

BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP: UNIVERSITY TEACHERS, STUDENTS, AND EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVES ON HARD AND SOFT SKILLS FOR EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract

In their talent acquisition strategies, companies establish a comprehensive candidate profile, detailing the combination of hard and soft skills considered vital for future employee success. An exploratory analysis was undertaken to explore whether undergraduate studies facilitate the acquisition of both specialized knowledge and essential soft skills, based on the viewpoints of teachers and students. Additionally, the study seeks to determine if the skills developed by educators align with employer expectations and explores the relative importance placed on technical versus interpersonal competencies by hiring organizations. The study involved directors and students of different higher education programmes (Educational Sciences, Psychology, Management, and Tourism), and employers whose business focus lies in the above-mentioned. Using NVivo software, content analysis was performed on the transcribed interviews to systematically analyse and interpret the data. Findings indicated a unanimous emphasis on soft skills, particularly communication, critical thinking, and autonomy, across all participant groups. Moreover, a strong consensus emerged regarding the need for enhanced collaboration between academia and industry, signifying a clear alignment between employer expectations and educational objectives.

Keywords: Skills gap, Employability, Labour Market, University-industry collaboration.

1 INTRODUCTION

In today's world, with its complex and interconnected nature, the importance of possessing a set of skills is essential. Defining, developing, and owning these competencies is a crucial part of personal and professional success. Indeed, this success depends on the acquisition and maintenance of hard skills and soft skills [1, 2]. Hard skills are generally objective, measurable, technical, and specific (related to a particular area of knowledge or task), conditionally transferable (applied directly in the workplace, often required in specific professions or sectors), and focused on professional performance (as they have a direct impact on task execution and productivity) [3, 4].

Soft skills are related to interpersonal interactions, behaviours, and cognitive abilities. These skills are associated with personality traits, attitudes, and capacities [1, 5]. They include communication skills, empathy, teamwork, conflict resolution, leadership, and adaptability. They are mainly characterized by their subjectivity and immeasurability (they cannot be directly quantified through standardized tests; their evaluation is usually based on qualitative feedback and performance observations), they are transferable between contexts (they can be applied in different areas and roles, being useful in any work environment), and they are essential for adaptation (they facilitate an individual's ability to adapt to new environments, deal with challenges, and collaborate with other people) [1, 4, 6].

As the job market becomes more competitive and globalized, companies are increasingly focused on evaluating soft skills during the hiring process and professional promotion. This phenomenon is because employers recognize that, in addition to hard skills, soft skills are fundamental to ensuring a collaborative, pleasant, productive, and innovative work environment [4].

Soft skills are essential for employability after higher education, namely professionalism, reliability, ability to deal with uncertainty and pressure, planning and strategic thinking skills, communication and interaction with others, good written and verbal communication skills, technological skills, creativity, self-confidence, self-regulation, time management, willingness to learn, and acceptance of responsibilities [6]. The concept of employability has been questioning the ability of education systems to train individuals with the skills desired by the job market [7]. The concept of graduate employability [8] refers to the ability of recent graduates to obtain employment and be successful, which also allows for the evaluation of the quality of university offerings. Employers expect recent graduates to enter the job market with a set of skills ready to be applied immediately at work. This includes both the technical knowledge of their field of study and behavioural competencies, such as the ability to adapt to new environments and work collaboratively [8]. Soft skills are seen as a determining factor for students' integration into the workplace, and many employers emphasize the need to improve these skills, highlighting that universities could better prepare

students for the challenges and demands of the job market, as well as foster better collaboration between higher education institutions and the professional sector [9]. According to [8], higher education institutions are seen by both employers and students as primarily responsible for preparing students for the job market. They have a responsibility to develop curricula that promote the skills necessary for employability, both in terms of technical and interpersonal/behavioural competencies. There is increasing pressure on institutions to provide training in skills demanded by the job market, which may compromise the quality of academic courses. Higher education has faced several challenges in adapting learning contexts to better prepare students for the demands of the job market. The connection between scientific and technical knowledge and transversal skills plays a crucial role in achieving high-quality professional performance [10].

Nowadays, it is observed that the generation with the highest level of education is the one facing the greatest difficulties in finding employment. This phenomenon demonstrates the gap that seems to exist between the training acquired by young people in higher education and the skills demanded by the job market [11]. It is important to consider the challenges and contradictions emerging from the dynamics between digitalization and commodification. On one hand, universities are pressured to train their students with the necessary skills to acquire technological competencies. On the other hand, there is a growing concern that this excessive emphasis on the demands of the job market may compromise the broader role of higher education, which traditionally includes the development of critical thinking, citizenship and the questioning of social norms [12].

Institutions have tried to bridge the gap with the job market through curricular innovation and revisions to pedagogical approaches [10] however, it is necessary to understand if these are actually being applied, are effective, and are meeting the demands. Thus, the objective of this research is to understand the perceptions of professors, higher education students and employers, regarding the acquisition of technical and interpersonal skills in the context of employability.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study, integrated into a larger project [13], adopted a qualitative exploratory approach, with the objective of understanding the perceptions of higher education teachers, students, and employers, regarding the acquisition of technical and interpersonal skills (hard and soft skills) in the context of employability. It sought to capture different perspectives on the existence of a possible mismatch between the skills developed in higher education and those skills valued by the job market. The sample consisted of three distinct groups of participants: teachers, students, and representatives of employing entities. Five individual interviews were carried out with professors from the fields of Educational Sciences, Mechatronics Engineering, Psychology, Management and Tourism. There were also conducted four focus group interviews with undergraduate students from the fields of Educational Sciences, Psychology, Management and Tourism; and six interviews with six companies with the potential to employ these students, operating in Évora, Portugal.

The selection of participants was based on a convenience sampling, seeking to ensure the diversity of training areas and the representativeness of relevant activity sectors with courses existing at the University of Évora. The interviews were conducted over a 5-day period, by 2 pairs of researchers, in a face-to-face format, according to the availability of the participants. A semi-structured interview guide, developed by the research team, was used, containing open-ended questions oriented towards the essential skills for employability and the role of higher education in their promotion. All participants gave their informed consent, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the collected data. After collection, the interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software, employing content analysis as the main technique [14] and thematic analysis [15, 16].

3 RESULTS

The results are presented in two sections. The first, «Acquired and Valued Skills: Perspectives of Students, Faculty, and Employers», analyses how these groups perceive the skills developed during the academic studies and those they consider most important. The second section explores communication between students, the university, and the labour market, including strategies suggested to improve this relationship. The frequency numbers correspond to Units of registration (UR).

3.1 Acquired and Valued Skills: Perspectives of Students, Faculty, and Employers

The following tables result from the categorisation and quantification of skills mentioned by the three groups: students, university teachers, and employers, based on their perceptions and experience. This analysis makes it possible to identify both convergences and discrepancies between the skills effectively developed during the degree and those perceived as most important.

Table 1. Skills acquired during the degree.

Category	Subcategory	Students	Faculty	Employers	f	F
Interpersonal and Emotional Skills	Teamwork	3	3	0	6	21 (35,0%)
	Communication	3	2	0	5	
	Empathy	3	0	0	3	
	Emotional intelligence	3	0	0	3	
	Motivation	1	1	0	2	
	Leadership	1	0	0	1	
	Respect	0	1	0	1	
Cognitive and Intellectual Skills	Critical thinking	3	5	1	9	17 (28,3%)
	Practical application of knowledge	4	0	0	4	
	Creativity	1	0	1	2	
	Problem-solving	1	0	0	1	
	Languages	0	0	1	1	
Intrapersonal and Self-Management	Organisation	2	2	0	4	17 (28,3%)
	Adaptability	1	3	0	4	
	Autonomy	3	0	0	3	
	Self-management	2	1	0	3	
	Resilience	2	0	0	2	
	Responsibility	0	1	0	1	
Technical Skills		0	3	2	5	5 (8,3%)
Total		33	22	5	60	100%

Table 2. Skills considered important.

Category	Subcategory	Students	Faculty	Employers	f	F
Interpersonal and Emotional Skills	Communication	7	4	0	11	26 (37,7%)
	Teamwork	2	2	0	4	
	Humility	0	0	4	4	
	Emotional intelligence	2	0	1	3	
	Empathy	1	1	0	2	
	Motivation	0	0	2	2	
Cognitive and Intellectual Skills	Willingness to learn	0	0	7	7	22 (31,9%)
	Problem-solving	4	1	0	5	
	Critical thinking	0	4	0	4	
	Creativity	0	3	0	3	
	Practical application of knowledge	1	0	0	1	
	Languages	0	1	0	1	
	Reading and writing	0	1	0	1	
Intrapersonal and Self-Management Skills	Proactivity	3	2	2	7	20 (29,0%)
	Autonomy	3	0	0	7	
	Resilience	2	0	1	3	
	Organisation	2	0	0	2	
	Adaptability	0	1	1	2	
	Availability	0	0	2	2	
	Dedication	0	0	1	1	
Technical Skills		0	0	1	1	1 (1,4%)
Total		27	20	22	69	100%

There is a clear emphasis on the value of transversal skills, as recognised by all the participants. Within the category of «*Interpersonal and Emotional Skills*», communication stands out (skills acquired during the degree = 5 UR; skills considered important = 11 UR), along with teamwork (skills acquired during the degree = 6 UR; skills considered important = 4 UR). One employer highlighted the relevance of communication, “One skill I consider highly relevant is communication. Being able to explain, to convey information. Not only to transmit it, but to engage the listener, to whom the message is directed, and to create empathy with the people being communicated with, thereby establishing an emotional connection” (R3_UR12). These skills are followed by references to emotional intelligence and empathy. In the category of «*Cognitive and Intellectual Skills*», critical thinking is particularly prominent, especially as a skill acquired during the classes, mentioned by students, faculty, and employers (skills acquired = 9 UR; skills considered important = 4 UR). A faculty member stated that students “don’t speak, they don’t want to participate, they’re afraid to participate. In my classes, I try hard, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, to encourage critical thinking” (R4_UR12).

Willingness to learn is frequently mentioned as a valued skill (7 UR), yet it is not mentioned as having been developed during the course (0 UR). Other noted skills in this category include practical application of knowledge (acquired = 4 UR; considered important = 1 UR) and **creativity** (acquired = 2 UR; considered important = 3 UR). As one faculty member refers “First and foremost, creativity and innovation, the ability to build innovative solutions from the elements of the context in which people find themselves, being able to draw on the resources available there” (R2_UR8).

These skills act as bridges between what is fostered in higher education and what is valued in the labour market. However, faculty members tend to perceive a higher level of development of these competences, which may reflect a discrepancy between pedagogical intentions and students’ perceptions. In the category of *Intrapersonal and Self-Management Skills*, proactivity stands out as the most frequently mentioned important skill (7 UR). One student observed: “In terms of soft skills, proactivity, that is, taking initiative, is very important or will be very important in the labour market, the moment we step forward to get things done” (R1_UR1). Organisation and adaptability were also frequently mentioned, as another student mentioned “The ability to adapt to our environment, to learn different things” (R1_UR4). Other referenced skills include autonomy, responsibility, resilience, self-management, availability, and dedication. Finally, «*Technical Skills*» were mentioned almost exclusively by teachers and employers, suggesting that students may not explicitly recognise them as the most important part of their academic journey. This highlights the need to make the technical dimension more connected with practical and professional contexts.

3.2 Stakeholders’ Perceptions of Communication Between Students, Universities, and the Labour Market

Table 3 presents the data obtained from the three groups of interviewees regarding their perception of communication between students, the University, and the labour market, the reasons they believe there is a lack of communication, and the improvements observed over time, organised into five categories.

Table 3. Perceptions of communication and its evolution.

Category	Subcategory	Students	Faculty	Employers	f	F
Perception that communication is not the problem		1	1	0	2	2 (2,3%)
Lack of communication between the University and the Job Market		4	3	4	11	11 (12,4%)
Limited communication between students and the Job Market		6	3	1	10	10 (11,2%)
Reasons for the lack of communication	Discrepancy between the University's theory and the Job Market's practice	0	2	7	9	39 (43,8%)
	Little importance given to the connection between the University and the Job Market	0	2	6	8	
	University's failure in monitoring internships	0	0	6	6	
	Differences according to the type of education and areas of knowledge	5	0	1	6	
	Resistance to change	0	4	0	4	

Improvements felt in communication over time	Insufficient and/or slow contact between the University and the Job Market	3	0	0	3	
	Generational differences	0	0	2	2	
	Lack of motivation and initiative from students	1	0	0	1	
	Improvements and effort from the University to align with the Job Market	3	13	1	17	27 (30,3%)
	Coordination between the Job Market and Students through Internships	6	0	0	6	
	Importance of visiting and observing companies	4	0	0	4	
Total		33	28	28	89	100

The analysis of the data presented in Table 3 highlights a widespread perception among the three groups of interviewees (students, teachers, and employers) that communication between the University, students, and the Labour Market faces significant difficulties. Only two registration units refer to the perception that the problem does not lie in communication: "No, I don't think the problem is in communication" (TL_UR1), which represents a minimal fraction of the total responses (2 out of 89), reinforcing the idea that this is a consensually recognized problem. The category *Lack of communication between the University and the Labour Market* was mentioned by all groups (11 UR), indicating a clear gap in institutional articulation. Among the highlighted expressions are perceptions such as "it doesn't happen" (CE_UR21) or "if there is a lack of communication? Yes, indeed" (VC_UR1), underscoring the absence of consistent dialogue channels between the two parties.

Meanwhile, *Limited communication between Students and the Labour Market* was particularly emphasized by students (6 registration units), although it was also recognized by teachers (3 registration units) and employers (only 1 registration unit). Students highlight difficulties in access and guidance, as illustrated in statements such as "I feel that students have no contact with the labour market" (P_UR1) and "we don't even know how to access the labour market, and there's a very big barrier in terms of what's also online for us" (PU_9). This perception is corroborated by employers, who indicate the absence of follow-up from the University, as in the testimony "I think that no professor from the University of Évora has ever come to ask about the quality of the work that the students were developing" (NEU_R3). The lack of preparation of students for professional integration is also mentioned: "students have no notion of how to search, how to plan, how to explore, how to establish contact networks to facilitate employment" (PC_UR3). Faced with this communication gap, the interviewees identified several causes organized into 8 subcategories, totalling 39 UR. One of the most representative is the diminutive importance attributed to the connection between the University and the Labour Market, identified by all three groups, with statements such as "the connection between companies and universities, education should be much more hand-in-hand" (PA_UR9), or "we sometimes feel that in more recent technologies, Universities do not have the capacity to respond" (CAP_UR7), pointing to a strategic and institutional failure that cuts across various fields of knowledge.

Another recurring reason is the mismatch between University theory and the practical component demanded by the Labour Market, especially highlighted by employers (7 registration units). This mismatch is well illustrated by statements such as: "Portugal is giving importance to studying, in the sense of theory [...] and is downplaying the practical part" (SO_UR5) and "there is a large deficit in what is [...] practice, reality" (PA_UR1), reinforcing the idea that academic training still does not sufficiently keep pace with the practical demands of the market.

The University's failure to follow up on internships was also pointed out as a difficulty, particularly by employers "His coordinator came here to drop him off and never appeared again" (MH_UR3), or "I don't see that there is a great relationship between the internship supervisor and the labour market" (US_UR3), highlighting a breakdown in the supervision process and connection between academia and the professional context. Other factors mentioned, although less frequently, include insufficient and/or slow contact between the University and the Labour Market, the lack of motivation and initiative of students, and resistance to change, which, even with a smaller number, reflect obstacles to the effectiveness of communication.

Despite the difficulties, the data also reveals perceived improvements in communication over time (27 UR). Employers acknowledge a growing effort on the part of the University: "I think that increasingly the circuit between academia and employers is becoming more efficient" (MM_UR1) and "in recent times

we have experienced a new methodology [...] that the University provided" (TL_UR6). Teachers also recognize the effort: "we ourselves promote this contact and try to establish contact" (BN_UR1). Students, in turn, value this evolution: "I feel that the University of Évora has already tightened this connection with the labor market a bit" (CE_UR6). The articulation between the Labour Market and students through internships was exclusively valued by students, as shown by the statement "they make an initial contact which are the curricular internships" (P_UR3), reinforcing the role of internships as an effective tool for approaching the market. The importance of visiting and observing companies was also highlighted as a way to become familiar with the professional context: "the XXXX company [...] was quite an experience [...] it's basically an introduction to the company" (G_UR7).

In summary, there is a consensus among the three groups regarding the existence of failures in communication. However, there are differences in how each group experiences the problem. Teachers and employers show greater concern with gaps of a structural and organizational nature, while students mainly emphasize practical issues related to their direct experience, particularly with regard to access to the labor market and the usefulness of internships. These different perspectives reinforce the need for articulated, continuous strategies adapted to the reality of each group to strengthen the bridges between the University and the Labour Market.

3.3 Strategies Proposed by Stakeholders to Improve Communication

Table 4 presents thirteen categories through which the strategies proposed by students, teachers, and employers, aimed at improving communication among them, are organised.

Table 4. Proposed strategies to improve communication.

Category	Students	Faculty	Employers	f	F
Relationship between academic programmes, employability, and regional territory	3	1	9	13	71 (100%)
Promote the sharing of contacts between the University and the Labour Market (through events, workshops, and company visits)	8	1	2	11	
Invest in the availability of internships	7	0	2	9	
Need for practical experience during University	0	5	3	8	
University initiatives that provide students with information about educational pathways and the Labour Market	6	0	0	6	
Bring real-world cases and professionals into the University	3	1	1	5	
Build sectoral networks between the University, the Labour Market, and students	0	4	0	4	
Place greater emphasis on career development	0	4	0	4	
Better integration of students into the transition to the Labour Market	0	0	3	3	
Strengthen the connection between the University and the Labour Market	0	1	2	3	
Sharing of difficulties experienced with teachers	2	0	0	2	
Encourage student initiative to approach the labour market (combat misinformation)	2	0	0	2	
Encourage the labour market to introduce itself to the university	1	0	0	1	
Total	32	17	22	71	71

Participants highlighted the importance of aligning University courses with regional employability and development. One student noted that their choice of course was influenced by its connection to regional development agencies, emphasizing the value of contributing to Portugal's interior regions (TU_UR10). Employers also stressed the mismatch between available courses and local needs. One employer mentioned difficulties in hiring Economics or Management graduates (NE_UR1), while another criticized the creation of unsustainable degrees with low demand and employability (SO_UR1). In the category *Promoting contact between university and labour market*, students valued workshops and visits to the labour market institutions. One student recalled attending a soft skills workshop in the first year but noted a lack of continuity (CEU_R13). Another suggested organizing a jobs event to connect students with

businesses and institutions (CEU_R16). Company visits were also seen as valuable for understanding the job market (CUR_12). Employers and teachers supported these initiatives, suggesting job fairs (PC_UR8) and highlighting programs like Open Day and Job Shadowing as ways to build mutual understanding between students and companies (CAP_UR11). *Investment in the availability of internships* is a category that stands out, as students consider them essential: "Internships could be an important factor because we would get to know the companies and understand what they require" (G_UR6).

Another key strategy proposed by students falls under the category *University initiatives providing students with information about their educational path and the labour market*. This aims to ensure students feel more supported by the institution, with the university acting as a bridge between students and employers, as demonstrated by this example: "Right from the first year of the degree, students should be made aware of at least the process: Look, you have three years of the degree, but be aware that you need a master's degree, and use your degree to do this, this, and this, as it is highly valued in the master's and you'll acquire knowledge for it, but no one tells us this!" (PUR_19). The category *Need for practical contact during university training* was highlighted by both teachers and employers. They pointed out the significant gap between theoretical knowledge and practical experience: "There is a large gap between theory and what is the actual practice, the reality" (PA_UR1).

Another category mentioned by all interview groups was the strategy of *Bringing practical cases and professionals into the university*. This issue highlights the need to make education more connected to practice, as noted: "many university professors have companies and work in other places and then bring that experience into the classroom, but I think that's still a very small number compared to what it should be" (US_UR5); "another professor came in who is a Manager, worked in a factory, he is an Engineer... when he started the subject, it was like a light at the end of the tunnel. Why? Because he had field experience and knew what he was talking about, he could explain with practical examples, it was very good." (G_UR6). In this regard, the *Need for greater contact with practice* emerges, as seen in the example: "To have content more adapted to what is needed, especially in the technological field, where reality is constantly changing" (CAP_UR6). With fewer recording units, other categories emerged as a result of some proposed strategies, such as the "Initiative for the MT to introduce itself to the Uni," "Sharing difficulties experienced with the lecturers," and the ability to "Invest in strengthening the connection between the Uni and the MT," among other categories presented in Table 4.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study reveal a consensus among students, teachers and employers regarding the relevance of transversal skills in the academic and professional context, with emphasis on communication, teamwork, critical thinking and proactivity. However, significant discrepancies were observed between the skills effectively developed during the academic trajectory and those considered most valued in the job market, especially with regard to the "willingness to learn", widely recognized as important, but not identified as having been acquired during the course.

It was also found that teachers tend to attribute a higher degree of development to the skills, which suggests a possible divergence between the pedagogical intention and the students' perception of their own educational process. The reduced visibility of technical skills by students indicates the need for greater integration and explanation of this knowledge in the curricula and teaching practices.

Regarding communication between students, universities and the job market, the data reveal a widespread perception of fragility in this relationship. This weakness is attributed to institutional factors, such as the weak connection between universities and companies, the gap between theory and practice, and the lack of monitoring of internships. For students, the main obstacles are related to access to the job market and the lack of professional guidance. Despite these difficulties, there is recognition of a growing effort on the part of the university to improve this connection, namely through the implementation of more integrated methodologies, visits to companies and the valorisation of curricular internships. These initiatives are welcomed by students and seen as promising for strengthening the connection with the market.

Finally, the strategies suggested by the different groups of stakeholders converge on three priority axes: strengthening the relationship between academic programs, employability and regional territory; promoting moments of sharing and direct contact between the University and the job market, through events, workshops and visits to companies; and investing in the availability and valorisation of curricular internships. These actions are considered fundamental to strengthening ties between academic training and the demands of the professional world, promoting more effective, continuous communication adapted to the real needs of students, teachers and employers.

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