et al., 2026) and the ambition pathway in Amissah et al. (2026) come closest to the SCCT sequence of efficacy, goals, and action. Three qualifications apply. SCCT was developed to explain career interest, choice, and performance, so its use for employability as an outcome is an application rather than a direct test. The sequence it proposes cannot be evaluated with cross-sectional data. And although Bandura (1997) identifies mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and affective states as sources of self-efficacy through which support might operate, none of the included studies measured these sources, so they remain theoretical explanations rather than empirical findings.

The evidence for Social Capital Theory is considerably thinner. Lin (2001) emphasises access to information, networks, and opportunities embedded in social relationships, but the included studies largely measured perceived support and psychological mediators, and none, as extracted, measured network size, information access, or referral opportunities. Perceived support is a perceptual indicator of available assistance and is not equivalent to structural social capital. Only a few mediators approach a social or market-facing mechanism, namely personal brand equity as an external signal (Wang & Wang, 2026) and work-study congruence (Chu et al., 2021). Social Capital Theory was also explicitly adopted by only one included study (Oliveira et al., 2025), whereas Conservation of Resources theory and Career Construction Theory guided several others. The Social Capital interpretation is therefore plausible but largely untested in this evidence base, and the two lenses used in this review are not equally supported. The Fugate et al. (2004) framework offers a further reading: career adaptability, psychological capital, and self-efficacy are close to the personal adaptability and career identity dimensions of employability, which suggests that some of the mediators may be components of employability rather than separate mechanisms, and which blurs the boundary between mediator and outcome.

Psychological capital (Karimi et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2026; Zhou et al., 2026) and career adaptability (Karimi et al., 2025; Xia et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2026) were the other recurrent mediators. Psychological capital is defined as a positive developmental state comprising hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007), and career adaptability as a psychosocial resource comprising concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Five studies tested serial models in which support was associated with one psychological resource, which was in turn associated with a second resource such as career adaptability, career goals, self-efficacy, or personal brand equity (Karimi et al., 2025; Schettino et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2026; Wang & Wang, 2026; Yang et al., 2026). The serial indirect paths were statistically significant in these studies, although some were small, such as the chain of $\beta = 0.03$ in Karimi et al. (2025). These findings are consistent with a pathway in which social support is related to employability through a sequence of psychological and career resources. Because temporal order cannot be established, this sequence should be treated as a hypothesis for longitudinal testing. Conservation of Resources theory, which guided three of the included studies, offers an alternative account in which resources accumulate and reinforce one another, and it would be compatible with the same cross-sectional associations. Less common mediators, such as well-being (Oliveira et al., 2025), self-compassion (Schettino et al., 2026), and work-study congruence (Chu et al., 2021), each appeared in a single study and need replication before conclusions are drawn. Studies on employment anxiety (Li et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023) point to similar psychological routes but concern a different outcome, and they are cited only as analogous evidence.

Sources of Support and Individual Differences

Results differed by source of support. Family support was directly associated with employability in Chu et al. (2021), Zhou et al. (2026), and, for external employability, Oliveira et al. (2025), whereas workplace support in Chu et al. (2021) and faculty support in Schettino et al. (2026) showed no significant direct association. One reading is that informal support from family, friends, and significant others is more directly related to students' employability than formal, institution-based support, which may be linked to employability mainly through psychological resources. This is a descriptive observation across a small number of studies that differ in country, population, and instrument, and it should be treated as a hypothesis. It is also confounded with methodological quality: the only study of faculty support scored 8/8, whereas the studies reporting direct associations for family, friends, or significant others scored 5 to 6 (Table 5). Among digitally mediated sources of support, Zhou et al. (2026) found the strongest association for significant others ($\beta = 0.277$, compared with 0.181 for family and 0.112 for friends). This may reflect reduced face-to-face contact with lecturers and peers in technology-enhanced learning, but that explanation was not tested, and no other included study compared sources in this context.

Xia et al. (2020) found that the association between career adaptability and employability was stronger among students with higher proactive personality, which suggests that the strength of the indirect association may differ across individuals, whereas Oliveira et al. (2025) found no moderation by self-efficacy. Proactive personality moderated the second stage of the pathway (from adaptability to employability) rather than the use of social support itself. The suggestion that proactive students seek out and use support more effectively is therefore a plausible interpretation that was not tested in the included studies. Individual-difference moderators were examined in too few studies to establish for whom the association between support and employability is strongest.

Geographic and Disciplinary Coverage

Positive associations were reported in samples from China (five studies), Iran, Ghana, Portugal, Australia, and Italy, and across tourism and hospitality, agriculture, low-income, working-student, and general university samples. The direction of the association therefore appears in several settings, which is consistent with, but does not demonstrate, wider applicability. Geographic consistency should not be overstated. Half of the studies came from China, each of the other five countries was represented by a single study, and replication within a country could not be assessed outside China. Sampling frames also varied. Wang & Wang (2026) used stratified cluster sampling across regions and institution types, whereas Yang et al. (2026) sampled a single institution in Shandong Province in which 65.2% of respondents were first-year students and 70.8% were female, so the largest sample in this review may be among the least representative of students approaching graduation. The representativeness of the remaining samples was not assessed in this review. The structure of the associations also differed by setting in a tentative way. All five Chinese studies reported a significant direct association, whereas among the five studies from other countries only Chu et al. (2021), for family support, did so clearly, and Oliveira et al. (2025) reported selected dimensions only. Differences in culture, family involvement in career decisions, labour-market structure, and higher education systems could contribute to such variation, and reviews of graduate employability and employability programmes similarly call for context-sensitive evidence (Abelha et al., 2020; Scandurra et al., 2024). However, the contrast is confounded with differences in instruments, sample sizes, and model specification, and it is offered as a hypothesis for cross-national comparison rather than as a finding.

Implications for Theory and Practice

For theory, the findings are most consistent with a view in which social support is a contextual resource that is statistically associated with employability mainly alongside psychological and career resources. They provide limited empirical grounds for distinguishing among SCCT, Conservation of Resources, and Social Capital interpretations. For practice, implications must be drawn cautiously because every included study was observational and none evaluated an intervention. The mediators identified here may indicate candidate targets, which should be treated as hypotheses to be tested rather than as demonstrated levers: (1) mentoring and coaching programmes that provide informational and emotional support from lecturers or practitioners; (2) career-guidance services that may help students develop career decision-making self-efficacy and career adaptability; (3) activities that build psychological capital, such as resilience, optimism, and hope training; and (4) communication that involves family members or partners in career planning, given that informal support appeared to be the most directly associated with employability. Because the direct associations were small in several studies, support alone is unlikely to be sufficient, and programmes should be piloted and evaluated, preferably with comparison groups and objective employment outcomes, before being scaled up. For students, the findings suggest that a supportive social environment is associated with higher perceived employability, but they do not show that increasing support will raise employability.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This review has several limitations. First, the search was limited to three databases (Scopus, PubMed, and ERIC), English-language peer-reviewed articles, and publications from 2016 to 2026. The exclusion of databases such as PsycINFO and Web of Science, which were not searched because institutional access was unavailable, may have

resulted in missed studies, while restricting the search to published articles may introduce publication bias. Additionally, ERIC was searched through its general interface without field restrictions, limiting reproducibility. Second, the ten included studies varied in samples, instruments, and analytical methods, preventing effect pooling, comparison of association strengths, publication bias assessment, and formal certainty evaluation. Third, all studies used cross-sectional designs and self-reported data, limiting causal and temporal interpretations and leaving common-method variance and reverse causation possible. Fourth, six studies did not address confounding, and the JBI checklist discriminated little among the studies: all ten were retained, and appraisal scores did not influence weighting or stratification of the synthesis. The appraisal, study selection, and data extraction also relied on one primary reviewer with secondary verification rather than independent dual assessment, potentially introducing subjective judgements or selection errors. Furthermore, the protocol was not registered in advance. Finally, potential overlap with studies included in Yang & Wang (2026) could not be quantified because their meta-analysis did not list the included studies.

Future research should employ longitudinal, experimental, or quasi-experimental designs to examine temporal relationships, reciprocal effects, and the effectiveness of campus-based support interventions. Studies should combine objective employment outcomes with self-perceived employability, use multi-source data, and report standardised effects with confidence intervals to support future meta-analyses (Stead et al., 2026; Yang & Wang, 2026). Further research should control for relevant confounders, directly measure social capital resources, and compare different sources and types of social support. Potential moderators, under-represented regions, and diverse academic fields should also be examined, alongside measurement invariance testing for cross-national comparisons. Future systematic reviews should expand database and language coverage, preregister protocols, implement independent dual screening and appraisal, and transparently report overlap with existing meta-analyses.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review synthesised ten cross-sectional studies on the association between social support and university students' employability. All ten studies reported a positive association, but its structure varied: a direct association was significant in some studies and not in others, whereas every study reported at least one significant indirect pathway. The mediators examined included self-efficacy, psychological capital, career adaptability, career goals, personal brand equity, and well-being, including serial models in five studies. Family, friends, significant others, faculty, and workplace support were investigated, with tentative indications that informal sources were more directly associated with employability than institutional ones. These patterns are consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory, which relates contextual support to self-efficacy, goals, and career outcomes. Social Capital Theory offers a plausible interpretation but remains largely untested, because no included study measured network or information resources.

This review complements the meta-analysis by Yang & Wang (2026), which estimated the overall association ($r = .41$) and selected moderators but did not examine mediating pathways. By mapping the mechanisms, support sources, and measurement and geographic characteristics of the primary studies, it suggests that the balance between direct and indirect associations may depend on how models are specified and measured, and it identifies evidence gaps, notably the absence of objective employment outcomes and of direct tests of social capital mechanisms.

These conclusions should be interpreted with caution. The evidence base is small, half of it comes from China, and the studies differ in how support and employability were measured. All studies were cross-sectional and relied on self-reports, six did not address confounding, and the search covered three databases and was limited to English-language articles; study selection and appraisal were verified by a second author rather than conducted independently in duplicate, and no protocol was registered. The findings therefore indicate an association rather than an established causal effect and should not be generalised beyond the contexts studied. Longitudinal, experimental, and cross-cultural research with objective outcomes is needed to test whether social support is prospectively related to employability and whether the identified mediators lie on that pathway.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

RAS: Developed the study concept and research design, ran the database search, screened the records and assessed full-text eligibility, extracted the data, conducted the initial methodological quality appraisal, synthesised the results, and drafted, revised, and edited the manuscript. OPM: Supervised the study academically, advised on its development, verified the final inclusion decisions, the extracted data, and the methodological quality appraisal, commented on the synthesis and the manuscript, reviewed the text critically, and approved the final version for submission.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Artificial intelligence tools were used in a limited capacity during manuscript preparation, solely to refine wording and language quality. The ideas, analyses, and interpretations in this study originate entirely from the authors. Both authors checked and revised the text, and they remain fully accountable for the accuracy and content of the published article.

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