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BUILDING UP UNDERGRADUATE SKILLS – EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM A PORTUGUESE UNIVERSITY

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Building up Undergraduate Skills – empirical evidence from a Portuguese University

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Abstract:

This study presents preliminary results of the PSP Project, addressing students' soft skills development within the context of HEI. Theoretical framework is grounded in Person-Environment Fit theories (Rounds & Hesketh, 1994), and also in Evans (2001) starfish model. Study 1 aimed to identify Economics and Business graduates' Market-Valued Skills Profile, collecting data through semi-structured interviews with HR managers and former students focus groups. Study 2 assessed students' confidence level regarding skills using a self-report questionnaire (Miles & Grummon, 2006). Career development representations were also assessed (Savickas, 2002; Gonçalves, 2006). Additional data was collected through open-ended questions focusing on work and other extracurricular experiences. Results from Study 1 highlight soft skills as multidimensional construct where different interrelated skills contribute to graduates' employability. Study 2 reveals students' positive self-perception regarding those skills, although limited vocational experiences were reported.

Key-Words: Soft Skills, Career development, higher education students; employability

Background and Context

This paper presents preliminary results of the PSP (PIC) Project[1] currently undergoing at the Faculty/School of Economics and Management (FEG) of the Catholic University of Portugal (CUP). The CUP has a longstanding tradition of Management/Business Administration in Portugal, being one of the first universities to offer undergraduate training in this field of studies. As part of the Portuguese Higher Education Institutions (HEI), the CUP faces the challenges introduced by the *Bologna Agreement*, especially the reduction of courses' length from 5 years on average to 3 years. Although at CUP students are encouraged to proceed to postgraduate studies, it is possible that graduates now start applying for entry-level positions earlier than before. As a result, the quality of the training provided during the three years became an issue for both universities and employers. The latter seemed concerned with the maturity of recent graduates as well as the sort of skills they develop in the university (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). The former are keen in assuring the employability of graduates in order to remain competitive, and for that they need to reassure employers. In the past, employers had already voiced criticism regarding the range of skills universities (don't) develop. In other words, they thought HEI emphasises technical skills rather than soft skills.

Drawing on career development perspectives, the PSP Project attempts to meet some of the employers' concerns, by addressing students' soft skills development within the context of HEI. As Savickas, Briddick and Watkins (2002) point out individuals who displayed competence in developing their careers also displayed greater psychological competence in general. Savickas *et al.* rationale is based on the reinforcement of the relationship between students' vocational maturity

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[1] PIC stands for *Portfolio Individual de Competências*. A possible translation could be *"Personal's Skills Portfolio" (*PSP*)*. It involves an Integrated System of Competencies Development (ISCD) with two interrelated stages: (i) to assess students' skills (which promotes students' awareness and self-appraisal of their skills), and (ii) a skills' development strategy, throughout (a) a Curricula Developmental Model (embedding employability into the curricula); and (b) a Coaching Model for students. Results obtained with the skills development strategy are not included in the present paper. This project was funded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia from the Portuguese Government - Ministério da Ciência, da Tecnologia e do Ensino Superior.

and their psychological adjustment. Hence, they conclude that greater career maturity means greater realization of one's potential which may addresses both employers and universities concerns/aims.

Theoretical background

Works related to contemporary Person-Environment Fit Theories (e.g. Chartrand, 1991; Rounds & Hesketh, 1994; Rounds & Tracey, 1990 *in* Swanson & Fouad, 1999) emphasise the correspondence between one's personal characteristics and labour contexts where individuals choose to work. Indeed, "the reciprocal nature of person-environment fit reflects a systems' perspective whereby change in one element influences the other elements in the system to create and imbalance" (Swanson & Fouad, 1999, pg 340). This correspondence between individuals' characteristics and their contexts is based on two basic assumptions: (i) subjects tend to search for congruent environments with their own *self*, (ii) there's mutual interaction subject-environment, and this same interaction may end up in more congruence (satisfaction, self-fulfilment) or less congruence (dissatisfaction, bad performance, job turn-over) between personal characteristics and professional environment requirements, in which adjustment process is reciprocal ("jobs change people and people change jobs" – Holland, 1997 quoted *in* Swanson & Fouad, 1999). Additionally, Swanson and Fouad (1999) consider that the adequacy between students' skills and their future working context will increase when students' self-knowledge is more developed (ie, when students "look around and look ahead" – Savickas, 1999), thus potentially contributing to higher levels of performance and satisfaction (Swanson & Fouad, 1999).

Hence, soft skills are highlighted as a key concept to foster a common understanding between universities and employers concerning employability. The relevance of soft skills has been stressed both by employers and graduates. Cabral-Cardoso et al (2006) have thoroughly analyzed perspectives stemming from each side, and asserted that both graduates and employers consider that HEI need to boost soft skills development (even if other contexts emerge as relevant for students' employability and for their skills development, namely extracurricular activities and work

experiences). This suggests that new teaching and assessing practices are required, especially those concerned with the development and assessment of students' soft skills. In other words, HEI need to bring the soft skills into the curricula, and encourage students and lecturers as well as tutors to the continuous awareness on soft skills. In order to accomplish this goal, however, it is necessary to determine which competences are to be developed.

Evans and collegues (2001[2]) showed, by reviewing several studies as well as analyzing learning and occupational biographies, that there are different interrelated skills that contribute to a successful change in an individual's career, "involving self steering capacities, and integrated social cognitive and technological dimensions together with life-long learning" (CEDEFOP, s. d., cit in Evans, 2001:3). Authors could group a five cluster organization of personal skills and competences, namely, (1) Methodological Skills (include the ability to handle multiple tasks and demands in complex and sometimes contradictory environments); (2) Social Skills (consist of empathy and promoting feelings of efficacy in others); (3) Skills related to Values and Attitudes (incorporate honesty and reliability, although they can be wrap by terms as responsibility, resilience, determination, awareness of rights and responsibility; (4) Learning Skills (takes into account insightfulness and also being able to capture knowledge by reflect on experience; and (5) Technical Skills (it refers to work related skills in order to perform different tasks in a specific domain, the ability to keep one self updated in one's professional area but also to be capable of functioning with new technologies). Such skills are taken as "interlinked and interdependent of human actions" (CEDEFOP, s. d., cit in Evans, 2001:3). Therefore, this model implies "a holistic perspective of skills with growth, movement and future development" (Evans, 2001:3) and it was named after starfish as the Starfish Model (Evans, 2001). The five broader ability clusters are crucial to cope with negotiating changes of work and learning environments (Evens, 2001, Lille), and consequently they must be object of self-evaluation and metacognitive analysis to met personal goals of learning success (Evans & Kersh, 2004, 2005).

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[2] Tacit skills and work inequalities: a UK perspective on tacit forms of key competences, and issues for future research. Paper presented at the ECER conference, Lille, September, 2001.

It is important to underlie that Starfish model points the fact that all competences, included in each larger skills set, do not happen out of a personal context, instead, they have both structure and referential features, the first form can be tacitly transferred between different environments providing they are "situated, underpinned by domain specific knowledge and developed trough social interaction within the culture and context of the work environment" (Evans, 2001, p.7).

Study 1

Purpose and Method

The first study aimed to identify the Market-Valued Skills Profile of Economics and Business's Graduates. Data collection followed two sequential stages. In the first stage, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR managers both from SMEs and large-sized Portuguese firms, in order to identify firm HRM recruitment and selection strategies and policies regarding Economics and Business Studies graduates (see Table 1, below).

TABLE 1

Individual Interviewees with Human Resources Managers

HRM Participants code	Work organization		Age	Sex
1. *Ms. Clever*	Telecommunications	Call Me Corporation	32	Female
2. *Papa Bear*	Beverage	Happy Drinking	48	Male
3. *Ms. Youth*	Insurance	Be Safe	25	Female
4. *Ms. Smart*	Road Construction	Choose a destiny, we will take you there	44	Female
5. *Mr. Socio*	Distribution	Posh Car	45	Male
6. *Mr. Law*	Distribution	Posh Car	53	Male

Note. Interviewees and their firms' identification were removed and illustrative names were given.

Following the interviews, two focus groups were performed (stage two). The first included Business alumni, and the second their Economics counterparts. Both focus groups covered different

graduation years to reflect different levels of seniority. Table 2 shows the composition of focus groups according to gender, graduation year, seniority and work organisation.

TABLE 2

Focus Groups' Participants (Management and Economics alumni)

Participant code	Work organisation	Position	Age	Sex	Graduation year
Participants in Focus Group 1 (Management alumni)					
Mr. Outgoing	Banking	Director of Corporate Marketing	34	Male	1996
Mr. Entrepreneur	Non-profitable organization HEI Accountancy firm	Consultant, Lecturer, Firm owner	43	Male	1992
Mr. Sporty	Consultancy	RH Consultant	32	Male	1999
Ms. Right	Import	RH Director	31	Female	2000
Mr. Budget	Professional Tools for Construction	Financial Department Director	36	Male	1994
Mr. Big Shoot	Construction Materials	Board of Directors	38	Male	1993
Mr. Road	Engineering and Construction	Financial Department Director	33	Male	1997
Mr. Stock Market	Banking	Financial Department	34	Male	1996
Mr. International	Banking	Vice-President	33	Male	1997
Participants in Focus Group 2 (Economics alumni)					
Mr. Spooky	Auditing	Financial Director	30	Male	2002
Ms. Money	Banking	Assistant	29	Female	2001
Mr. Alldeals	Multinational Manufacturer household cleaning	Manager	29	Male	2001
Ms. Allinone	Distribution	Manager	29	Female	2001
Mr. Talk	Telecommunications	Analyst	29	Male	2001
Mr. Who	Consultancy	Consultant	29	Male	2003
Mr. Healthy	Health Care	Manager	27	Male	2003
Mr. Yeah	Consultancy and Auditing	Consultant	30	Male	2001

The interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed. Finally, their content was analysed using QSR NVivo. Nodes and categories were built and text units were grouped accordingly. Data analysis was a recurrent process as coding and categorizing were complementary and interdependent.

Results & Discussion

Although interviewees' accounts were similar regarding key skills that graduates should possess at the beginning of their career, data analysis was carried out into two separate parts. First, the contribution of individual HRM interviews was analysed to produce a map of the Market-Valued Skills. Secondly, the perception of alumni regarding their skills development when they graduate was also equated. Although those results were analysed separately, they are presented jointly to provide an integrated outcome of Study 1.

The skills identified among HRM can be split both in technical (operating) and soft skills, though the last ones were overrepresented, suggesting that soft skills significantly contribute to promoting the employability of economics and management graduates. Hence, technical skills were not further considered. In fact, the latter are beyond the goals of the PSP Project since they are already addressed by the formal curricula. As **Ms. Smart**, a HR manager, explained, "well… the technical skills are not an issue". She further justified her views saying that "for us it is more important the school where the candidates are coming from, and then we assume that graduates from a particular school with an average grade of 14[3] will have a good level of technical skills, which will be enough to perform the job at that level, anyway". In fact, four out of five interviewees referred the existence in their firms of a key skills framework that employees were required to master, e.g., team work, creativity, professionalism. The skills identified were most and above behavioural, consistent with soft-skills concept. As **Ms. Clever**, 32 years old, HRM at *Call me Corporation*, pointed out, "soft skills are really important when selecting a candidate for a job". This is consistent with the view of **Papa Bear**, 48 years old, HRM at *Happy Drinking*, who discriminated the six skills his firm was looking for in recent graduates: "clients and consumers orientation, respect for the individual, team work, responsible citizenship, integrity and ethics"… **Ms. Smart**, 44 years old HRM at *Choose a destiny, we will take you there*, also asserted that "our skills dictionary comprises four key skills: team work, loyalty and integrity, client orientation and

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[3] On a scale from 0 to 20 it corresponds to a 70% in the UK marking system.

creativity, they are behavioural skills, it is very important for us and utmost that our employees will identify and are involved with the organization, that they fit well, that they are able to work in teams, that they work together and share information".

Data from alumni's focus groups are similar to HRM interviews, regarding the type of skills that a business and economics graduate should have. Once again the emphasis is upon the soft skills rather than technical skills. As the moderator of the focus group suggest towards the end of the meeting: "I think that we covered quite well the issues related to soft skills but little was said regarding the technical skills". In fact, the relevance of teamwork, the communication effectiveness, the time and pressure management, the ability to adapt to change and learning as a continuing process were some of the topics discussed. Table 3 presents Paradigmatic anecdotal evidence.

TABLE 3

Categorical Starfish examples based on focus groups and interviews

Cluster	Paradigmatic Anecdotal evidence from HRM interviewees	Paradigmatic Anecdotal evidence from alumni focus group participant's discussion
Technical Skills *(content related skills, IT skills, …)*	"well… the technical skills are not an issue" Ms. Smart, 44 years old, HRM at Choose a destiny, we will take you there	"When I left University I had a clear impression that I knew less that I need but more than I thought in terms of communicating with people, understand how to reach to a decision making" Mr. Budget, 36 years old Financial Department Director at a Professional Tools for Construction
Methodological Skills *(Problem-Solving; Systemic Thinking; Personal Management; Creativity)*	"The awareness of the individuals in daily working life is very important and it is not very common. You know it is important to be able to read the political and economical context and transpose it to the firm, otherwise we are missing opportunities". Ms. Clever, 32 years old, HRM at Call Me Corporation	"we developed the ability to adapt, we get the tools to understand what is around us" Ms. Right, 31 years old HRM at Import
Social Skills *(Communication, Assertiveness; Interpersonal Relationship; Teamwork)*	"Social intelligence above all… in our days we have individuals capable to perform a job, technically speaking, but when they arrive to an organization they clash internally and even with the clients… ". Ms. Clever, 32 years old, HRM at Call Me Corporation "some relevant skills are firstly, networking, and secondly team work and managing teams, leading and motivate individuals" "we need to try to understand the other"... Ms. Clever, 32 years old, HRM at Call Me Corporation "team work is crucial for working in organizations …cooperative work is an ability that students need to develop… "stars" are less and less relevant, we do not need outstanding individuals working alone, we need ordinary people working very well in group" "we value the attitude of our collaborators"…. Papa Bear, 48 years old HRM at Happy Drinking	"group assignments was important to promote the development of teamwork or communication skills" Mr Budget, 36 years old Financial Department Director at a Professional Tools for Construction "When I left University I had a clear impression that I knew less that I need but more than I thought in terms of communicating with people, understand how to reach to a decision making" Mr Budget, 36 years old Financial Department Director at a Professional Tools for Construction
Skills related to Values and Attitudes *(Persistence; Responsibility; Integrity and Ethics)*	"we need combative individuals…someone that it is able to grab a task and to carry it out to the end". Papa Bear, 48 years old HRM at Happy Drinking "creativity it is also very important, (it is up to graduates with high potential to develop exceptional things, a project, to take the risk … this is something that the university is not encouraging [capable of giving them]" Papa Bear, 48 years old HRM at Happy Drinking	"the university can help students to develop a certain work ethics" Mr. Talk, 29 years old, Telecommunications Analyst
Learning Skills *(Motivation to learn; Openness to Change; Pursuit of Quality and Excellence; Knowledge Management)*	individuals have "to face challenges, to search for new opportunities"… Ms. Clever, 32 years old, HRM at Call Me Corporation " there is an important assumption (…), it is the investment in continuing training". Ms. Clever, 32 years old, HRM at Call Me Corporation the need…"to be open minded, to adapt easily, to understand the context where you are". Ms. Clever, 32 years old, HRM at Call Me Corporation "it is very important that graduates demonstrate their willingness to learn, you know, the so called intellectual humility, to have the drive to learn more" Papa Bear, 48 years old HRM at Happy Drinking	"I see my degree as my google tool, it is a source of information… what is relevant is that I do know what information I need to look for and where to go" Mr. Outgoing, 34 years old Director of Corporate Marketing at a Bank

These findings are consistent with the literature reviewed suggesting that there are different interrelated skills contributing for individuals' employability (Evans, 2002). As **Ms. Smart** strongly pointed out "there is not one single factor that we use to support our decision to hire, it is a multidimensional process really, and I need to analyse all sorts of dimensions to reach a decision…".

The analysis of the interviews revealed a wide variety of skills and interviewees used different expressions interchangeably to designate each of them. The data was then categorised drawing on the Starfish Model (Evans, 2001), using the four soft skill clusters as the main theoretical categories, within which interviewees were organized. It followed the adaptation of the theoretical model according to the actual empirical data that resulted in a context-specific Market-Valued Profile of management and economics graduates:

(1) *Methodological Skills* (Problem-Solving; Systemic Thinking; Personal Management; Creativity): **Ms. Clever** stressed the relevance of systemic thinking to firms: "the awareness of the individuals in daily working life is very important and it is not very common. You know it is important to be able to read the political and economical context and transpose it to the firm, otherwise we are missing opportunities". This kind of ability is also valued by alumni. As **Ms. Right**, a 31 years old HRM at Import says, "we developed the ability to adapt, we get the tools to understand what is around us". **(2)** *Social Skills* (Communication, Assertiveness; Interpersonal Relationship; Teamwork). As **Ms. Clever** said, "Social intelligence above all… in our days we have individuals capable to perform a job, technically speaking, but when they arrive to an organization they clash internally and even with the clients… ". Furthermore, she stressed that "some relevant skills are firstly, networking, and secondly team work and managing teams, leading and motivate individuals", and added the need to "try to understand the other"... Social skills are also highly valued by **Papa Bear** who thought "team work is crucial for working in organizations …cooperative work is an ability that students need to develop… "stars" are less and less relevant, we do not need outstanding individuals working alone, we need ordinary people working very well

in group"…"we value the attitude of our collaborators"…. An insight on how can HEI improve those skills is provided by **Mr. Budget**, a 36 years old Financial Department Director at a Professional Tools for Construction, for whom "continuous assessment was important to promote the development of teamwork or communication skills". As he further explains, "When I left University I had a clear impression that I knew less that I need but more than I thought in terms of communicating with people, understand how to reach to a decision making".

(3) *Skills related to Values and Attitudes* (Persistence; Responsibility; Integrity and Ethics) are also recurrent in the interviews with employers. To illustrate them, **Papa Bear** called the attention to the employees' attitudes, saying that "we need combative individuals…someone that it is able to grab a task and to carry it out to the end". He then added that…"creativity it is also very important, (it is up to graduates with high potential to develop exceptional things, a project, to take the risk … this is something that the university is not encouraging [capable of giving them]". Integrity and Ethics was the most valued of skills related to values and attitudes, being spontaneously mentioned by four out of the five interviewees. When considering focus group contents, interestingly alumni considered that "the university can help students to develop a certain work ethics", as it was stated by **Mr. Talk**, a 29 years old, Telecommunications Analyst.

(4) *Learning Skills* (Motivation to learn; Openness to Change; Pursuit of Quality and Excellence; Knowledge Management). According to **Ms. Clever**, individuals have "to face challenges, to search for new opportunities"…Emphasising employees' entrepreneurship, she also added that in her firm…" there is an important assumption (…), it is the investment in continuing training". Hence, she stressed the need…"to be open minded, to adapt easily, to understand the context where you are". **Papa Bear** corroborated the importance of learning skills: "it is very important that graduates demonstrate their willingness to learn, you know, the so called intellectual humility, to have the drive to learn more". Within a different perspective, alumni also stress learning skills as an outcome of their academic trajectory. As **Mr. Outgoing**, a 34 years old Director of Corporate Marketing at a Bank and former student says, "I see my degree as my google

tool, it is a source of information… what is relevant is that I do know what information I need to look for and where to go for it".

Study 2

Purpose & Method

Further research was warranted to assess the resulting Market-Valued Skills Profile amongst students, leading to the second study. Its goal was to assert how confident were the students regarding such skills, at the early stage of their studies. Moreover, it seemed important to relate the skills' development to both individual characteristics and to life experiences, as critical aspects of developmental processes. Hence, a sample of 100 first-year students (66 males and 34 females) was surveyed (see Table 4, below).

TABLE 4

Descriptive Statistics for social economic composition of study 2 participants

				Statistics		
Variables						
	Freq.	*min*	*max*	*mode*	*meann*	*Std. deviation*
Age		17	36	18 (54%)	18.92	2.18
Gender						
Male	66					
Female	34					
Degree						
Economics	35					
Management	65					
Marital Status						
Single	99					
Married	1					
Household						
Living with family	74,7					
Living with friends	10					
Living alone	10					
Moving away to study						
Yes	23					
No	68					
Missing values	9					
Mother's qualification				6	5.05	1.44
< Compulsory	9					
Secondary education	26					
Higher education	52					
> Higher education	6					
Missing values	7					

(Cont. Table 4)

	Freq.	min	max	mode	meann	Std. deviation
Father's qualification				6	5.09	1.50
< Compulsory	11					
Secondary education	22					
Higher education	53					
> Higher education	8					
Missing values	6					

The questionnaire aimed to assess the Market-Valued Skills Profile and drew on existing self-reports (Miles & Grummon, 2006; University of Salford, 2006). To ensure that all the dimensions enlisted in the Market-Value Skills Profile were assessed, a few other items were added. This resulted in a 114-items questionnaire and a 5-point Likert-type scale was used. Internal consistency was analysed, using Cronbach's alpha, which held to satisfactory values (.97). A second questionnaire, (N=43 items) was also used to assess students' career development representations (Student Career Concerns Inventory; Savickas, 2002; Portuguese adaptation by Ramos, Crespo, Gonçalves & Coimbra, 2002). Additional data was collected through open-ended questions focusing on vocational experience. Thus, students were asked regarding their extra-curricular experiences, namely (1) work experiences, (2) volunteer experiences, (3) civic engagement, (4) complementary training, (5) mobility experiences and (6) other extra-curricular experiences, and were required to describe them briefly. In each case, data was coded considering length and diversity of the reported activities (a minimum of 6 months period was to be considered a significant experience), in a scale ranging from 1 to 4, that is to say that higher scores were given to longer and more diversified experiences (see Table 5).

TABLE 5

Students' Self-Perceptions regarding their Skills Development

Clusters and Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation	Clusters and Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social Skills	**4.09**	**.56**	*Skills related to Values and Attitudes*	**3.76**	**.61**
Written Communication	4.15	.70	Integrity and Ethics	4.15	.59
Oral Communication	4.02	.53	Persistence	3.79	.69

(Cont. Table 5)

Clusters and Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation	Clusters and Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation
Interpersonal Relationship	4.11	.48	Responsibility	3.40	.69
Teamwork	4.09	.51	*Learning Skills*	**3.57**	**.58**
Methodological Skills	**3.78**	**.66**	Improving Own Learning	4.11	.54
Personal Management	4.09	**.67**	Adapting to Change	3.20	.59
Problem-Solving	3.94	**.54**	Sense of Quality	3.57	.57
Creativity	4.05	**.52**	Lifelong Learning	3.55	.53
Systemic Thinking	3.33	**.62**	Information Processing	3.41	.68

Results & Discussion

As far as students' self-perception regarding their soft skills' development is concerned, results show that students have a highly positive self-perception (Table 5, above). The highest score was obtained for *Social Skills* (M=4.09, SD=.56), followed by *Skills related to Values and Attitudes* and by *Methodological Skills* which had analogous scores (M = 3.76, SD = .61 and M = 3.78, SD = .66, respectively), while *Learning Skills* (M=3.57, SD=.58) obtained the lowest scores. This is inconsistent with that obtained by Cabral-Cardoso's study (2006), in which learning skills stand out as the skill individuals perceive as more developed. However, the different results might reflect different methodologies, since Cabral-Cardoso used a single item questionnaire for each individual competence (2006) unlike present research. In fact the cluster *Learning Skills* resulted from the average score of five different but interrelated skills: Improving one's own Learning, Adapting to Change, Sense of Quality, Lifelong Learning and Information Processing. This choice drew on Evans' (2001) holistic approach that deems skills as "interlinked and interdependent" (2001). However, if we look at each of the skills listed individually, the higher score in Cabral-Cardoso's (2006) research is similar to the score obtained for Improving Own Learning in this study, which also stands out as one of the highest scores (M = 4.11, SD = 0.54). See Table 5 (p.15) for a summary.

Regarding students' investment in extra-curricular activities and the inter-relation to career and skills development, students reported limited extra-curricular activities (see Table 6).

TABLE 6

Students' Extra-Curricular Experiences

Extra-Curricular Experiences		
	Mean	*Std. Deviation*
Work-experience	2.37	1.25
Volunteer-work	1.64	1.01
Civic engagement	2.35	.45
Mobility experiences	1.38	.79
Complementary training	3.19	1.33
Other extra-curricular experiences	3.78	1.046

One possible explanation for this result may rest upon students' social economic condition. Most of our students are young (M = 18.92, SD = 2.18; 99% are less than 24 years old), and, for the most part, had middle and upper class origin. They were also in the university for the first time and were full-time students. The absence of extra-curricular activities might relate to family's strategies, since CUP is a private university and charges high tuition fees is likely to influence family strategies, concentrating students' investments in academic related activities. This lack of extra-curricular activities might also derive from the heavy academic schedule and curricula rigidity existing in the university. That is, despite recent changes, students are still expected to attend lectures which last for 30 hours a week, in addition of the time to study and research (individually or working in teams). If these reasoning proves right, then it also helps understand the low scores obtained with students' reported working experiences (M = 2.37, SD = 1.25), volunteering experiences (M = 1.64, SD = 1.01), and civic engagement (M = 2.35, SD = 1.45). Indeed these results suggest a discrepancy between students' personal investments and those currently valued by employers (Oliveira and Sottomayor, 2006; Guimarães, 2006). In fact, the importance of students' personal investments was highlighted by **Miss Youth**, 25 years old HRM at *Be Safe* from study 1,

who stated that "extracurricular activities … it is like a puzzle…the voluntary work, the work developed within the students' union… all of these aspects of one individual life are summing up".

Additionally, students' investments on mobility experiences were scarce (M = 1.38, SD =.79). In fact, most of CUP students are still living at home: only 23 percent of respondents had to move to a different city to study (consult Table 4, p.12). On the other hand, most of CUP students perceived an international career as an attractive option (Guimarães, 2006). If students' employability expectations are to be met, specific skills should be built up along with the academic experience. For example, **Mr International**, 33 years old currently pursuing a career in banking abroad, told that his Erasmus experience encouraged him to apply to such a position: "when applying to an international position it is very important to demonstrate in the CV that one is pursuing that goal [working abroad] for quite sometime, I am sure that my Erasmus experience contributed positively to my application" (Study 1, Focus Group 1, Participant 9). **Ms. Youth** also stated that "those who went on an Erasmus experience had to face and to overcome some barriers, they do not have their mother or father to help them out (…) if they needed money they had to try to find a way to get it…", and concluded that "moving away from home will contribute to [develop] individual's autonomy" (Study 1, 25 years old HRM at *Be Safe*). This is particularly relevant, if we attend to the fact that almost 70% of the surveyed students live with their parents. Hence, mobility experiences (such as Erasmus) in particular, alongside other extra-curricular experiences, emerge as employability promoters (Guimarães, 2006) and actually, they have been strongly encouraged at CUP for some time.

Literature discusses the role of life experiences in individuals' career development, as for example, leisure activities (Munson & Savickas, 2002). However, the added-value of life experiences depends upon its length and diversity (Coimbra, 1991). Therefore, individuals with higher scores on extra-curricular activities, that is, with longer and more varied experiences, are expected to show higher scores on career development. However, in this study the data did not support such association (see Table 7, p.17).

TABLE 7

The association of Students' investment in extra-curricular activities to career development

Extra-Curricular Experiences	*Career Development*	
	r	p
work-experience	**-.09**	.25
volunteer-work	**.09**	.28
civic participation	**.05**	.54
mobility experiences	**.10**	.22
complementary training	**.15**	**.05**
other extra-curricular experiences	**.04**	.63

Correlations between career development as measured by the Student Career Concerns Inventory (Savickas, 2002; Ramos, Crespo, Gonçalves & Coimbra, 2002) and each individual extra-curricular activity are non-significant (consult Table 8, p.18). There are several reasons that might shed light on such results. The initial self-assessment took place at the beginning of the academic year. Thus, first-year students lacked the opportunity to accomplish previous significant investments lined up with their career options, if they had had considered them at all. In some cases, students are the children of SME entrepreneurs and the degree becomes instrumental, possibly, as they are destined to work in the family business. In other words, being shielded from competition in the labour market, they may lack the motivation to engage in extra-curricular activities, at least at the initial stage of the academic career at the university.

In turn, Munson and Savickas (2002) suggest that individuals with higher scores on extra-curricular activities are also expected to show higher scores on skills development. In the same vein, Cabral-Cardoso (2006) compared the contribution of the university with other training experiences (such as continuing education/ training and work experience) and found that the latter play a more important role than the former in the development of soft skills. The study results show that although students reported limited extra-curricular activities, their self-perception regarding soft-skills development was generally very positive, as already mentioned (consult Table 5). This divergence suggests that students do not associate skills development to work/other life experiences. In fact, the data show a lack of association between both variables: the majority of the

correlations between skills and extra-curricular activities are non-significant yet again. Those results seem to suggest that students might hold unrealistic self-perception of their skills development. Actually, the research data show that they fail to produce evidence to support the confidence displayed. This hypothesis is supported by anecdotal data from Study 1. In the individual interviews, **Ms. Smart**, 44 years old HRM at *Choose a destiny, we will take you there* said "the school plays a role in managing students expectations regarding the labour market. How can they possibly think that a position as a Director is suitable for a fresh graduate?". This hypothesis is also strengthen by Cabral-Cardoso's (2006) study which draws attention to the gap between graduates self-assessment and firms' perceptions of graduates' proficiency on the same soft skills. If this hypothesis proves to be right, then there is a need to adjust students' self-appraisal to students' actual skills' mastery. The PSP Project gains relevance in this context, especially through the aforementioned Skills Development Strategy. Data provided by Study 2 was also equated in terms of the relationship of students' skills development to their vocational development representations (see Table 8, below).

TABLE 8

Students' Market-Valued Skills Profile and their vocational development

Clusters and Skills	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*	*Career Development*	
			r	p
Social Skills	4.09	.56		
Written Communication	4.15	.70	**.24**	**.00**
Oral Communication	4.02	.53	**.31**	**.00**
Interpersonal Relationship	4.11	.48	**.36**	**.00**
Teamwork	4.09	.51	**.38**	**.00**
Skills related to Values and Attitudes	3.76	.61		
Integrity and Ethics	4.15	.59	**39**	**.00**
Persistence	3.79	.69	.10	.20
Responsibility	3.40	.69	**.23**	**.00**
Methodological Skills	3.78	.66		
Personal Management	4.09	.67	**.22**	**.01**
Problem-Solving	3.94	.54	**.33**	**.00**
Creativity	4.05	.52	**.34**	**.00**
Systemic Thinking	3.33	.62	**.29**	**.00**
Learning Skills	3.57	.58		
Improving Own Learning	4.11	.54	**.35**	**.00**
Adapting to Change	3.20	.59	.13	.10
Sense of Quality	3.57	.57	**.23**	**.00**
Lifelong Learning	3.55	.53	.13	.10
Information Processing	3.41	.68	**.16**	**.04**

Although the correlation scores are not strong, ranging from low to moderate, significant positive correlations emerged between career development and the majority of self-reported soft skills. The higher correlation values were observed for Integrity and Ethics ($r=.39$, $p=.00$), Teamwork ($r=.38$, $p=.00$) and Interpersonal Relationship ($r=.36$, $p=.00$). These results are consistent with other studies. Savickas, Briddick and Watkins (2002), although using different instruments, also found "that more mature attitudes toward planning and exploration related to an adjustment style characterized by extroversion in interpersonal relationships and by a positive orientation to social norms" (p. 24). Moreover, they concluded "greater career maturity means (…) greater realization of one's potential" (p. 24). Savickas and his colleagues' assertion reinforces the interpretation of the relationship between students' vocational maturity and students' soft skills development in this study.

Final Remarks

Research findings in Study 1, namely alumni and employers' perceptions on economics and management graduate's employability demonstrate the need to implement new practices of teaching and assessing students' progress focusing on their soft skills. More specifically, the results corroborate the importance for High Education Institutions (HEI) to establish integrated teaching and assessment tools in order to keep students and lectures/tutors focused on the continuous awareness and development of soft skills. In order to do so, students interests are a valuable tool. Technical staff should value the role of interests in such development. As stated by Savickas (1995), "a focus on how the clients uses an interest prompts counsellors to trace (…) both backwards to its origins in private preoccupations and forward to its expression in public occupations" (p. 188), stressing that exploring interests helps students to acknowledge and reveal their work values. This acknowledgement supports the construction of their PSP individual path, likely to increase congruence of personal characteristics and aimed work context.

Furthermore, other contexts emerge in Study 1 as relevant for students' employability, leading to the development of equally valued skills, namely, extracurricular activities and work experiences. Moreover, Study 2 suggests that CUP needs to promote students' non-academic experiences in order to support their positive self-expectations. In addition, other sources of skills' evaluation, such as feedback from peers, lecturers and other stakeholders, may be of value to balance unrealistic representations of own competency. Cooperation between universities and firms was also pointed out as a positive initiative that should be encouraged. Hence, ISCD might benefit from the active cooperation of professional managers who could contribute to the building up of the Skills Profile of economics and management graduates (Study 1). Their contribution might also be crucial at the stage of skills appraisal, thereby allowing HEI and firms' proximity. Besides, this research also recommends that the curricula need to integrate, as much as possible, the suggestions provided by employers and graduates. The gap between students work expectations and employers requirements may also be levelled if HEI provide students with systematic and structured contacts with graduates with significant work experience who could act as mentors, as part of the learning process. Finally, and in order maintain students, lecturers and tutors focused on the need to develop soft skills as a major advantage in the labour market, it seems crucial to develop an integrating teaching and assessment tool – a students' skills audit - created to monitor students' progress on the development of soft skills during their stay in the university.

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