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Importance of sustainable training for the employment of the future

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Abstract

Purpose: University learning of a group of competencies, also proposed by Bologna, is currently gaining importance: transversal competencies, already included in the OECD Competencies Report (2019) which, common to all university degrees, bring the student closer to a new reality and to a diverse professional future, where sustainable leaders will be one of the fundamental axes of any decision.

Design/methodology: The results of a massive survey that was carried out on how university students perceive and value these skills are analyzed, together with a series of qualitative interviews with employers, analyzing what deficiencies exist.

Findings: The results show that soft skills are essential for the professional future of students and that they understand and value it. Likewise, it was observed that it is essential to establish a common system of certified recognition of these competences and that universities must develop instruments that facilitate their accreditation in the workplace through digital badges

Practical implications: For its effective development, it is necessary to incorporate in the different degree studies a type of training anchored in the values and attitudes necessary to achieve a fairer and more balanced society, in line with what the Sustainable Development Goals 3, 4 and 8 mark.

Originality/value: This study provides a vision of the need for training in certain skills to achieve a rapprochement between the labor market and the university.

Keywords: Sustainable leadership, Competences, Social Justice, Certification, Values, Labor Market

Jel Codes: I23, I25

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1. Introduction

The University needs a deep adaptation of the study plans to the new social and labor scenario, since, despite the fact that some changes are taking place, it is essential to promote employability, facilitating the use of a shared

language to define academic and professional profiles. , thus allowing comparison and communication between different countries (Navaridas Nalda, Jiménez Trens & Fernández Ortiz, 2016). We think that the pandemic has helped speed up this process, but it is still a pending issue in most universities. After a systematic review of transversal skills for employability in university graduates from the perspective of an employee carried out by García-Álvarez, Vázquez-Rodríguez, Quiroga-Carrillo and Priegue Camaño (2022), it is concluded that universities still have work ahead of them in improving the employability of their graduates. University institutions must move away from an exclusively vocational or professionalized approach towards one that helps provide graduates with personal resources. They need for their personal and professional development throughout their lives. In this regard, there are clear limitations in current curricula in helping graduates face multidirectional professional paths. It is in this context that the "pedagogies for employability" makes more sense, by allowing universities to include active methodologies in education that strengthen the links between academia and the social and labor reality.

First, it should not be forgotten that the university deployment is deployment of knowledge and contribution to society. The place where great conversations are generated, where personal and social projects can mature and growth and progress at work are achieved (Polo, 2018).

The Bologna Declaration (1999) proposed the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to guarantee the adaptation of the education system to social, labor and scientific needs and facilitate the movement of students between Member Countries. The latter aspect has been gradually implemented and student mobility between European universities has been strengthened. Thus, according to figures from the Spanish Integrated University Information System (SIIU), in the year 2020 (academic year 2019-20) the number of foreign students under ordinary registration and the number of foreign lecturers in the Spanish university system continued its rising trend, achieving figures of 153,089 students and 3,872 lecturers, respectively (SIIU, 2020).

The problem does not reside in the specific competences of university degrees, but in what are known as general or transversal competences, whether they are instrumental, systemic, or interpersonal (Tuning Project, 2000). These competences seek to enhance students' human and social dimension and link up with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) 4 and 8 developed by the UN, in terms of quality teaching, the first of them, and economic growth, employment, citizenship, d, thus helping to create a fairer and more balanced society. An Education for Global Citizenship is required, understood as a kind of education that seeks to train citizens that recognize and understand the need to act and think globally in their search for global justice and can do so (Ballbé Martínez, González Valencia & Ortega-Sánchez 2021).

The acquisition of this training will enable students to define a key aspect regarding their future: their sense of purpose, what motivates them and the reason why they are training themselves in the first place. This sense of purpose defines the why and the wherefore of their education. It is not simply a question of acquiring knowledge (expertise), but of ensuring students develop a certain attitude regarding the challenges of the future (purpose) and a sense of commitment to the world (impact). A more desirable future for all will only be achieved if young people understand their sense of purpose, if students wish to help develop something better than that which already exists, if they think about what their legacy will be to society and to the world. The development of what are known as civic competences will help students to understand what they are training themselves for. In this respect, environmental training and education for sustainable development have been presented as initiatives that seek to promote the learning of values, effectively enhancing social justice and the environment (Agirreazkuenaga Zigorraga & Cobreros Mendazona, 2020).

Transversal competences, civic skills, should not only be present at universities, but should be developed from primary education onwards. Fortunately, we have several emblematic examples available to us in Spain, where various schools in the 1980's under the first democratic governments made a considerable effort to introduce these competences into their training curricula, teaching student's values such as civic harmony within the school and within society, accepting differences and diversity and developing peaceful means of managing conflicts and working as part of a team (Sala, Pagès & Santisteban, 2021).

Students should learn how to become agents for social change to bring about a better future. Let us not overlook the fact that many of these competences and skills change the way students think and behave, making them more reflective, more resilient, more tolerant in the face of disagreements and differences, more flexible regarding variety, more open to dialogue and more capable of compromising to contribute to proposals that favor the common good, etc. As Herbert Alexander Simon (1976) once stated when talking about Man's limited rationality when it comes to taking decisions, based on his cognitive limitations in terms of information and time: «To design is to devise courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones». This is precisely what transversal competences encourage in students, enabling them to be able to see and value the world in a different way. According to data collected from a survey carried out in February by the University-Business Foundation through TALENTOTECA. (FUE, 2021) aimed at undergraduates and recent graduates at Spanish universities, employability is the key pending issue at universities in Spain. Six out of ten Spanish university students claim they are not prepared for the world of employment when they finish university, whilst 90% believe it is necessary to carry out additional training to adapt their profile to what companies are really looking for. This additional training is precisely what we are referring to in this study.

2. Theoretical framework

The training of citizens is not only one of the main objectives of compulsory education. It is also essential in terms of maintaining democracy itself (Santisteban et al., 2021). In this sense, according to Cinque (2016), soft skills help people to adapt and conduct themselves in an effective manner. However, the skills mismatch continues to be quite high today and it will continue to be so as the demand for skills in employment changes over the coming years. Up until 2025, professionals will be required who have mastered the skills of critical thinking and problem-solving, not to mention self-management skills such as active learning, stress resilience and tolerance and flexibility (WEF, 2020). Employers are looking for professionals who have these skills and personal qualities, which make them more adaptable, more proactive, more resilient, and more responsible (Vera, 2016).

According to the report, Thriving in the Global Skills Shortage: Your Path Through the Wilderness (Cornerstone, 2022). We should not forget that the most frequent reasons cited by companies who find it difficult to find professionals to fill their job positions come down to two aspects: not having the necessary skills, a skills mismatch; and lack of skills.

This is the area in which the university world must act to reduce the current skills gap. The Talent Shortage Survey (ManpowerGroup, 2021), based on research carried out amongst more than 45,000 people in 43 countries and territories, reveals that 69% of companies at a worldwide level reported a shortage of talent after the COVID-19 pandemic. This deficit faced by employers is at its highest point over the last 15 years. Today, it is more difficult than ever to find employees with soft skills and expert knowledge, and in these rapidly changing and uncertain times, the need for soft skills has never been greater.

By the Word Economic Forum (WEF, 2018) what is known as the Fourth Industrial Revolution will lead to general disruption, not only in terms of trading models, but also regarding employment markets over the next five years, featuring an enormous shift in terms of the skills that are required, as shown in Figure 1.

Today, 2018	Trending, 2022	Declining, 2022
Analytical thinking and innovation	Analytical thinking and innovation	Manual dexterity, endurance and precision
Complex problem-solving	Active learning and learning strategies	Memory, verbal, auditory and spatial abilities
Critical thinking and analysis	Creativity, originality and initiative	Management of financial, material resources
Active learning and learning strategies	Technology design and programming	Technology installation and maintenance
Creativity, originality and initiative	Critical thinking and analysis	Reading, writing, math and active listening
Attention to detail, trustworthiness	Complex problem-solving	Management of personnel
Emotional intelligence	Leadership and social influence	Quality control and safety awareness
Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation	Emotional intelligence	Coordination and time management
Leadership and social influence	Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation	Visual, auditory and speech abilities
Coordination and time management	Systems analysis and evaluation	Technology use, monitoring and control

Figure 1. Comparison of the 10 Most Sought-After Skills between 2018 and 2022 (WEF, 2018)

Michavila, Martínez, Martín-González, García Peñalvo and Cruz-Benito (2016), as shown in Figure 2, also provide evidence along the same lines, estimating that, up until 2030, there will be a decline in demand for work involving manual and cognitive skills, both in the United States and in Western Europe. However, the demand for higher cognitive skills is expected to increase (such as statistics, critical thought, and creativity), as will the demand for social and emotional skills (interpersonal capacities, leadership, initiative, enterprise, and adaptability) and technological skills (such as programming, data analysis, technological design, engineering, and scientific research).

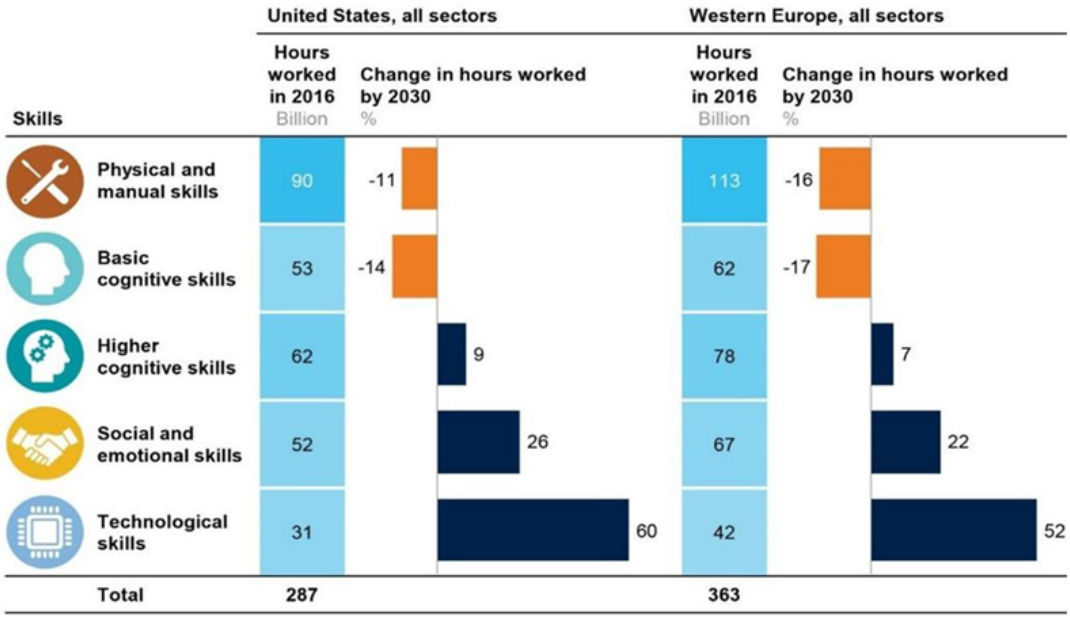

Figure 2.Changes in Skills Required (Michavila et al., 2016)

The importance of these competences in education has led the European Union has launched a project for the classification and evaluation of competences in all sectors, known as ESCO - European Skills / Competences, Qualifications and Occupations. ESCO determines Europe's multilingual classification of competences, qualifications and occupations for the labor market, education, and training, forming part of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

This project systematically illustrates the relationships between the different concepts and has become a new shared language for job seekers, employers, companies and teaching staff, with a view to catering for the needs of the labor market. In this respect, it separates skills into two categories: specific skills for employment; and soft or transversal skills, consisting of human and transformative skills. The latter are directly linked to Sustainable Development Goals 3, 4 and 8.

Within this context, companies and educational institutions must necessarily work together in order to incorporate the learning of these skills into university qualifications, shaping a flexible academic-professional profile that can adapt to a changing and uncertain social environment. According to Marrero Sánchez, Mohamed Amar and Xifra Triadú (2018), these skills should be promoted at educational institutions from primary school onwards, and they should be gradually developed and strengthened throughout our lives. However, we must focus our efforts towards achieving this goal. Authors such as Londoño and Cano (2015) believe it is essential to progress towards practice when it comes to competences, because many theories, models, methodologies, and proposals have been posited, but much remains to be done regarding questions such as how to develop competences specifically and precisely and how to evaluate them.

According to Jackson and Wilton (2017), the reality regarding university education policies aimed at boosting employability focuses on the acquisition of skills such as communication, self-management, self-knowledge and

problem-solving. Nevertheless, it is also important to adapt these skills and make them more flexible in relation to labor market demands, in which skills linked to the information and communication technologies and digital skills emerge as key factors when it comes to acquiring high-skill competences (Almerich, Suárez-Rodríguez, Díaz-García & Orellana, 2020), bearing in mind that the key aspect regarding these competences and skills is that they cannot be replaced by technology, given that they are of a cognitive nature. Thus, if they cannot be integrated into course curricula at all levels, companies will not be able to progress, and the economy will stagnate (Qizi, 2020).

The fundamental skills required to meet the challenges associated with an effective use of new technologies can be summarized as follows: communication and collaboration skills, learning skills (critical thought, among others), personal autonomy (flexibility and initiative) and digital skills (Joynes, Rossignoli & Fenywa Amonoo-Kuofi, 2019).

The university world must not only cater for the demands of the current employment market, but must also be proactive, anticipating the demands posed by existing jobs and the jobs of the future (Pagés Serra & Ripani, 2017). In order to achieve this, we must invest in the development of better training systems that enable professionals to update their skills on an ongoing basis, working alongside employers when it comes to identifying these skills, given that they are the ones who know what skills are most sought-after within the world of work.

In addition to their inclusion in course curricula and in own degrees, the acquisition of these kinds of skills requires active recognition of their importance on the part of the educational establishment, and one of the forms of recognition that is most familiar to the current labor market (and which also facilitates the integration of technology into student curriculums) consists of what are known as "digital badges". These have been developed by the Mozilla Foundation in association with the MacArthur Foundation to provide a means of acknowledging informal learning throughout our lifetime (Glover, 2013).

A digital badge consists of a graphic representation of some competence, skill or ability. Based on a digital file, it brings together the criteria and evidence of fulfilment on the part of the student (Buckingham, 2014). Such badges constitute a new means of providing credentials or accreditation to those individuals who demonstrate a certain knowledge, ability or capacity within a particular domain (Randall, Harrison & West, 2013), and they can be used to boost students' interest in certain contents or to guide students when carrying out a series of activities or tasks, so that they know they are working towards a certain objective when doing so (Araujo, Santos, Pedro & Batista, 2017).

Badges are currently being used or are being developed at prestigious institutions such as MIT, but also at organizations outside the realm of higher education such as NASA and the Disney-Pixar film studios (Tally, 2012). This rising use is because companies looking for employees tend to review the candidates' profiles through digital platforms and the social media, such as LinkedIn, verifying the competences that the candidates have certified. Given that social recruiting is the strategy employed when it comes to finding, attracting, and contracting talent, based on the use of social media and web sites, certifying, and recognizing competences through digital badges facilitates the selection process for recruiters and boosts employability.

The model we propose could serve as an example for other universities when it comes to identifying, recognizing, and certifying competences such as self-knowledge, personal growth, leadership, communication, teamwork, innovation, initiative, empathy, enterprise, etc., given that a digital badge can be generated for each one.

If recognition on the part of employers and the certification of these competences is fundamental regarding students' employability, the way in which these competences are perceived and valued is also essential. Knowing how to incorporate them into students' training will determine the success or failure of such teachings. No training program will be successful if students fail to identify the contents as necessary.

Through the surveys we have carried out we have been able to discover students' opinion of this kind of learning. The data from these surveys have enabled us to observe how students associate their training in transversal competences with their future employability. And our awareness of this data helps us to elaborate proposals designed to improve such training. We hope our results will enable other universities to set up transversal learning schemes to train students in these skills and provide the corresponding certification. We would like to receive constructive feedback regarding the strong- and weak-points of this learning process to discover whether students' training truly caters for the real demands of the labor market and the ongoing and rather uncertain changes witnessed by society today and in the future.

3. Methodology

3.1. Objectives

As a research group that focuses on educational matters, we are interested in being able to link what are known as transversal skills or competences, which students acquire in university classrooms, with the demands of society and the labor market. Based on this premise, we have established a series of priority and secondary objectives. The priority objectives are as follows:

a) To discover the current demand for competences on the labor market on the part of recruiters.

b) To bring the university world closer to the word of employment, providing examples as to how the acquisition of these competences can be certified, based on tools such as digital badges, which facilitate the work of employers.

c) To establish the kind of training in transversal skills that university students receive in Spain and based on this information, determine how well they are really trained, so that we can make recommendations and highlight the weaknesses and strengths of the system. We shall also study those contents that should be extended, either through specific programs or own qualifications or by incorporating these contents into the different subjects that make up each course curriculum.

Some Spanish universities have set up a service-learning model, that together with other methodologies, such as learning based on challenges or problems, permits students to acquire technical and transversal competences simultaneously, as society has been demanding: a university model that goes beyond the training of future professionals, a committed university that is asked to form a critical and responsible citizenship that works to overcome existing injustices and inequalities, seeking the common good (Martínez-Martín, 2016). We can consider being in an optimistic position in relation to the perception that already exists among university institutions and their mission with society: in general, the social responsibility that the university has is recognized, together with the impact that educational and research activity should have in society at large. This fact undoubtedly makes it easier for the university to be perceived as a propitious space to materialize service-learning as a methodology that nurtures commitment to current social, scientific and ethical problems.

Nevertheless, we are especially concerned with what are known as civic competencies, which are key, not only in terms of training good professionals (Hwang, Liu & Salusso, 2019), but also in terms of developing a different way of viewing the world.

It is evident that training in transversal and multi-functional competences, irrespective of the context, together with the rest of the specific competences that form part of each qualification, enhance and facilitate the entry of students onto the labor market. However, professionalizing competences aimed at developing critical thought in students based on sustainability and social justice are, perhaps, even more necessary (Solís & López Andrada, 2020).

The problem resides in how to adapt the teaching of these competences as part of the qualifications that are currently offered in different academic fields. This is an aspect that goes way beyond the limits of this study, one that we hereby throw open as a challenge for other researchers to tackle.

As secondary objectives, we also need to establish students' strengths and weaknesses to be able to create a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Analysis for this study, one that might enable us to offer a series of recommendations when it comes to introducing improvements, whilst also providing a guide for other universities who are beginning to incorporate these competences into their course curricula.

3.2. Sample and procedure

Regarding methodological design and procedure, the research process we followed consisted of the following stages:

1) We based our research on the premise established by the 2017 OECD Report (2017) "Skills for Job Indicators", namely that «growth in employment has been stronger in those jobs in which cognitive skills and soft skills were required». In order to discover which of these soft skills played the most significant role in companies' selection and recruitment processes, we carried out an in-depth review of the specialized literature, which enabled us to establish the state of the question. We consulted the leading reports published on this matter to establish the importance of soft skills regarding graduates' entry onto the employment market.

2) Then we carried out a total of twenty five semi-direct qualitative interviews with the CEOs of various recruitment companies, such as the following: Juan Luis Goujon, the Head of Business Strategy & Development at Lee Hecht Harrison (LHH); Antonio Moya Ximenes, Talent Manager Spain at Dentons; Javier Martín, the Learning & Development Manager at Randstad España; and Ana Zayas at Page Personnel. We used these interviews as a social research technique that enabled us to gather some highly valuable information regarding the purposes of our study. This type of interview is an instrument capable of adapting to the various personalities of each subject, in which we work with the words of the interviewee and with their ways of feeling, not being a technique that leads simply to collect data about a person, but tries to make someone talk that subject, to understand it from within (Corbetta, 2003).

The interviews helped us to discern the deep-seated reasons that motivated these social agents when it came to recruiting employees. The methodology we chose was that of the semi-direct interview, that present a greater degree of flexibility than directed ones, because they start with planned questions, which can be adjusted to the interviewees. Its advantage is the possibility of adapting to the subjects with enormous possibilities to motivate the interlocutor, clarify terms, identify ambiguities and reduce formalisms. Although this kind of interview limited the respondents' communicative freedom to a certain extent, it helped us to focus the information on what we sought to achieve, and to link the results with the ultimate goals of our research. These interviews enabled us to draw certain conclusions regarding the kind of skills prioritized by companies and to establish those skills that were considered indispensable for students' incorporation into the employment market. For this, a conventional content analysis and a summative analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) were carried out, which allowed us to classify and organize the information obtained into significant units that, in turn, were part of categories with a broader meaning. Based on this process, a framework was defined with which the analysis of the information was carried out, after validation of the instrument by the professionals who had previously reviewed the questionnaire. This analysis helped us to identify the key competencies for employability on which we wanted to conduct a survey of a sample group of university students to find out how they perceived and valued the training received in the classroom in these skills and their degree of preparation in these subjects.

3) Once we had obtained the data from our interviews, we asked the company UNIVERSUM to carry out a survey with closed-ended questions amongst a sample of 829 university students at Universidad CEU San Pablo. The type of information employed was range-based, and the questions posed to the students rated their degree of satisfaction using a Likert-type scale of 1 to 5 (in which 5 represented the highest degree of satisfaction possible). The parameters employed to calculate the sample revealed the suitability and representative nature of the group, based on a reliability level of more than 95% regarding the surveys carried out, using the reliability coefficient $Za/2 * \sigma/\sqrt{(n)}$. Za/2and a margin of error of + 5, according to details furnished by UNIVERSUM.

This group survey was carried out between November 2020 and April 2021, including both undergraduate (94%) and post-graduate (6%). It also included full-time students (86%) and part-time students (14 %), both of which

studied a wide range of degrees, encompassing the social and humanities sciences (8%), economics and business (35%), law (19%), communication and marketing (18%), the health sciences (6%), and technical studies (14%) within the fields of engineering and architecture. The sample consisted of 71% women and 29% men, with ages ranging between 17 and 38 years. Some 94% of the group were Spanish students and 6% were foreign students. The open-ended qualitative interviews carried out with the heads of Spanish and foreign job recruitment companies, as well as other studies we have mentioned resulting from our analysis of the state of the question, enabled us to identify eleven skills as being the most sought-after in staff selection processes:

a) Possession of communication skills.

b) A capacity to apply practical know-how to resolve problems.

c) An ability to work as part of a team.

d) Being proactive and being capable of making new proposals.

e) Initiative and decision-making capacity.

f) A capacity to learn new skills.

g) A capacity to adapt to change and new situations.

h) A sense of commitment to the project, company, or team.

i) Leadership capacity.

j) Being empathic and showing a positive attitude; being assertive.

k) Possessing a capacity for organization and planning at work.

Many of these competences appear in the report "Flexibility@Work2021: Embracing Change" by Randstad Research (2021) as key aspects when it comes to searching for employment. The report analyses how the labor market is changing due to technology and automation. It states, for examples, that in 2030 the competences most sought after by employers will be soft skills such as communication, critical thought, creativity, initiative, and emotional intelligence, concluding that these aspects will be indispensable when applicants search for a job. The same conclusions were drawn by a study carried out by the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2020) on the future of employability, which estimated that some 85 million jobs will be destroyed by 2025, but that 97 million new jobs will be created, with those who remain in their current job positions having to update 40% of their skills and competences to focus on what are known as soft skills. We can confidently state, therefore, that transversal competences will be key for students when they seek to join the job market, in which respect it is essential to know how they value such skills. Training in these competences will only be successful at universities if students consider it to be necessary.

Bearing in mind these eleven competences, the most sought-after by employers, we formulated nine key questions for our survey with the group of San Pablo University:

1. Am I capable of communicating clearly?
2. Am I capable of learning new skills?
3. Do I have a capacity for initiative?
4. Am I confident I can solve difficult problems?
5. Do I have the capacity to make proposals?
6. Do I adapt well to change?
7. Do I have the capacity to work as part of a team?
8. Do I have a capacity for leadership?

9. Am I empathic and do I have a positive attitude?

4) In order to be able to compare their behaviour with a wider universe of university students, we asked UNIVERSUM to furnish us with a more extensive report based on surveys carried out with a sample of 30,900 university students at different universities across Europe and America, a report created over a period of 10 years (from 2011 to 2021). This report included, as part of a more extensive questionnaire regarding employability and entry into the job market, the nine key questions that we needed to analyze amongst the students of our sample group.

Regarding the wider group or reference group, the study was carried out over a period of 10 years, between 2011 and 2021. The group characteristics were like those of the sample group. The survey included full-time students (85%) and part-time students (15 %), both of which studied the same range of degrees as the sample group. The wider group of reference group was made up of 58% women and 42% men, with ages ranging from 17 to 38 years. Some 80% of the students were Spanish, whilst 20% were foreign. For questions included in the reference group survey, a scale of 1-5 was used for the responses. Based on all these characteristics and similarities, it was possible to compare and use the reference group to resize the results of our sample

When analyzing the data from the surveys carried out by UNIVERSUM, a clustering technique was employed, which can detect groups with similar behaviour patterns. In this respect, itis a perfect technique to understand which and how many similar sub-groups exist on a data base, which in our case consisted of university degree students. Clustering begins by evaluating all the different respondents, subsequently grouping them together in accordance with similar preferences revealed regarding certain variables that are considered.

The use of this technique by UNIVERSUM enabled us to compare our study group with the reference group of 30,900 students furnished by UNIVERSUM. The variables considered for our sample group coincided with some of the variables established for the wider reference group corresponding to UNIVERSUM. In this sense, the variables considered by UNIVERSUM for this reference group consisted of those set out below in Table 1:

Dimension	**Items**
1. Appealing attributes of the employer.	• Reputation and image of the employer: attributes of the employer as an organization • People and culture: social environment of the workplace. • Characteristics of the job: the content and demands of the job. • Remuneration and advancement opportunities: monetary compensation and other benefits.
2. Evaluation of talent soft skills. How far would you agree with the following statements?	• I tend to challenge the status quo and create new things. • I work better alone than as part of a team. • I tend to take the initiative to make things happen. • I like frequent change. • I can communicate clearly. • I am capable of learning new skills. • I have a capacity for initiative. • I am confident I can solve difficult problems. • I have the capacity to make proposals. • I adapt well to change. • I have the capacity to work as part of a team. • I have a capacity for leadership. • I am empathic and I have a positive attitude.
3. Compensation questions. If you had to choose, where would you prefer to work?	• An established organization or a start-up. • A large organization or a small to medium-sized organization. • An organization that operates mainly at a local level or an organization with global operations. • An organization founded locally, or an organization founded abroad. • Private sector or public sector. • A large city or a small to medium-sized city.

Table 1. Variables of the Reference Study Carried Out by UNIVERSUM

Within these three groups of variables-attributes, the group relating to soft skills (in terms of the questions asked and the scaling of the responses) perfectly matched the questions that were required and were effectively posed to the sample group of our university students. All of this meant that we were able to use the wider group as a point of reference to observe similarities, differences, and typical deviations about our sample group.

In relation to the questions concerning soft skills and competences, the same kinds of questionnaire were used for both groups, featuring only a few minor differences due to local differences in the area where the survey was carried out. In both cases, the questionnaires were based on closed-ended questions, and the response choices were carefully selected and constantly evaluated. The survey was carried out directly with the sample group, whilst the reference group respondents filled out a questionnaire online with computers and smartphones, based on a list of university students furnished by the universities themselves.

In order to guarantee quality data in the reference group, UNIVERSUM constantly reviewed all of the data, cleansing and eliminating those that might give rise to error.

Also, for the reference group, applied the weighting technique to adjust discrepancies in data gathering regarding the real distribution of students at universities. This was achieved by gathering data regarding the number of students studying at each main campus and the number of professionals working within a specific area/region (mapping). This mapping was used to weight the students and to guarantee a distribution that was as close to reality as possible. The weighting was based on the following factors: educational institution, main study campus, area/region, etc. All the data based on all the students were weighted, as were all of the data of the students within a main study campus. The breakdowns that included gender, high-performing students or other groups with more specific characteristics were not weighted. Mapping was also used to calculate the proportion of the population that was able to sample during the working period in which the survey was carried out.

4. Analysis and results

Data from the survey carried out with the sample group show that the young people we consulted perceived this kind of training in a very positive light. Their general level of satisfaction with training programs that contain or develop these competences was very high, revealing that some 90.92% of the respondents considered this training to be positive or highly positive (33.60% considered it to be positive and 57.32% stated it was highly positive). In relation to the question as to how they associated these skills with their future employability, 75.86% considered them to be useful or extremely useful (28.79% stated they were useful and 47.07% claimed they were extremely useful.

Nevertheless, although the data revealed students' high rating of these competences in terms of usefulness, other research also show that this training is not being given with sufficient weight or importance in the classroom. Michavila et al. (2016) confirm an unstable development of these skills in universities in relation to the value given by graduates inserted in the labor market. In this same line, authors also highlight how competencies of this type have not been properly sufficiently in traditional training university, marked by academicism, the achievement of objectives and the assimilation of knowledge in a vertical teaching approach (Caballero, López-Miguens & Lampón, 2014; Räty, Komulainen, Hytti & Kanasen, 2019). Also, in Acedo, Azcona, Riaño and Ruiz (2017), the existence of discrepancies between the skills acquired by students during their training at university and the practical skills necessary to carry out their work in different companies is pointed out. These authors suggest that the training offered by universities is not always sufficient or is oriented to the demands currently required by both society and the labor market. An issue that Pineda-Herrero, Ciraso-Calí and Armijos-Yambay (2018) point outas one of the most important deficits of university education from the perspective of students.

Following this same line, we find the data gathered from our respondents, we can observe a significant lack of training amongst students, which means they have serious failings in certain areas, such as, for example, the capacity to work as part of a team, the capacity for initiative, etc. Students recognized that they possessed or had acquired only some of the most essential and basic skills for joining the job market and they were concerned about their training in other skills, which they felt they needed to improve or were quite frankly deficient. The

data we gathered shows that it is essential to boost the learning of these kinds of skills at universities, giving them greater prominence. All of this leads us to reflect on the urgent need to definitively adapt teaching to the criteria set out by Bologna in this respect. And theoretical training is not the only aspect we must promote. It is also fundamental to develop competences that are essential within society (and not just within the job market), especially if we wish to achieve a fairer and more sustainable future, a better future in which nobody is left behind. There is still much to do at Spanish universities in this respect.

The data from the surveys reveal that, unfortunately, much work remains to be done in terms of improving training in transversal skills at our universities. As things stand today, the weaknesses outweigh the strengths, as recognized by the students themselves. Table 2 shows the results of the reference group and those given by our students in the assessment of some skills that allow us to analyse the main weaknesses, strengths and opportunities:

SKILLS	UNIVERSUM -Reference Group	Students of San Pablo University	CONCLUSION
Confident in Comunication	72%	71%	Strengths
Influence of their training in the learning of skills	79%	83%	
Capacity of Initiative	74%	71%	
Ability to solve difficult problems	54%	53%	Opportunities for Improvement
Capacity to make proposals (creativity)	49%	48%	
Ability to adapt to changes	39%	40%	
Capacity for teamwork	14%	14%	Weaknesses
Capacity for leadership	26%	26%	
Empathy and positive attitude	34%	34%	

Table 2. Weaknesses, strengths and opportunities that students have in skills

Although we found some skills as strengths, they only represented a small part of the many skills needed today in the labor market and in society.

Whit the results we obtained have enabled us to create a SWOT analysis of the situation. This should be the starting point for our reflections when it comes to formulating proposals for improvement in order to address the situation, as presented in Figure 3, where the threats have been obtained as a conclusion of the 25 interviews conducted with CEOs of various recruitment companies, since the students, especially undergraduates, are not very realistic in this regard, perhaps due to youth and lack of experience in the search for employment.

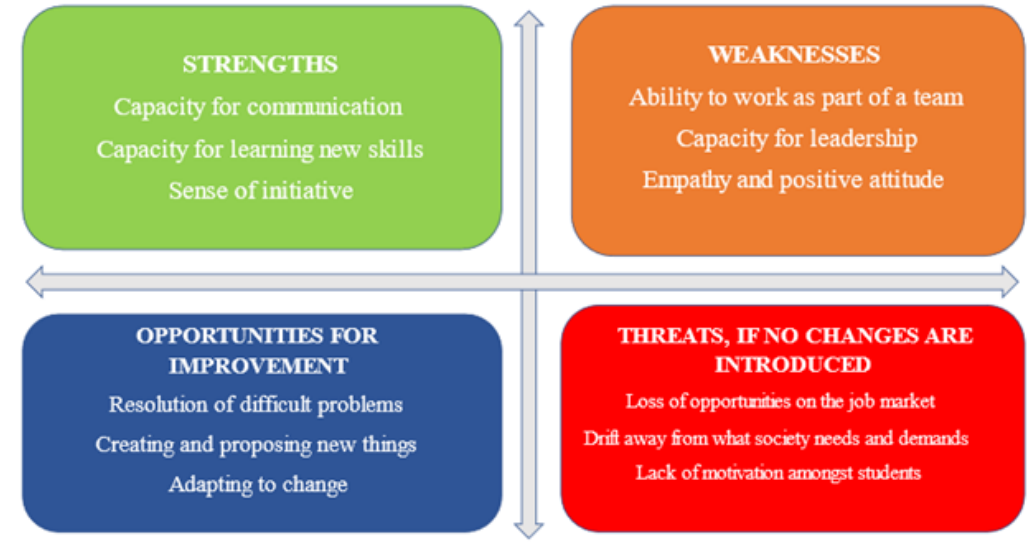

Figure 3. SWOT Analysis of the Surveyed Students' Perceptions of Skills Acquired

5. Conclusions and implications

The analysis of the results of the surveys carried out on the students of the San Pablo CEU University, according to those obtained in other centers, show us the importance of learning the so-called soft skills, especially those in which the students have a greatest weakness or see them as an opportunity to improve

There is still a wide gap between the competences demanded by the market and the training provided by universities. Although there is an evolution of training (both at the university level and in the companies themselves) it is positive, it is also insufficient: "It is worrying the employment that due to incapacities of the system itself is stopping creating. In a pandemic year, companies could have increased its contracting by 12.5%, creating 3,600 additional jobs and generating more than 313 million euros of activity", indicates the edition2020 of the study Employability and Digital Talent in connection with the lack of digital professionals and specific skills in the labor market. (Fundación Vass, 2020).

The interviews we carried out with twenty-five recruiters confirm that these kinds of competences will be vital for the students' future, and that their importance will continue to increase in the coming years due to changes within the business environment and within society itself.

Employers are going to require candidates with a larger number of skills, and they are going to value these competences more than theoretical training itself, given that knowledge and technology are subject to constant changes and transformation. In order to be able to select the best candidates, employers are calling for standard rating criteria for these competences, and one of the digital resources that has acquired greatest credibility and recognition amongst employers consists of digital badges. Digital badges are positioning themselves in recent years as an option especially interesting and useful. Obtaining these types of badges, either through formal assessments or informal, will favor the student's digital presence and improve their reputation, displaying and sharing them through different online spaces such as personal web pages, digital portfolios, blogs or social networks (Gibson, Ostashewski, Flintoff, Grant & Knight, 2015). In the communiqué of the meeting of 49 European ministers of higher education held in Rome in November 2020, within the framework of the EHEA (European Higher Education Area), they congratulated themselves on the results achieved on the twenty-first anniversary of the Bologna Declaration and established the guidelines for the future of European education. That communiqué insisted on the need to maintain flexible and open channels as part of the inspiration for the Bologna process. It was explicitly stated that, in addition to the complete undergraduate and postgraduate programs developed by higher education institutions, these should offer smaller learning units capable of updating professional, cultural and transversal skills at various stages of professional life and staff (EHEA, 2020).

Among these smaller and more flexible units, micro-credentials are explicitly referred to as a tool for this greater flexibility and the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) is tasked with exploring and developing this issue.

Currently, in most countries the national regulatory framework allows the existence of micro-credentials (Badges), but in very few cases are they explicitly regulated or mentioned in the legislation. For this reason, many countries, including the US, as well as the European Commission and the OECD, are working to adapt the regulatory framework and integrate micro-credentials into the various legislations.

Employers demand these competences, and students perceive them as being indispensable for their future. This much is shown by the data gathered in the surveys we have carried out. Nevertheless, training in this respect is still one of the weak points of the current education system. The 96% of the academic directors of the main American universities believe that they are effective in preparing their students for the labor market. However, only 11 percent of employers agree that universities teach the necessary skills (Busson, 2021). According to the XXIV Adecco Infoempleo Report: Employment Supply and Demand in Spain, 2021, among the main difficulties contemplated by employers in 2020 is that in 28.8% of cases the candidates do not have the required skills , accentuating the difference in talent between what the studios offer and what the companies demand.

HR leaders are finding it increasingly difficult to quickly find and develop talent with the most in-demand skills; one can speak of the existence of a revolution in skills in the face of this mismatch, and to the extent that jobs

include more and more requirements (technological and social skills being the most demanded), companies will have to be more and more creative and flexible to attract, engage and improve skills, since it is estimated that 58% of companies will need new skills to perform their functions while 69% do not find candidates with the necessary skills (Manpower Group, 2021).

Students are aware of their strengths and weaknesses in these matters and are demanding better training. They only feel sure of themselves and confident in relation to certain competences, such as their capacity to communicate, their ability to learn new skills and their sense of initiative. However, they know, and they recognize that their biggest weaknesses consist of their difficulties in working as part of a team, their capacity for leadership and their empathic and positive attitude.

The respondents recognize that they could improve competences such as tackling and resolving difficult problems, formulating new proposals, and adapting to change, but they do not have the necessary tools or the appropriate training to do so. It is precisely for this reason that they believe this kind of training should be more present in classrooms, and they declare that at present they do not possess sufficient skills in these areas to guarantee a successful professional future.

It is universities that should react to these demands. Their teaching and learning methods must adapt to a world that is constantly changing by introducing new ways of thinking, based on new tools such as, for example, design thinking, which introduces innovative methodologies into the classroom, forcing students to resolve problems that have no easy solution in chaotic or disorganized environments or situations. Such approaches are already being applied at universities such as Stanford University, the University of Potsdam, the Helsinki University of Technology, the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the University of Cali, the Technical University of Munich, etc., and the results testify to their worth (Steinbeck, 2011).

In this regard, Universidad San Pablo offers its own undergraduate course and another postgraduate course where the most demanded skills are taught in an innovative and experiential way. With a Learning based on real challenges proposed by companies from various fields, webinars taught by professionals and mentored by expert teachers in transversal skills, communication, self-knowledge, leadership, teamwork, innovation and entrepreneurship are taught.

It is true that not all soft skills are easy to learn or foster in students. Some skills are innate, and they flow quite naturally, even though it is always a good idea to strengthen them and/or learn them again; other skills must always be learned with the support of professionals. The raison d'être of many competences resides in forms of behaviour, values, and ways of interpreting the worlds that are fairer, flexible, balanced and respectful of others and respectful of diversity. If we train students in these skills, we shall be giving them the opportunity to create a better world, as set out in the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals 3, 4 and 8.

Within this context it is fundamental for universities to rely on lecturers who are specialized in these competences, teachers who can foster and develop critical thought and a capacity for problem-solving in their students, as well as self-management skills such as active learning, resilience, tolerance to stress, flexibility, etc. In today's increasingly globalized world in which traditional learning models are being replaced with more dynamic approaches, the role of the teacher is no longer defined as a mere conveyor of knowledge, but as a tutor who guides and accompanies the student in their learning process. Researchers from private and public universities in the country express the need for pedagogical and didactic training from university professors, with arguments of a different order: the requirements and demands posed by the globalized world; new ways of accessing information; accreditation processes; the discourse of quality; the skills; economic development; the relationship between the work of the university professor and the development of research skills in students; the teaching of specific fields of knowledge; the pedagogical knowledge and the ethics of the university professor, etc. (González. & Malagón, 2015).

The implementation of training in transversal skills and competences in classrooms will be indispensable, with classrooms becoming dynamic and interactive arenas, featuring collaborative learning models in which teamwork

plays a key role. We must teach students to be able to take part in projects and integrate within different contexts, based on a greater degree of flexibility, understanding, tolerance and energy.

Education will be entirely transformed, and universities must adapt to a new framework that requires more practical and interactive learning, based on soft skills, skills that are less theoretical. Students of the twenty-first century will be students who share their experiences in an international, multicultural, and technological environment, one in which the relationship between teacher and student will be key in the digital age we live in (Hershkovizt & Forkosh-Baruch, 2017).

Students will demand greater flexibility in terms of learning processes and a more practical approach to teaching, one in which transversal skills must play a more prominent role. It is not only a matter of acquiring knowledge, but also a question of knowing how to use and apply that knowledge.

The professor will adopt a different role, becoming a companion in the learning process, which will lead to a greater sense of freedom about educational formats, timetables, ways of teaching and learning, the places where this learning takes place and the kinds of competences that are acquired. The classroom will become a flexible environment, one that facilitates collaborative learning amongst students and learning between students and the teacher.

In such classrooms, students will necessarily and obligatorily learn to develop skills such as leadership, empathy, proactiveness, collaborative work, initiative, communication, critical thought, etc. The way in which we evaluate our students' abilities will also change, given that, although theoretical knowledge will be essential, transversal skills will become the guiding thread of the entire training process.

The world of university cannot become a bubble, one that isolates students from society and from all the changes that are liable to occur. It must immediately implement the Bologna strategies relating to the learning of what are known as general and transversal skills and competences.

Agents of the work environment believe that current students of the university will work in positions that have not yet been invented and that universities must prepare them for it. The key questions are: are we really doing this? Are we really preparing them for the future? Or must we rethink the way in which we approach this matter? Perhaps we should reflect on how we are preparing our students and what training we are giving them. Are we really fostering the development of their abilities, competences and skills? Do we really want to prepare our students for the twenty-first century? Do we want them to become agents for change and to transform the world as it is today, achieving a better, fairer and more sustainable future, one in which nobody is left behind?

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