

Employability as Interpretive and Mediating Capability

—A Dual-Dimensional Model for Tourism Graduates Integrating Cultural Identity and Technical Competence

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Abstract

Graduate employability in tourism is frequently reduced to transferable generic skills and short-term employment outcomes. Such framings fit poorly with tourism work in heritage- and memory-oriented destinations, where graduates are evaluated through their ability to produce credible meanings and mediate visitor experiences rather than merely execute tasks. This conceptual paper reconceptualises tourism graduate employability as a dual-dimensional capability architecture composed of cultural identity capability and technical competence. Drawing on employability theory, tourism interpretation scholarship, heritage and authenticity debates, and platform mediation research, the paper theorises a coupling mechanism in which cultural identity capability stabilises interpretive legitimacy and motivational resilience, while technical competence amplifies reach, engagement, and experiential coherence across mediated environments. Crucially, employability is argued to emerge from the interaction of these two capabilities rather than their additive accumulation. The paper specifies boundary conditions, failure modes, and an operationalisation pathway suitable for indicator-system construction, measurement, and curriculum alignment. The contribution is a tourism-specific employability model that is assessable, teachable, and transferable across domains where interpretive labour and mediated storytelling are central.

Keywords

Graduate Employability, Tourism Education, Interpretation, Cultural Identity, Digital Mediation, Heritage Tourism, Platformisation

1. Introduction: Re-Problematising Employability for Meaning-Intensive Tourism Work

Employability has become an organising concept in higher education governance, curriculum reform, and quality assurance, increasingly tethered to institutional reputations and funding logics. Yet despite its prominence, employability remains a contested object in scholarship: at times treated as a stock of attributes, at times conceptualised as a developmental capability, and at times theorised as a relational achievement shaped by labour-market conditions and institutional structures. More durable academic interventions have consistently cautioned against reducing employability to “skill possession” or first-destination outcomes, instead insisting on employability as something enacted, socially situated, and sustained over time [1]-[3].

Tourism intensifies these conceptual tensions because graduate performance is not only assessed by managers but also directly evaluated by visitors in real time. Many tourism roles are organised around interpretive encounters in which visitors judge quality through perceived authenticity, narrative coherence, trust, and emotional resonance. In heritage and memory-work destinations in particular, graduates are tasked with translating place-based histories, contested memories, and value-laden materials into intelligible experiences that are ethically defensible as well as engaging. This is interpretive labour: not the transmission of information as such, but the crafting of meaning under conditions where legitimacy is always vulnerable to doubt, controversy, and fatigue [4]-[7].

At the same time, tourism employability is increasingly mediated. The visitor encounter is no longer confined to on-site guiding, face-to-face service, and printed materials. Tourism narratives circulate across platforms through short-form video, live streaming, influencer marketing, interactive exhibits, and algorithmically curated content feeds. Digital technologies do not merely support experience; they increasingly structure what becomes visible, what counts as engaging, and how narratives travel. In platform environments, employability is partly a function of one’s ability to work within attention economies and algorithmic visibility regimes, which can reward spectacle while penalising nuance. Tourism research on digital transformation and smart tourism has long warned that technology reshapes the production and evaluation of experience rather than simply enhancing it [8] [9]. Broader platform scholarship similarly shows how connective infrastructures embed values and steer cultural production through metrics, ranking, recommendation, and moderation [10]-[12].

These features of tourism work expose a persistent mismatch between dominant employability framings and the lived realities of graduate practice. Generic skill lists struggle to capture how graduates convert understanding into credible interpretation, or how they manage the ethical and reputational risks of mediated storytelling. If employability is a capability that must be sustained and renewed, tourism requires a model explicitly designed for meaning-making and mediation as core work processes.

Scope and boundary at the outset. The argument is not that all tourism work is uniformly meaning-intensive. Major sectors such as hospitality operations (e.g., front-office routines, revenue/yield discipline, SOP-driven service recovery) and transport/logistics (e.g., scheduling, safety, capacity coordination, compliance) are often evaluated through operational reliability, efficiency, and procedural correctness. In those domains, employability may be well approximated—though still imperfectly—by competence bundles and behavioural consistency under standardised service scripts. By contrast, the present paper targets contexts in which graduates are hired and promoted because they can author and defend credible meanings—heritage sites, museums, memorials, values-laden place branding, and memory-work destinations—where performance is inseparable from legitimacy work and where narrative choices carry ethical and reputational consequences. This contrast clarifies that the model’s primary purchase lies where interpretation is not a “soft supplement” but an evaluative core of work.

This paper advances a tourism-specific conceptualisation of graduate employability as a dual-dimensional capability architecture integrating cultural identity capability and technical competence, with a coupling mechanism at its theoretical core. Here, cultural identity capability refers to the capability to steward a destination’s value-laden heritage and translate it into legitimate interpretation (not the graduate’s personal identity or private self-conception); technical competence refers to the capability to design and deliver multimodal, platform-adaptive communication and to iteratively improve mediated storytelling under changing technologies. The central claim is that employability in meaning-intensive tourism contexts is generated through the interaction of these two capabilities rather than through their simple accumulation.

Paper structure. The argument proceeds by 1) grounding employability-as-capability in established employability theory, 2) specifying construct discrimination and capability definitions, 3) theorising interpretive legitimacy via heritage and authenticity debates, 4) theorising mediation conditions via platform studies and tourism digitalisation, and then 5) articulating the coupling mechanism, its organisational moderators, failure modes, and an operationalisation pathway for measurement and curriculum alignment.

2. From Skills to Capability in Employability Theory: What Tourism Still Needs

The employability literature has moved far beyond early policy framings that equated employability with employer-specified skills or immediate job outcomes. A key contribution of Knight and Yorke is the insistence that employability is not reducible to retained knowledge or atomised skills, but is better understood through the synergy of understanding, skillful practices, efficacy beliefs, and reflective learning. Their preference for “understanding and mastery” over “knowledge possession” shifts employability from a storage metaphor to a conversion metaphor, foregrounding the graduate’s ability to mobilise learning in context [13]. Hinchliffe and

Jolly extend this line by arguing that graduate employability is bound to identity formation and meaning-making, where academic background is applied and developed through intellectual curiosity, creativity, and reflective engagement with achievements [14]. Bridgstock's intervention is complementary: in labour markets marked by volatility and portfolio careers, employability requires career management competence and proactive navigation, not merely the display of generic skills attractive to employers [15].

These arguments provide a strong general foundation, but tourism still encounters an unresolved theoretical problem. Tourism education often imports employability vocabulary while operationalising it in ways that remain close to competency checklists, generic skills, and discipline-specific technical proficiencies. What is under-theorised is the way employability is enacted, where legitimacy and authenticity are the currency of performance. Tourism work is often performative and interpretive: the graduate must translate meaning, manage emotional labour, negotiate contested narratives, and sustain trust under pressure. These are not additional soft skills appended to a technical core; they are central to many tourism jobs, especially in heritage, museum, memorial, and values-laden destinations.

A second unresolved problem is that employability theories often treat identity-related capacities and technical capacities as parallel or substitutable. Yet in tourism practice, the two dimensions are rarely separable. A technically sophisticated narrative that lacks interpretive legitimacy can be highly visible but fragile, producing reputational risk and distrust. Conversely, a deeply grounded interpretive stance without mediating capability may preserve ethical integrity but fail to reach audiences in platformised labour markets where signalling, visibility, and multi-format communication are decisive. Tourism, therefore, requires an explicit mechanism theory of complementarity: a model specifying how interpretive legitimacy and mediated enactment co-produce employability, and under what conditions that complementarity collapses.

To build that mechanism, tourism employability theory must be anchored in two literatures that are often treated as content rather than theory: i) heritage and authenticity debates that define interpretive legitimacy, and ii) platform mediation scholarship that defines how visibility, engagement, and value drift operate in algorithmic environments.

3. The Dual-Dimensional Model: Conceptual Discrimination and Capability Definitions

Conceptual positioning and discrimination are essential for clarifying the novelty of the proposed model and for avoiding the common fate of "new" employability constructs: semantic overlap with established capabilities and weak construct validity. In measurement terms, the paper treats cultural identity capability and technical competence as related but distinct constructs. The analytical requirement is not simply definitional elegance but discriminant validity, meaning that each construct captures variance in employability outcomes not explained by the

other or by adjacent constructs [16]-[18]. This is especially important in tourism, where interpretation competence, heritage literacy, and digital storytelling skills are already established educational goals.

Clarifying the term at first use. Cultural identity capability is introduced here as a stewardship capability rather than a statement about the graduate's personal identity. The construct does not ask whether individuals "identify" with a place as a private self-label; instead, it concerns whether they can reliably take up and enact the ethical and narrative responsibilities embedded in a destination's heritage regime. This clarification matters because "cultural identity" is easily misread as psychological self-identity; in this manuscript, it is closer to the capability for authorised meaning-work—how a graduate handles value commitments, interpretive boundaries, and legitimacy under scrutiny.

Cultural identity capability is not synonymous with heritage interpretation competence. Interpretation competence primarily concerns how meaning is communicated, including thematic structuring, audience engagement, and narrative technique [19] [20]. By contrast, cultural identity capability concerns the normative and identity-laden conditions under which meaning is authorised, contested, and ethically stewarded in heritage and memory-work settings. It foregrounds stewardship judgment, legitimacy work, and motivational resilience when narratives are politically or ethically sensitive, rather than the craft of information delivery *per se*. Conceptually, it is closer to what heritage scholarship has described as the governance of meaning through authorised narratives and professional norms [21], as well as the practice of managing dissonance and contestation without collapsing into either propaganda or relativism [22].

Similarly, technical competence is not reducible to digital skills or software proficiency. Rather, it denotes a mediating capability that includes platform-rule adaptation, algorithmic visibility awareness, and reflexive understanding of how media forms, metrics, and infrastructures co-produce meaning, credibility, and reputational risk. This expands standard "digital competence" notions into a platform mediation frame: competence is not only tool use but informed navigation of socio-technical infrastructures that organise attention and evaluation [10]-[12]. As a result, the two constructs are distinguished less by content domains than by their evaluative regimes: legitimacy and mediation.

Cultural identity capability refers to the graduate's capacity to internalise and steward the value commitments embedded in a destination's heritage and translate them into credible, ethical, and engaging interpretive performance. This capability is enacted, not merely declared. It becomes visible in how graduates frame narratives, handle contested memory, manage visitor scepticism, and maintain interpretive integrity under commercial and emotional pressures. The definition is intentionally capability-oriented: it emphasises the conversion of understanding into defensible interpretive action and the maintenance of ethical stance under pressure, consistent with employability-as-enactment accounts [13] [14].

Technical competence refers to the graduate's capacity to design, adapt, and de-

liver multimodal communication across channels and audiences, and to sustain learning under technological change. In tourism, this capability is not limited to production skill; it includes mediation judgement: knowing how form reshapes meaning and how to iteratively refine mediated experiences without sacrificing interpretive legitimacy. This formulation aligns with research that treats digitalisation as restructuring experience production and evaluation rather than acting as a neutral add-on [8] [9]. Taken together, the dual-dimensional model asserts that tourism employability is best understood not as a list of attributes but as a coupled capability architecture in which legitimacy work and mediation work co-determine the stability, portability, and sustainability of graduate value in the labour market.

4. Heritage and Authenticity as the Problem-Space of Interpretive Legitimacy

The claim that tourism work is meaning-intensive is not new; what matters is specifying how meaning becomes evaluative, contested, and employability-relevant. Authenticity debates provide this infrastructure by showing how legitimacy is produced, challenged, and institutionalised in tourism encounters.

MacCannell's staged authenticity thesis identifies a structural condition of tourism: visitors seek "backstage" reality and interpret frontstage displays through suspicion, desire, and semiotic reading [4]. For employability, the implication is not merely that interpretation matters, but that interpretation is conducted under an implicit credibility audit. The interpreter's authority is always potentially fragile because visitors bring interpretive heuristics for detecting strategic staging. This fragility is amplified in heritage and memory-work destinations where narratives are value-laden and where visitors may carry prior beliefs or political sensitivities.

Wang's intervention reframes authenticity as plural, distinguishing objective authenticity from constructive authenticity and existential authenticity [6]. Constructive authenticity is especially consequential here because it shifts attention from whether an object is "authentically original" to how authenticity is socially produced through interpretive framing, institutional authorisation, and visitor resonance. In meaning-intensive tourism, authenticity becomes an outcome of interpretation rather than a pre-given property. This pushes employability beyond factual knowledge: graduates must manage the conditions under which credible authenticity effects can be produced and sustained.

Heritage studies further complicate legitimacy by showing that heritage is not simply "the past" but a contemporary cultural process through which societies select, narrate, and authorise what should be remembered [23]. Smith's authorised heritage discourse thesis clarifies how expert institutions and professional norms shape what is recognised as legitimate heritage and how it should be interpreted [21]. From an employability standpoint, this means interpretive labour is constrained by institutional logics and ethical commitments, not only by visitor preferences. Graduates must therefore demonstrate stewardship judgement that aligns

interpretation with authorised constraints while keeping narratives meaningful and accessible.

The dissonant heritage tradition adds a second layer of difficulty: heritage narratives are often contested, conflictual, and politically charged, producing competing claims to legitimacy and ownership [22]. In revolutionary heritage and other memory-work contexts, the interpretive task is not to “neutralise” conflict but to manage it responsibly, acknowledging contestation without collapsing into either sensationalism or evasive vagueness. This is precisely where cultural identity capability becomes employability-relevant: it stabilises interpretive legitimacy through ethical reasoning, narrative judgement, and motivational resilience under scrutiny.

Interpretation scholarship provides micro-foundations for how meaning-making is performed. Tilden and Ham shift interpretation from information delivery to relevance, provocation, and thematic coherence [19] [20]. Moscardo’s work on mindful visitors further links interpretation to attention, engagement, and reflective processing, clarifying why interpretive design shapes visitor learning rather than merely communicating facts [5]. Together, these works justify why cultural identity capability is a capability rather than an attitude: legitimacy is produced through interpretive practices, and the employable graduate is one who can repeatedly produce credible meaning under institutional and social constraints.

5. Platform Mediation and Algorithmic Visibility as Employability Conditions in Tourism

Tourism storytelling increasingly occurs inside platform environments rather than being distributed through neutral channels. Platformisation is not simply the diffusion of digital tools; it is the reorganisation of cultural production, labour, and value capture around platforms that intermediate transactions, attention, and evaluation. Tourism scholarship has documented how digitalisation reshapes distribution, promotion, and experience design, while smart tourism research highlights data-driven personalisation and infrastructural embedding of technology in destinations and services [8] [9] [24]. A platformisation lens further emphasises intermediation power, market concentration, and regulatory tensions [25].

Platform studies explain why mediation becomes an employability condition. The platform society perspective shows how social and economic life becomes organised around connective infrastructures that embed public values and reshape institutions through ranking, recommendation, and datafication [12]. Gillespie clarifies that platforms actively govern visibility and legitimacy through content moderation and infrastructural design [11]. Bucher emphasises that algorithms shape attention and action by privileging certain forms of engagement and predictability [10].

When brought into tourism, the employability stakes are clear. Graduates increasingly build reputations and signal competence through platform-mediated artefacts: short videos, live-stream tours, social content portfolios, analytics dash-

boards, and community engagement traces. Visibility is partly algorithmic; credibility is partly performative; and evaluation is partly metricised. Technical competence in this context involves platform-rule adaptation, audience segmentation, multimodal design, and iterative optimisation.

The implication for employability is not merely that graduates must market destinations. Rather, they must navigate a mediated place-making economy in which narrative forms are shaped by attention dynamics and algorithmic selection. This amplifies both opportunity and risk. The opportunity is within reach: technical competence can scale interpretive narratives beyond on-site encounters and support portfolio careers. The risk is value drift: when algorithmic incentives reward immediacy, spectacle, and emotional intensity, interpretive integrity can erode, and shallow storytelling can become the default.

Platform mediation, therefore, intensifies the importance of technical competence while simultaneously increasing the need for cultural identity capability to prevent credibility erosion. In platform environments, the costs of decoupling are amplified because ethically questionable narratives can spread widely and persistently, producing reputational damage. Conversely, culturally grounded narratives that cannot be mediated effectively may fail to compete for attention and opportunity, producing employability fragility in labour markets where signalling and visibility matter.

6. The Coupling Mechanism: Why Identity × Technique Is Multiplicative, When It Fails, and How to Measure It

The coupling mechanism is the theoretical core of the manuscript because it explains why tourism employability in meaning-intensive contexts cannot be represented as an additive bundle of identity plus skills. The theoretical alternative is an additive (substitutability) model: employability is treated as the sum of independent competence components such that weakness in one dimension can be compensated by strength in the other. Additive architectures are attractive because they fit checklist curricula and straightforward measurement, and they implicitly align with “skills portfolio” discourse in employability policy. However, this alternative is insufficient in interpretive labour contexts, because legitimacy and mediation do not behave as compensatory resources. In meaning-work, technical polish does not reliably compensate for legitimacy deficits; likewise, ethical seriousness does not reliably compensate for invisibility under platform regimes. The dynamics are better captured as complementarity rather than substitution.

Interpretive legitimacy functions as a threshold phenomenon. Visitors often operate with credibility heuristics: signals of trustworthiness, consistency, and ethical stance. Once credibility is doubted, additional technical polish can intensify scepticism by making storytelling feel more staged, more strategic, or more manipulative. In MacCannell’s terms, higher performance sophistication can amplify the sense of frontstage staging rather than reduce it; in Smith’s terms, technical outputs that ignore authorised heritage constraints can trigger institutional

delegitimation regardless of audience engagement [4] [21]. Technical competence, therefore, does not generate stable employability returns unless interpretive legitimacy is present.

When cultural identity capability is high, technical competence becomes a multiplier because mediated outputs are perceived as grounded and trustworthy; they scale credible meaning rather than merely scaling attention. The same technical competence applied without stewardship can produce visibility, but with fragile employability returns because the outputs are vulnerable to reputational criticism, institutional sanction, or visitor distrust. This is why the marginal employability return to technical competence rises as cultural identity capability increases. Conversely, cultural identity capability yields stronger and more portable employability returns when it can be enacted in forms that are legible and competitive in contemporary platformised evaluation regimes.

This complementarity produces predictable failure modes when coupling breaks. High technical competence with low cultural identity capability tends toward value drift: optimisation for attention under algorithmic incentives without stewardship judgement, producing short-term visibility while elevating the probability of backlash, institutional exclusion, and burnout. High cultural identity capability with low technical competence produces the opposite pattern: legitimacy without reach. The graduate may be careful and ethically grounded, but struggles to translate those qualities into mediated outputs that travel across platforms and audiences, weakening mobility and career growth in labour markets where signalling and visibility matter.

Organisational conditions that support or undermine coupling. The coupling is not solely an individual attribute; it is materially shaped by organisational evaluation regimes and institutional culture. Performance metrics that reward speed, volume, and click-through engagement without parallel accountability for accuracy, provenance, and ethical handling of contested narratives create systematic incentives for decoupling: technical competence is selectively reinforced while stewardship judgement is treated as friction. Conversely, organisations that institutionalise dual accountability—e.g., requiring provenance disclosure, peer review of interpretive scripts, or ethical sign-off for sensitive narratives—create conditions under which the two capabilities mutually reinforce. Institutional culture matters as well: cultures that treat interpretation as a professional craft with legitimate discretion allow graduates to practise judgement, learn from critique, and stabilise legitimacy over time; cultures that treat interpretation as mere promotional output reduce identity capability to compliance and invite value drift. These organisational moderators explain why the same graduate can appear “highly employable” in one setting yet become fragile in another: coupling is strengthened or weakened by what organisations reward, tolerate, and publicly recognise.

Illustrative cases (mechanism made tangible). A positive coupled case is a revolutionary heritage site recruiting a young interpreter who produces short-form videos translating archival detail into accessible themes while explicitly signalling

provenance and ethical framing. Technical competence expands reach through platform-adaptive editing and iterative optimisation, while cultural identity capability anchors legitimacy by avoiding sensational shortcuts and responsibly handling contested episodes. A negative decoupled case is a travel influencer narrating a red tourism story using cinematic effects and viral pacing but compressing complex events into emotionally charged simplifications that introduce factual distortions. Although content initially performs well algorithmically, credibility collapses once inaccuracies are challenged, triggering reputational backlash and termination of collaborations.

Measurement should capture complementarity rather than assessing the two dimensions in isolation. A coupling-consistent strategy treats both capabilities as performance-capable constructs elicited through tasks, artefacts, and scenario judgement, then models their interaction statistically. Latent variable interaction approaches in SEM are appropriate when both capabilities are modelled as latent constructs [26] [27].

7. Tourism-Specific Propositions in Prose

Propositions are stated in narrative form to preserve theoretical cadence while making the model testable. The central empirical expectation is complementarity: the effect of one capability on employability-relevant outcomes depends on the level of the other. This is consistent with classic accounts of complementarities in organisational design, where bundles of practices or resources exhibit increasing returns when co-present [28]. In the present model, legitimacy and mediation are complements: each increases the productivity of the other in producing stable, portable employability.

Where tourism work is meaning-intensive, graduates with stronger cultural identity capability will be more likely to generate visitor-perceived authenticity, trust, and acceptance of interpretive framing because their performances better manage credibility heuristics and stewardship responsibilities [4] [6] [21]. However, these advantages will be most pronounced when graduates also possess sufficient technical competence to render interpretive intent in formats that visitors encounter and value across channels. This conditionality reflects that legitimacy must be experienced, not merely asserted, and experience increasingly travels via mediated forms [12] [10].

In mediated tourism environments, graduates with stronger technical competence will be more likely to produce engagement, comprehension, and recall because they can design multimodal experiences aligned with platform and audience logics [8] [9]. Yet these engagement outcomes will translate into sustainable employability advantages only when technical outputs carry interpretive legitimacy grounded in cultural identity capability. Without such grounding, technical competence is more likely to generate volatile attention-dependent gains that are vulnerable to legitimacy crises, organisational exclusion, or self-undermining burn-out [11] [10].

Employability advantages will therefore be strongest where the two capabilities are jointly high because each increases the productivity of the other. Decoupling yields asymmetric risks: technique-high/identity-low tends toward value drift and reputational fragility; identity-high/technique-low tends toward bounded legitimacy with weaker signalling and slower mobility. Boundary conditions moderate these patterns. In tightly scripted service roles with low interpretive autonomy, coupling should weaken because legitimacy is partially institutionalised through standardisation rather than enacted judgement [14]. In high platform-intensity contexts, coupling should strengthen because visibility pressures increase the marginal returns to technical competence while also magnifying the penalties for legitimacy failure. Finally, organisational reward systems and cultural norms should systematically shift the observed coupling strength by shaping whether stewardship is treated as professional work or as expendable “tone”.

8. Operationalisation and Curriculum Alignment: Toward an Indicator System

A conceptual model aimed at curriculum and measurement must specify an operationalisation pathway that preserves theoretical meaning while enabling reliable assessment. Best practice in construct development begins with domain specification and theory-based item generation, followed by content validation and psychometric testing, and culminates in evidence for convergent and discriminant validity [16] [17]. In this model, however, an additional design principle is required: identity and technique should be measured as enacted capabilities rather than as self-reported traits, because self-report is vulnerable to social desirability and may collapse stewardship into ideology or mere “attitude”. Accordingly, performance-based tasks and artefact evaluation are positioned as primary evidence sources, supplemented by reflective materials for developmental diagnostics rather than as the sole indicators.

The operational programme can combine three typical methodological families. First, behavioural event interviews and critical incident techniques can identify how high performers actually enact legitimacy and mediation under pressure, generating empirically grounded indicator domains [29]-[31]. Second, scenario-based judgement tasks can elicit stewardship reasoning in contested situations, aligning measurement with interpretive judgement rather than belief statements; such situational judgement approaches are widely used to assess judgement in high-stakes professional contexts [32]. Third, portfolio-based assessment can capture cross-format translation and iterative optimisation, providing evidence of mediation competence as outputs rather than claims.

The indicator logic should be explicitly linked to the coupling mechanism. Indicators for cultural identity capability should capture legitimacy work: how graduates justify interpretive choices, manage contested memory, and maintain ethical accuracy while producing relevance and engagement. Indicators for technical competence should capture mediation work: cross-platform narrative translation,

platform-rule adaptation, and analytics-informed iteration without value drift. To keep the assessment architecture readable to reviewers, **Table 1** summarises a Construct-Indicator-Task-Rubric schema that makes the model assessable while remaining faithful to its theoretical commitments.

Table 1. Construct-Indicator-Task-Rubric schema for assessing coupled employability capabilities.

Construct	Indicator	Task (Elicitation/Artefact)	Rubric Anchor (What Counts as “High” Performance)
Cultural identity capability	Stewardship judgement under contestation	Scenario judgement exercise: contested episode requires narrative framing, justification, and risk assessment; graded blind by expert panel (heritage scholar + site educator + manager).	Frames a coherent theme; acknowledges contestation; justifies choices with evidence and ethical reasoning; avoids distortion/sensationalism; anticipates visitor questions and institutional constraints.
Cultural identity capability	Legitimacy management and credibility signalling	Role-play interpretation with sceptical visitor prompts + short written provenance note (sources, what is interpretive vs factual).	Signals provenance transparently; manages scepticism without defensiveness; maintains trust and respect; preserves factual integrity; adapts tone to audience while retaining ethical stance.
Technical competence	Cross-format translation and platform adaptation	Produce three equivalent narratives from the same heritage brief: 1) on-site script, 2) 60 - 90s short video storyboard, 3) live-stream run-sheet; include platform constraints and target audiences.	Preserves interpretive intent across formats; adapts to time/attention constraints; uses modality appropriately (voice/visual/interaction); avoids value drift; outputs are technically coherent and audience-appropriate.
Technical competence	Iterative optimisation with integrity constraints	Two-cycle revision: improve a media artefact using engagement/comprehension feedback; submit iteration log explaining changes and what was not changed (integrity constraints).	Uses data to refine structure and clarity; demonstrates learning and responsiveness; explicitly protects interpretive legitimacy; avoids optimising for metrics at the expense of accuracy/ethics; revisions improve comprehension and coherence.

The rubric anchors are deliberately interpretive rather than purely technical. They evaluate whether outputs remain thematically coherent, ethically defensible, and institutionally legible while being adapted for platform environments. This avoids a common pitfall in tourism education assessment: rewarding production value and engagement metrics while neglecting stewardship. For curriculum alignment, the schema implies studio-based learning designs in which students repeatedly translate a single heritage brief across formats while defending their interpretive choices, consistent with constructive alignment principles and the employability-as-conversion logic emphasised in higher education scholarship [13].

In validation, the empirical test must reflect coupling, not merely two main effects. Studies should estimate interaction terms or latent interactions and assess whether the joint presence of both capabilities predicts outcomes such as visitor trust, supervisor ratings, and portfolio quality beyond the additive contributions of each capability. This interaction-focused design ensures that measurement and

theory remain aligned, and it provides a clear pathway for building an indicator system that can support both research and programme-level continuous improvement.

9. Conclusion: Boundary Conditions and Transferability

This paper reconceptualises tourism graduate employability as a dual-dimensional capability architecture integrating cultural identity capability and technical competence. The theoretical contribution lies in specifying a coupling mechanism: employability in meaning-intensive tourism contexts is not the sum of identity and technique but their interaction. Heritage and authenticity debates explain why interpretive legitimacy is a core evaluative condition of tourism work, while platform mediation scholarship explains why technical competence has become constitutive of employability through algorithmic visibility, attention dynamics, and mediated signalling. Together, these anchors justify the model, clarify failure modes, and specify an operationalisation pathway based on performance-based indicators rather than self-report identity statements.

The model is expected to travel best to tourism domains where meaning-making and legitimacy work are central (heritage, memory-work, indigenous tourism, museum interpretation, and values-laden place branding). Its coupling effect should weaken in low-autonomy, low-ethics-intensity roles characterised by tight scripting and routinised service delivery, where interpretive judgement is institutionally suppressed. For broader mass-tourism contexts, the cultural identity capability component can be re-specified as place-based identity or attachment capability, preserving the coupling logic while adapting the normative core to less politicised meaning regimes.

Post-graduation development. Although the paper focuses on graduate employability, the coupling is not fixed at graduation. In supportive organisational environments—where interpretive work is mentored, provenance and ethics are institutionally rewarded, and digital optimisation is bounded by integrity constraints—the coupling is expected to strengthen with professional experience as graduates accumulate situated judgement and refine mediation craft. Conversely, the coupling is vulnerable to decay under evaluation regimes that monetise visibility while discounting stewardship: repeated exposure to metricised incentives can normalise value drift and gradually re-train technical competence away from legitimacy. This developmental note underscores why curriculum design and organisational governance should be treated as complementary levers rather than as separable arenas.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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