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Extra-curricular engagement as a driver of the development of transferable skills and perceived employability: a bibliometric analysis

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Abstract

This article examines the academic literature on extra-curricular engagement, soft skills and perceived employability through a bibliometric approach. Against a backdrop of changing labour market expectations and growing pressure on higher education institutions to produce work-ready graduates, the study aims to identify the main research trends, influential actors and thematic structures related to these concepts. The analysis is based on a corpus of 107 open-access articles indexed in Scopus between 2020 and 2026 and analysed using VOSviewer. The results show a growing scientific interest in this topic, particularly between 2022 and 2025. They also reveal that the field is structured around several thematic clusters, with employability emerging as the central concept, closely linked to higher education, perceived employability, extracurricular activities and soft skills. Furthermore, the results highlight a relatively fragmented network of authors as well as a moderate level of international collaboration. Overall, the study confirms that extra-curricular engagement is increasingly regarded in the literature as a potential lever for developing transferable skills and enhancing perceived employability, although these

relationships remain embedded within a broader and still fragmented field of research. This article thus helps to clarify the intellectual structure of this field and suggests avenues for future research into the role of para-university experiences in graduates' employability.

Keywords: Para-university engagement; cross-disciplinary skills; perceived employability; higher education; bibliometric analysis; VOSviewer.

1. Introduction

Recent changes in the labour market have profoundly reshaped the expectations placed on higher education graduates. In an environment characterised by uncertainty, increased competition, changing career paths and rapidly evolving skills requirements, employability has gradually emerged as a central concern for universities. Recent literature highlights that employability is now regarded not only as an individual goal for professional success, but also as an important indicator of institutional performance and a matter of economic policy.

In this context, a mere command of subject-specific knowledge appears increasingly insufficient. Higher education institutions are under growing pressure to prepare graduates who are able to adapt to changing professional contexts, communicate effectively, collaborate, solve problems and actively manage their career paths. Several studies thus highlight that employability goes far beyond the accumulation of technical skills and is closely linked to broader dimensions such as professional identity, self-confidence, networking and the ability to take the initiative.

This trend explains the growing interest in soft skills, often presented as a key driver of integration into and adaptation to the world of work. Research shows, however, that developing these skills in higher education remains problematic. On the one hand, students still face difficulties in identifying, articulating and applying these skills in professional contexts. On the other hand, they highlight a lack of explicit teaching methods and concrete opportunities for application, which fuels the perception of a disconnect between university education and the expectations of the labour market.

It is in this context that para-, co- and extra-curricular activities take on particular importance. A growing body of research shows that the development of employability is not limited to the formal curriculum, but extends to a range of complementary activities, whether these be work placements, mentoring, networking events, international experiences, involvement in voluntary organisations or other opportunities offered outside the classroom. These initiatives have the potential to strengthen not only students' human capital, but also their social capital, their professional identity and their understanding of the world of work.

However, the mere existence of these opportunities does not guarantee that students will actually make use of them. Several recent studies show that student engagement in developing employability often falls short of expectations. The obstacles identified are numerous: academic pressures, financial pressures, health issues, a lack of confidence, a lack of clarity regarding the schemes on offer, or an insufficient perception of their usefulness. From this perspective, engagement appears to be a key factor, as it determines students' actual access to experiences likely to develop their skills and their perceived employability.

At the same time, the literature on perceived employability emphasises its multidimensional nature. It refers not only to the skills possessed, but also to the student's perception of their ability to secure a job, seize career opportunities and meet employers' expectations. In this regard, existing research highlights that this perception depends both on personal

factors, such as general skills, academic performance or individual resources, and on contextual factors, notably the labour market, the institutional environment and the opportunities available.

Despite the richness of these contributions, the field remains fragmented. Research is often scattered across several sub-fields: student engagement, employability, perceived employability, transferable skills, career development, extra-curricular activities, professional socialisation and the transition from university to work. This fragmentation makes it more difficult to gain a comprehensive understanding of how extra-curricular engagement is viewed as a driver of the development of transferable skills and perceived employability. It therefore justifies the use of a bibliometric analysis, capable of mapping the dynamics of scholarly output, identifying dominant themes, key conceptual networks and areas that remain under-explored.

With this in mind, this article aims to examine the scientific literature on extra-curricular engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability, in order to identify the main trends, thematic structures and research perspectives. More specifically, the aim is to analyse how scholarly output has developed around these notions, which concepts occupy a central place within it, and how existing research links student engagement, skills development and the construction of perceived employability.

Building on this general objective, the article is structured around the following questions:

- (1) How has the academic literature on extra-curricular engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability evolved?
- (2) Which authors, sources, keywords and networks are the most influential in this field?
- (3) Which thematic cluster's structure existing research?
- (4) What gaps and research prospects emerge from this mapping?

2. Conceptual framework and theoretical underpinnings

In order to better contextualise the subject of this research, it is necessary to clarify the main concepts that underpin our analysis. Indeed, analysing the links between extra-curricular engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability requires a rigorous theoretical framework, enabling us to clarify the scope of each concept and highlight how they interrelate in the literature. This section therefore presents the

conceptual foundations of the study, examining in turn perceived employability, transferable skills and the role of extra-curricular engagement in the development of these resources.

2.1 Perceived employability: definition and scope

Perceived employability refers to the way in which an individual assesses their ability to secure a job, retain it or seize new career opportunities. In the article by Ergün and Şeşen (2021), this concept is linked to the classic definition by Hillage and Pollard (1998), according to which employability concerns an individual's perception of their ability to find a job, retain their current job or secure another satisfactory job if necessary. The authors also point out that this concept must be understood in a multidimensional way, taking into account knowledge, skills and the labour market context. This perspective is further developed by Clarke (2018), who demonstrates that employability must be understood not only in terms of individual attributes, but also in terms of the capital held by the student and the contextual conditions in which they operate.

Following the same line of reasoning, Ergün and Şeşen (2021) show that perceived employability does not depend solely on individual resources. Drawing in particular on Rothwell et al. (2008, 2009), Berntson et al. (2006) and Qenani et al. (2014), they emphasise that this perception is influenced by both personal and contextual factors. Their review thus highlights the role of soft skills, academic performance, personal circumstances, and the external labour market in shaping students' sense of employability. This view is reinforced by Jung and Li (2024), who show, in the case of Master's students in Hong Kong, that perceived employability is closely linked to individual characteristics, the academic environment and the way in which students assess their career prospects.

The article by Ajarrar and Berjaoui (2021) usefully complements this perspective in the Moroccan context. The authors point out that perceived employability has often been viewed as an individual's ability to find a job that meets their expectations, whilst noting that this approach remains overly simplistic. Drawing on Vanhercke et al. (2014), they define perceived employability as the result of an individual's perception of their personal factors — notably their skills and social capital — as well as contextual factors such as the labour market. They also demonstrate, following Vanhercke et al. (2013), that this concept may include the ability to retain one's job in a changing environment. In the same vein, Sánchez-Queija et al. (2023) show that perceived employability varies according to educational pathways and

the resources mobilised by students, which confirms its both subjective and contextual nature.

Also, in the study by Ajarrar and Berjaoui (2021), the authors specify that, for students and recent graduates, a more appropriate definition is that proposed by Moreland (2005). This defines perceived employability as a set of skills, knowledge and attributes that make graduates more likely to secure employment and succeed in it. This approach is significant for our work, as it directly links perceived employability to the skills and knowledge developed during a student's university career, including those acquired outside the strictly academic setting. From this perspective, Padgett and Donald (2023) demonstrate that a targeted curricular intervention can enhance students perceived employability, confirming that it can be developed through explicit pedagogical measures.

The literature drawn from the analysed articles allows us to view perceived employability as a subjective, multidimensional and contextual construct. It refers not only to the possession of skills, but also to the individual's confidence in their resources, their ability to mobilise them, and their interpretation of the opportunities offered by the professional environment. This psychological dimension is also highlighted by Shomotova and Ibrahim (2023), who emphasise the importance of validating instruments for measuring perceived employability in a student context, as well as by Wang et al. (2024), who show that the perception of employability also depends on broader institutional and social environments. From this perspective, perceived employability is a particularly relevant concept for analysing how extra-curricular engagement can contribute to the development of transferable skills and to strengthening the sense of readiness for employment.

2.2. Transversal skills in higher education

In the literature on employability, transferable skills play a central role, as they refer to a set of abilities that can be transferred from one context to another and applied in a variety of professional situations. Unlike strictly technical skills, they are not limited to a specific disciplinary field, but encompass abilities such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, autonomy and time management. In the study by Ergün and Şeşen (2021), these skills are presented as elements of human capital that contribute directly to perceived employability, particularly through teamwork, emotional intelligence and entrepreneurial skills. The authors also point out, drawing on Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006), Dacre et al. (2014) and Finch et al. (2016), that these skills are now highly sought after by

employers and constitute crucial resources in the transition to employment.

The importance of these skills is also highlighted in the article by Otermans et al. (2025), which shows that British students and graduates regard soft skills as essential to their preparation for the labour market. The findings of this qualitative study particularly emphasise communication, time management, critical thinking, problem-solving and adaptability. However, the authors also show that students often find it difficult to clearly identify these skills, to understand how they develop during their university studies and, above all, to transfer them to the professional world. This finding reveals that the issue is not merely one of acquiring skills, but also of articulating them, promoting their value and applying them in recruitment or employment contexts.

From this perspective, several studies highlight the limitations of the traditional academic framework. Otermans et al. (2025) show that some students consider teaching methods too passive to foster a visible development of their cross-disciplinary skills, whilst work placements and extracurricular activities appear to offer more concrete opportunities for learning and putting these skills into practice. For their part, Fish, Bertone and van Gramberg (2025) point out that employability in higher education does not rely solely on subject-specific content, but also on the opportunities offered to students to engage, experiment, build their confidence and develop their personal effectiveness. In this context, transferable skills are not merely individual attributes; they are developed through experiences, interactions and learning environments that often lie at the interface between the university and the world of work.

The study by Jackson et al. (2024) further reinforces this idea by showing that certain employability-building activities – notably work-related activities, mentoring experiences, networking activities and work placements – are perceived by graduates as particularly useful for developing their professional self-concept, their networks and their employment prospects. This suggests that transferable skills are developed not only through formal teaching, but also through students’ exposure to real-life situations, concrete responsibilities and meaningful social interactions. In this context, higher education is called upon to move beyond an approach centred exclusively on academic knowledge to incorporate broader formative experiences.

Transversal skills are presented in the literature as a bridge between university education and entry into the labour market. They are a fundamental driver of employability, but their development requires explicit pedagogical approaches,

opportunities for practical application and greater recognition of learning achieved outside the classroom. This perspective fully justifies the focus, in this study, on extra-curricular engagement as a potential arena for developing these skills.

Table 1: Interculturalism and skills development among young people

Element	Main idea	Contribution to employability
Definition of cross-cutting skills	Transferable skills that can be applied in different professional contexts	They complement technical skills and enhance adaptability to the labour market
Key skills mentioned	Communication, teamwork, independence, adaptability, time management, problem-solving	They facilitate entry into the labour market and prepare individuals for employment
Limitations of the formal academic framework	Traditional teaching methods do not always allow for the visible development of these skills	Need for more practical and applied approaches
Opportunities for development	Work placements, extracurricular activities, mentoring, networking, work experience	These experiences promote practical learning and the development of skills
Key idea	Transversal skills act as a bridge between university education and entry into the world of work	They justify the focus on extra-curricular engagement

Source: Author’s own analysis based on the literature reviewed.

2.3. Extra-curricular engagement as a learning environment

Paracurricular engagement can be defined as students’ involvement in activities that lie outside the strictly academic framework, but which nevertheless contribute to their personal, social and professional development. It encompasses a variety of experiences such as work placements, mentoring, networking activities, work-related projects, student societies, voluntary work, professional development programmes, and certain international experiences. In recent literature, these activities are often referred to as co-curricular or extra-curricular activities, or as

opportunities for employability development. Jackson et al. (2024) point out that employability development extends beyond the formal curriculum and includes a range of complementary activities offered by the institution or organised individually by students. This perspective is further elaborated by Chapman (2023), who demonstrates that extracurricular activities serve not only to enhance employability but also to foster identity and a sense of belonging, thereby reinforcing their value within students' educational journeys.

This perspective is based on the idea that university learning is not limited to the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge. Co-curricular activities provide spaces for experimentation where students can apply their knowledge, develop transferable skills, expand their networks and gradually build a professional identity. In the study by Jackson et al. (2024), graduates noted in particular that work-related activities, external paid employment, mentoring and networking activities contribute to the development of a professional sense of self, social connections and access to employment. These findings show that extra-curricular engagement can be viewed as a mechanism for gradual professionalisation, bringing students closer to the standards, expectations and practices of the world of work. Similarly, Clark and Zukas (2015) demonstrate, from the perspective of former students, that extracurricular activities are important resources in preparing for employment and in enhancing graduates' profiles.

The article by Fish, Bertone and van Gramberg (2025) explores this issue in greater depth by analysing students' engagement with employability-building opportunities outside the classroom. The authors show that engagement should not be reduced to mere observable participation, but that it comprises at least two major dimensions: an affective dimension, linked to emotions, stress, confidence and a sense of relevance; and a behavioural dimension, linked to taking the initiative, active participation and the effort invested. Their study highlights that students do not automatically take advantage of the opportunities available, even when universities develop a wide range of such activities. Engagement therefore depends not only on the existence of these activities, but also on how they are perceived, how accessible they are, and how they are integrated into the student's academic journey. This analysis is consistent with that of Goodwin and Vincent (2024), who emphasise that extracurricular communities of practice can play an important role in the gradual development of employability, particularly when they enable students to engage in meaningful collective experiences.

The work of Otermans et al. (2025) supports this view by showing that work placements and extracurricular activities are perceived by students as essential experiences for skills development and preparation for employment, but that their accessibility and uptake remain variable. The authors emphasise in particular that these experiences enable students to better understand how the professional world actually works, to gain confidence and to learn how to apply their skills to new situations. They also show that students particularly value contexts in which they can experiment, observe and interact with professionals, which confirms the educational value of activities carried out outside the traditional academic setting. This view is reinforced by Ragui (2026), who demonstrates that extra-curricular activities can have positive effects on graduates' entry into the labour market, particularly through the acquisition of valuable experience and skills that can be directly applied in the workplace.

The literature also highlights that extra-curricular engagement varies socially and institutionally. Jackson et al. (2024) show that participation rates in many activities remain relatively low and vary according to age, citizenship, whether the student is the first in their family to attend university, and the institution attended. The authors identify several barriers to participation, notably academic and professional obligations, financial pressures, health issues, a lack of confidence and a lack of awareness of available opportunities. For their part, Fish et al. (2025) emphasise the impact of emotional and behavioural barriers, as well as institutional constraints relating to the visibility, timing and perceived relevance of the activities on offer. These findings show that extra-curricular engagement cannot be regarded as an automatic resource; it depends on the specific conditions under which students can access and engage with it. Phusavat et al. (2025) reach a similar conclusion, emphasising that students' perceptions of employability are strongly influenced by the opportunities that are actually accessible and by the way in which university schemes are organised and perceived.

Extracurricular engagement can be understood as a learning space situated at the intersection of the university and the professional world. It plays an important role in the development of transferable skills, in the construction of professional identity and in enhancing perceived employability. However, its impact depends largely on the ability of institutions to make these opportunities visible, inclusive and integrated into the study programme, as well as on students' ability to recognise their value for their professional future. This idea is in line with the work of Fleming (2025), which shows that preparation for employment also depends on universities' ability to strategically organise the experiences and resources made

available to students within a broader framework of professionalisation.

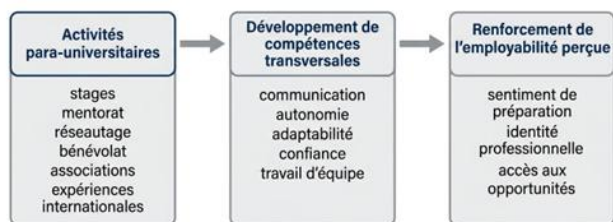


Figure 1: Extracurricular engagement as an intermediate space for learning

Source: Author's own synthesis based on the analysed literature.

2.4 The relationship between extra-curricular engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability

The literature reviewed highlights a fundamental relationship between extra-curricular engagement, the development of transferable skills and perceived employability. This relationship is based on the idea that experiences undertaken outside the formal academic setting provide students with real-world learning situations in which they can develop, test and apply skills that will be useful for their future entry into the labour market. From this perspective, extra-curricular engagement acts not merely as a complementary activity, but as an intermediary mechanism for professional development.

A key link clearly established in the analysed research concerns the relationship between engagement and transferable skills. Ergün and Şeşen (2021) show that generic skills, such as teamwork, emotional intelligence and entrepreneurial skills, are significant determinants of perceived employability. Otermans et al. (2025), for their part, emphasise that work placements and extracurricular activities are perceived by students as essential opportunities for developing skills such as communication, time management, autonomy and adaptability. As for Jackson et al. (2024), they show that work-related activities, mentoring and networking experiences help to strengthen students' professional self-concept and social connections, which constitutes a form of cross-disciplinary learning with high professional value.

A second important link concerns the relationship between transferable skills and perceived employability. Research shows that students' perception of their ability to enter the labour market depends largely on their sense of possessing the skills required to meet professional expectations. In the study

by Ergün and Şeşen (2021), general skills emerge as a significant factor in perceived employability, alongside academic performance and the labour market context. Similarly, Ajarrar and Berjaoui (2021) demonstrate, in the Moroccan context, that individual and relational resources positively influence perceived employability, with self-confidence playing a notable mediating role. It thus appears that soft skills not only enhance 'objective' employability but also influence how students assess their chances of securing employment.

The literature shows, however, that this relationship is neither automatic nor uniform. Fish et al. (2025) emphasise that student engagement in employability-building activities depends heavily on emotional and behavioural factors, such as stress, a lack of confidence, feeling overwhelmed, or a lack of clear perception of the value of these opportunities. Jackson et al. (2024) also identify significant structural barriers, linked to academic, financial and health-related constraints, as well as a lack of information. These findings suggest that the relationship between engagement, skills and perceived employability is mediated by intermediate variables:

- Access to opportunities,
- Quality of support schemes,
- Social capital,
- Self-confidence and the ability to recognise acquired skills.

From this perspective, perceived employability should not be viewed as merely the mechanical result of participation in extra-curricular activities. It is built through a more complex process, in which students engage in experiences, develop skills, learn to identify and value them, and link them to their career plans. The concept of professional identity, highlighted by Jackson et al. (2024), plays an important role here, in that it helps us understand how students move from mere participation to a genuine sense of ownership of their experiences in terms of their career. Similarly, the findings of Otermans et al. (2025) show that students derive greater benefit from experiences that enable them not only to take action, but also to understand how their skills can be applied and transferred to different settings.

Thus, the literature review leads us to regard extra-curricular engagement as an indirect yet fundamental driver of perceived employability, acting primarily through the development of transferable skills, the strengthening of networks, the construction of professional identity and the building of self-

confidence. This framework forms the theoretical core of our study and justifies the value of a bibliometric mapping exercise, which enables us to observe how these three concepts are interconnected within the existing scientific literature.

3. Methodology of the bibliometric research

In order to analyse the scientific structure of the field concerning para-academic engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability, this study adopts a bibliometric approach. This methodological choice is justified by bibliometrics' ability to map a research field, identify its evolutionary dynamics and key actors, as well as the conceptual relationships that structure it. In a field that remains fragmented across several related concepts — student engagement, employability, cross-disciplinary skills, and co- and extra-curricular activities — the bibliometric approach provides a comprehensive, systematic and visual overview of the existing scientific literature. It therefore appears particularly well-suited to the objective of this research, which is not to empirically test a causal model, but to examine how the literature articulates these three concepts over time.

The approach adopted follows the methodology of a descriptive and relational bibliometric review. It aims, on the one hand, to describe trends in publication volume and to identify the most influential authors, journals, institutions and countries; and, on the other hand, to analyse networks of keyword co-occurrence in order to identify dominant themes and conceptual affinities within the field. This dual approach is consistent with the exploratory nature of the study, in that it enables both a quantitative assessment of the state of the literature and an examination of its intellectual structure.

The bibliographic corpus was compiled from an international database recognised for the breadth of its coverage and its relevance to scientific mapping. The search strategy was developed around the key concepts underpinning the study, namely extra-curricular engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability. With this in mind, several related terms were used to account for the terminological diversity observed in the literature, notably 'student engagement', 'extracurricular activities', 'co-curricular activities', 'soft skills', 'transferable skills', 'transversal skills', 'perceived employability' and 'graduate employability'. This choice is justified by the fact that recent research does not always use the same terminology to refer to similar concepts, particularly when it comes to activities outside the formal curriculum or skills that can be applied in various contexts.

Once the documents had been identified, a selection process was carried out to compile a corpus consistent with the research objective. The inclusion criteria prioritised academic articles explicitly addressing at least one of the three selected themes, published in academic journals and falling within the fields of higher education, employability or skills development. Duplicates and documents clearly unrelated to the subject were excluded. This filtering stage was necessary to ensure the relevance of the analysed corpus and to limit information noise, which is particularly common in bibliometric research on broad concepts such as employability or student engagement. The selected bibliographic data were then exported and prepared for analysis. This preparation phase involved cleaning the keywords, notably by standardising certain lexical variants and reducing terminological redundancies. This work is essential in bibliometrics, as variations in spelling can impair the readability of the generated maps and artificially fragment the thematic clusters. Particular attention was therefore paid to harmonising similar expressions, in order to more faithfully reflect the structure of the field under study.

The bibliometric analysis was carried out using the VOSviewer software, which is widely used in scientific mapping research for the analysis of bibliographic networks. The value of this tool lies in its ability to visualise the relationships between different elements of the corpus — authors, documents, keywords or sources — in the form of networks, density plots or temporal overlays. Within the scope of this research, the focus was primarily on analysing the co-occurrence of keywords, as this enables the identification of dominant thematic clusters and conceptual connections between the key concepts within the field. This analysis was supplemented by a descriptive review of the temporal evolution of publications and the most prominent actors in the field.

Conceived in this way, the bibliometric methodology adopted in this study aims to produce a structured mapping of the literature relating to extra-curricular engagement, cross-disciplinary skills and perceived employability. It forms the analytical basis for the following section, which is devoted to the presentation and interpretation of the bibliometric results.

Table 2: Filtering process for the bibliographic corpus in Scopus

Filtering stage	Criteria applied	Number of results
1	Initial search query: “perceived employability” AND “extracurricular activities”	666
2	Document type filter: Article	532
3	Publication period restriction: 2020–2026	443
4	Refine by relevant keywords: perceived employability, extracurricular activities, students, employability, soft skills	165
5	Open Access restriction: Open Access	107

Source: Compiled by the author from the Scopus database.

3.1. Choice of database

For the purposes of this research, the Scopus database was selected as the primary source for bibliographic data collection. This choice was based on the breadth of its scientific coverage, the disciplinary diversity of the journals it indexes and the richness of the metadata it provides. Indeed, Scopus provides access not only to the titles, abstracts and keywords of publications, but also to information on authors, affiliations, sources, cited references and years of publication, making it a database particularly well-suited to conducting a bibliometric analysis.

The use of Scopus is also justified by the interdisciplinary nature of the subject under study. The issue of extra-curricular engagement, the development of transferable skills and perceived employability lies at the intersection of several fields of research, notably higher education, educational sciences, management, human resources and employment studies. In this context, Scopus offers sufficiently broad coverage to accommodate this diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches.

The choice of a single database is driven by a desire for methodological consistency. In bibliometrics, the use of a single, clearly defined database helps to minimise duplicates, ensure greater homogeneity of the corpus and facilitate data

processing in visualisation software such as VOSviewer. Consequently, Scopus was selected as the reference database for the identification, extraction and processing of the bibliographic corpus used in this study.

The choice of Scopus is based on scientific reliability, as this database is frequently used in bibliometric research relating to the social sciences and higher education studies. Its use thus ensures greater traceability of the search strategy and greater clarity in the construction of the analysed corpus.

3.2. Search strategy and bibliographic search terms

The bibliographic search strategy was designed to identify publications addressing the relationship between student engagement, extracurricular activities, the development of transferable skills and perceived employability. Given the diversity of terminology observed in the literature, the search was based on a progressively refined combination of keywords to cover the main terms used in this field.

In the first stage, a simple initial search query was formulated using the terms “perceived employability” and “extracurricular activities”. This initial search aimed to identify a core set of publications directly related to perceived employability and activities undertaken outside the formal curriculum. This query identified an initial corpus of 666 documents in the Scopus database.

In a second stage, several filters were applied to improve the scientific relevance of the corpus. The document type was first restricted to articles, in order to prioritise peer-reviewed academic publications. This reduced the corpus to 532 results. Next, a time restriction was introduced, retaining only publications appearing between 2020 and 2026, with the aim of focusing the analysis on the most recent work that is most representative of contemporary developments in the field. This step reduced the corpus to 443 publications.

In a third stage, the search was narrowed down thematically using the keywords most directly related to the research topic. The terms ‘perceived employability’, ‘extracurricular activities’, ‘students’, ‘employability’ and ‘soft skills’ were thus selected. This keyword filtering enabled the corpus to be refocused on the publications most closely related to the research question, reducing the total to 165 articles. Finally, a final filter was applied to retain only open-access documents, resulting in a final corpus of 107 publications.

This search and filtering process enabled the creation of a corpus consistent with the study’s objective, namely to map the academic literature on the links between extra-curricular engagement, soft skills and perceived employability. It should

be emphasised, however, that this corpus remains dependent on the terms selected and the filters applied, which constitutes a typical limitation of any bibliometric approach based on a targeted search strategy.

3.3. Criteria for selecting the corpus

Following the initial identification of publications, a set of selection criteria was applied in order to compile a corpus consistent with the research objective. This stage aimed to exclude documents that were too far removed from the research question and to retain only those publications with sufficient scientific relevance for the bibliometric analysis.

The first criterion concerned the nature of the document. Only scientific articles were retained, excluding book chapters, conference papers, editorial notes, reviews or other types of documents. This choice was justified by the desire to prioritise established, peer-reviewed academic work exhibiting a more consistent level of scientific rigour.

The second criterion related to the publication period. The study was limited to publications appearing between 2020 and 2026. This choice allows the analysis to focus on the most recent work, in line with current developments in debates concerning employability, soft skills and student engagement in higher education.

The third criterion concerned thematic relevance. Only those documents were selected whose titles, abstracts or keywords explicitly referred to one or more of the following areas: perceived employability, employability, extracurricular or para-university activities, students and soft skills. This step was necessary to narrow down overly general results and exclude publications that used these terms in contexts other than higher education and the transition to employment.

The fourth criterion concerned the accessibility of the documents. In the final version of the corpus, only open-access articles were included. This choice serves a dual purpose: it facilitates full access to the texts for further qualitative analysis of the content, and it ensures better traceability of the sources used in the study.

Finally, a verification and refinement process was carried out to eliminate any duplicates and check the overall consistency of the corpus. This stage resulted in a final set of publications that was sufficiently focused to be processed in VOSviewer, whilst remaining broad enough to reflect the main trends in the field under study.

Thus, the successive application of these criteria enabled us to move from an initial broad set to a final corpus that was more

homogeneous, more relevant and better suited to the objectives of the bibliometric research.

4. Bibliometric results

This section presents the main results from the bibliometric analysis carried out on the corpus selected from the Scopus database and processed using the VOSviewer software. The aim is to highlight publication dynamics, the main scientific sources, and the thematic structure of the field under study. The analysis focuses in particular on the temporal evolution of scientific output, the distribution of publications by source, and the relationships between the keywords most frequently used in the literature.

Through this approach, the aim is not only to describe the research field relating to extra-academic engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability, but also to identify the dominant trends, conceptual affinities and main structuring axes. The results thus enable us to identify the most prominent themes in recent literature and to shed light on how this field is organised scientifically.

4.1. Temporal trends in publications

Analysing the trends in publications over time enables us to assess the dynamics of scholarly output surrounding the topic under study. It provides insight into the pace of the field's development, the periods of most marked growth and, more broadly, the growing interest in the links between student engagement, transferable skills and employability. For the purposes of this study, the period under consideration runs from 2020 to 2026, in accordance with the corpus selection criteria.

Examining the number of publications per year thus aims to determine whether the literature on this subject is experiencing continuous growth, an irregular trend or a concentration in certain specific years. This chronological analysis constitutes an essential first step in the study, as it enables us to pinpoint the emergence and consolidation of the field before exploring its thematic structures in greater detail.



Figure 2: Annual trend in the number of publications in the analysed corpus (2020–2026)

Source: Compiled by the author using data extracted from Scopus.

Figure 2 highlights an overall upward trend in scientific output over the period studied, with a notable increase between 2020 and 2025. The peak in publications is observed in 2025, which recorded the highest number of documents, whilst 2026 shows a lower level, which may be explained by the fact that the year was only partially covered at the time of data collection. Overall, this trend reflects a growing interest in the literature in topics related to student engagement, soft skills and employability.

4.2. Breakdown of publications by source

Analysing the distribution of publications by source enables us to identify the most active journals in the field under study. This step is important as it provides insight into the editorial platforms where research on extra-curricular engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability is most frequently published. It also helps to identify the journals that shape the field's scientific visibility and contribute to its academic consolidation.

In the context of this study, the examination of sources aims to highlight any concentration of publications in certain journals specialising in higher education, employability, education or career development. Such an analysis provides a better understanding of the field's disciplinary roots, as well as the dominant trends in the literature. Indeed, depending on whether publications originate predominantly from journals in educational sciences, management or employment, the interpretation of the phenomenon under study may vary.

The breakdown by source is a useful indicator for assessing the field's level of maturity. A wide dispersion across several journals may indicate a field that is still fragmented and

interdisciplinary, whilst a more pronounced concentration around a few major sources may suggest that the scientific debate is gradually becoming more structured. Thus, the analysis of the most productive journals complements the study of trends over time by providing an overview of the main channels through which research on the subject is disseminated.

4.3. Most influential authors

The analysis of authors makes it possible to identify the most prominent researchers in the corpus under study, taking into account three main indicators: the number of documents published, the number of citations received and total link strength. These indicators enable a more nuanced understanding of the structure of the field, distinguishing between mere scientific productivity and academic influence, as well as the intensity of relationships within the research network.

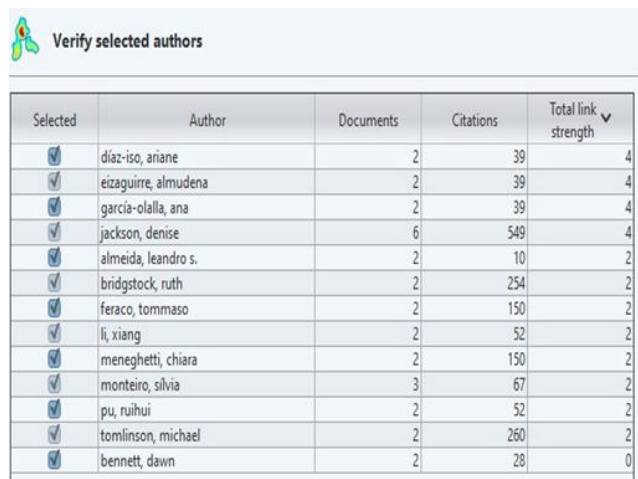
The results show that Denise Jackson occupies a central position within the corpus. She emerges as the most productive author with six papers, but also as the most influential in terms of citations, with 549 citations, whilst having a total link strength of 4. This position suggests that she plays a structuring role in the literature on employability, student engagement and career development activities in higher education. Other authors also exert a notable influence, albeit with a smaller volume of publications. This is particularly the case for Michael Tomlinson, with 260 citations; Ruth Bridgstock, with 254 citations; and Tommaso Feraco and Chiara Meneghetti, who each have 150 citations. These results indicate that the field under study relies on a small core of highly cited authors, whose work helps to shape academic debates on employability and preparing students for the labour market.

Visualisation of the author network reveals a structure comprising small collaborative clusters rather than a highly integrated network. Several distinct groups emerge, organised around a few central authors. For example, one cluster brings together Denise Jackson, Ruth Bridgstock and Michael Tomlinson, whilst another comprises Ariane Díaz-Iso, Almudena Eizaguirre and Ana García-Olalla. Other smaller sub-groups are centred on Tommaso Feraco and Chiara Meneghetti, or on Xiàng Li and Ruihui Pu. This configuration suggests that research on the subject remains characterised by collaboration within small, tightly-knit groups, without any single unified academic network dominating the entire field.

Overall, these results reflect a field in the process of taking shape, driven by a few influential authors and organised

around relatively fragmented collaborations. This situation is consistent with the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, which draws on studies of higher education, employability, skills and career development. It also shows that certain authors, in particular Denise Jackson, are key references for understanding the contemporary dynamics of the literature on student engagement and employability.

Table 3: Network of co-authors in the analysed corpus



Selected	Author	Documents	Citations	Total link strength
☒	díaz-iso, aniane	2	39	4
☒	eizaguirre, almodena	2	39	4
☒	garcía-olalla, ana	2	39	4
☒	jackson, denise	6	549	4
☒	almeida, leandro s.	2	10	2
☒	bridgstock, ruth	2	254	2
☒	feraco, tommaso	2	150	2
☒	li, xiang	2	52	2
☒	meneghetti, chiara	2	150	2
☒	monteiro, silvia	3	67	2
☒	pu, ruihui	2	52	2
☒	tomlinson, michael	2	260	2
☒	bennett, dawn	2	28	0

Source: Compiled by the author using data extracted from Scopus and visualised with VOSviewer.

Table 3 highlights a relative concentration of scholarly output around a limited number of authors. Denise Jackson stands out clearly as the most influential author in the corpus, with 6 papers, 549 citations and a total link strength of 4, confirming her central position in the field under study. Other authors, such as Michael Tomlinson, Ruth Bridgstock, Tommaso Feraco and Chiara Meneghetti, also exert a notable influence, despite having a smaller number of publications, which demonstrates that scientific impact depends not only on the volume of output, but also on the visibility and circulation of work within the academic network.

4.4. Geographical distribution of publications

An analysis of the geographical distribution of publications highlights a relatively wide international reach of research into extra-curricular engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability. Data from Scopus, visualised using VOSviewer, show that **China** ranks first in terms of the number of publications (**18 documents**) and total link strength (**11**), reflecting both high productivity and strong connectivity within the scientific network. It is followed by the **United Kingdom** (**14 papers; 469 citations; link strength = 6**), **Australia** (**13 papers; 602 citations; link strength = 5**) and **Spain** (**11 papers; link strength = 6**). Other countries, such

as **Portugal, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Italy** and **Brazil**, also contribute to shaping the field, confirming the gradual expansion of this research area to several academic spheres beyond the Anglo-Saxon world alone. However, the map of the collaboration network between countries reveals a configuration that is still **relatively sparse** and **loosely connected**, suggesting that international cooperation exists but remains limited. Thus, research on this subject demonstrates a genuine international outlook, whilst remaining characterised by geographical asymmetries, in that scientific output, academic impact and network connections are concentrated mainly around a few dominant hubs, notably China, Australia, the United Kingdom, Spain and Portugal.

Table 4: Main countries contributing to the analysed corpus

Country	Documents	Citations	Total link strength
China	18	216	11
United Kingdom	14	469	6
Australia	13	602	5
Spain	11	162	6
Portugal	8	365	3
Malaysia	5	73	4
Saudi Arabia	5	65	4
Italy	5	191	3
Thailand	4	56	4
Bangladesh	3	35	4
Brazil	3	79	3
Ukraine	3	19	3
Kuwait	2	11	4
Ethiopia	2	11	3
Lithuania	2	16	3
Netherlands	2	56	3
Serbia	2	16	3
Egypt	2	0	2

France	2	59	2
Taiwan	2	46	2

Source: Compiled by the author using data extracted from Scopus and processed using VOSviewer.

Table 4 highlights a relative concentration of scientific output in a limited number of countries. **China** ranks first in terms of the number of publications with **18 papers**, whilst **Australia** stands out as the most influential country in terms of the number of citations (**602**), ahead of the **United Kingdom (469)** and **Portugal (365)**. In terms of connectivity, China also has the highest **total link strength (11)**, confirming its central position in the network. These results show that the field's international visibility rests on the volume of output, academic impact and the degree of integration within bibliometric relationships

**Figure 3:** Geographical distribution of publications in the analysed corpus

Source: Prepared by the author using data extracted from Scopus and visualised with VOSviewer.

Figure 3 highlights a relatively extensive but loosely structured network of international collaboration. Several countries occupy a prominent position within the network, notably **China**, the **United Kingdom**, **Australia**, **Spain**, **Portugal**, **Brazil** and **Saudi Arabia**, confirming the international openness of the field under study. However, the network's configuration remains rather **linear** and **sparsely connected**, suggesting that collaborations between countries exist but are still limited. This structure thus reflects a field that is expanding internationally but is still organised around a few dominant academic hubs.

4.5. Co-occurrence analysis of keywords

The co-occurrence analysis of keywords is the central stage of bibliometric mapping, as it enables the identification of the main thematic clusters around which the literature in the corpus is organised. Based on the results generated by VOSviewer, several keywords emerge as particularly frequent and strongly connected, thereby highlighting the dominant concepts in the field under study. Among the most frequently occurring terms are **employability**, **students**, **higher education**, **student**, **psychology**, **soft skills**, **perceived employability** and **extracurricular activities**. This frequency confirms that the selected literature lies primarily at the intersection of higher education, student trajectories and issues of employability.

The keyword ‘**employability**’ emerges as the central node of the network, with the highest number of occurrences. It is directly linked to terms such as ‘**higher education**’, ‘**perceived employability**’, ‘**extracurricular activities**’, ‘**soft skills**’, ‘**academic performance**’, ‘**employment**’ and ‘**self-efficacy**’. This configuration shows that the literature does not treat employability as an isolated concept, but as a construct closely associated with the academic environment, individual resources and extracurricular experiences. It also confirms that extracurricular activities and the development of soft skills occupy a distinct place within the field, even though they form part of a broader conceptual framework dominated by the general concept of employability.

The network visualisation highlights several **thematic clusters**. A first cluster, structured around ‘**employability**’, brings together the concepts most directly linked to the core of the study, such as ‘**higher education**’, ‘**perceived employability**’, ‘**extracurricular activities**’, ‘**soft skills**’, ‘**academic performance**’ and ‘**self-efficacy**’. This cluster appears to be the closest to the research question, in that it explicitly links higher education, student experiences and the development of perceived employability. It thus reflects the main theoretical core of the corpus.

A second cluster, organised around keywords such as ‘**student**’, ‘**students**’, ‘**human**’, ‘**female**’, ‘**male**’, ‘**psychology**’ and ‘**education**’, relates more to the general characteristics of the populations studied and to more descriptive or psychosocial approaches. This cluster reflects the strong presence of studies centred on students as the population under analysis, with a focus that is sometimes more psychological or demographic than strictly centred on employability in the operational sense.

A third cluster appears to revolve around terms such as ‘**career**’, ‘**career choice**’, ‘**decision making**’, ‘**questionnaire**’, ‘**young adult**’ and ‘**surveys and questionnaires**. This cluster relates to literature more closely linked to career choices; decision-making dimensions and the investigative tools used in empirical studies. It shows that the issue of perceived employability is also linked to questions of career trajectories, guidance and the development of career plans.

The co-occurrence map highlights a structuring of the field around three major clusters: one centred on **employability in higher education**, a broader cluster relating to **student profiles and psychosocial approaches**, and a cluster focused on **career choices and decision-making dimensions**. This structure confirms that the links between extra-curricular engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability do indeed exist in the literature, but that they form part of a broader field, in which the concepts of general employability, student pathways and psychological development remain strongly present.

These results also show that, whilst keywords directly related to your topic — notably ‘**extracurricular activities**’, ‘**soft skills**’ and ‘**perceived employability**’ — do appear on the map, they still occupy a position that is relatively embedded within a broader conceptual framework dominated by ‘**employability**’ and ‘**higher education**’. This suggests that the literature frequently addresses these concepts in a connected manner, but not always from a fully integrated perspective. This observation thus reinforces the relevance of your work, which aims precisely to better articulate these dimensions through a targeted bibliometric analysis.

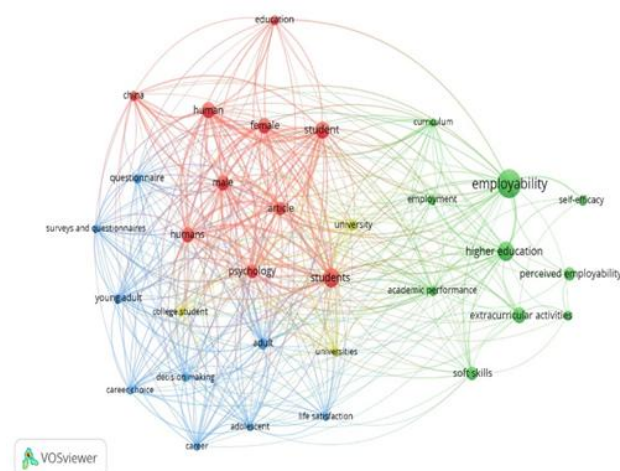


Figure 4: Co-occurrence map of keywords from the analysed corpus

Source: Prepared by the author using data extracted from Scopus and visualised with VOSviewer.

Figure 4 highlights a thematic network structured around the central keyword ‘employability’, which is strongly linked to ‘higher education’, ‘perceived employability’, ‘extracurricular activities’ and ‘soft skills’. It also reveals several complementary clusters relating to student profiles, psychosocial approaches and career choices. This structure demonstrates that the literature on perceived employability forms part of a broad and multidimensional field, within which extracurricular activities and soft skills occupy a distinct place, though one that remains integrated into broader issues.

4.6. Interpretative synthesis of results by clusters

The co-occurrence analysis of keywords identified four clusters structuring the field under study. This thematic organisation shows that the literature on extra-curricular engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability does not develop in a uniform manner, but rather revolves around several complementary conceptual nuclei.

The **first cluster** comprises terms such as ‘article’, ‘China’, ‘education’, ‘female’, ‘human’, ‘humans’, ‘male’, ‘psychology’, ‘student’ and ‘students’. This cluster refers to a more general body of literature, centred on student populations, their demographic characteristics and the educational or psychological approaches used to analyse their relationship with employability. It reflects a body of work that situates the issue of employability within a broad, often descriptive framework, in which the student is the primary unit of analysis.

The **second cluster** comprises the keywords ‘academic performance’, ‘curriculum’, ‘employability’, ‘employment’, ‘extracurricular activities’, ‘higher education’, ‘perceived employability’, ‘self-efficacy’, ‘soft skills’ and ‘university students’. This cluster forms the core most closely related to the research question. It directly links higher education, employability, extracurricular activities, soft skills and perceived employability. It shows that the literature increasingly recognises the role of non-academic experiences in the development of skills useful for entering the labour market. The simultaneous presence of ‘soft skills’, ‘perceived employability’ and ‘extracurricular activities’ confirms that these concepts are well established within the academic debate, even though they remain part of a broader framework dominated by the general concept of employability.

The other clusters observed in the map extend this structure by linking the field to complementary dimensions, notably **career choices**, **decision-making**, **questionnaire-based**

approaches and certain psychosocial dimensions of the student experience. These clusters show that perceived employability is not only addressed as a matter of skills or activities, but also as a phenomenon linked to the development of a career plan, self-perception and career guidance mechanisms.

Overall, the cluster analysis reveals a key finding: the literature is structured around a strong core devoted to **employability in higher education**, to which are linked more general dimensions relating to **student profiles**, **psychosocial approaches** and **career trajectories**. This configuration shows that the links between extra-curricular engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability are indeed present in the academic literature, but that they remain embedded within a broader and more dispersed field.

The cluster analysis confirms both the relevance and the topicality of your topic. It shows that the central concepts of your work occupy a distinct place in the literature, whilst revealing that they are not yet always studied from a fully integrated perspective. It is precisely this relative dispersion that justifies the value of a bibliometric analysis focused on extra-curricular engagement as a lever for developing cross-disciplinary skills and perceived employability.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to analyse the academic literature on extra-curricular engagement, transferable skills and perceived employability, using a bibliometric approach based on a corpus of publications from the Scopus database, analysed using VOSviewer. The study is set against a backdrop where changes in the labour market are heightening expectations of higher education in terms of preparing students for entry into the workforce.

The results show, firstly, an overall increase in scientific output over the period studied, with a marked rise between 2022 and 2025. They also highlight the presence of a small core of influential authors, as well as a scientific network that remains relatively fragmented. The geographical distribution of publications also highlights the international scope of the field, which is dominated by a few particularly active countries, without, however, revealing a high level of integration in terms of collaboration.

The main contribution of this research lies in the co-occurrence analysis of keywords, which has enabled the identification of several thematic clusters structuring the literature. The results show that the concepts of employability, higher education, perceived employability, extracurricular

activities and soft skills are closely connected, confirming the existence of a relevant conceptual framework for studying extra-curricular engagement as a lever for developing transferable skills and perceived employability. However, this interconnection remains only partially integrated within a broader framework dominated by general issues relating to student profiles, psychosocial approaches and career trajectories.

From a theoretical perspective, this study helps to clarify a field that remains fragmented by demonstrating that extra-curricular engagement cannot be reduced to a peripheral activity, but must be viewed as a complementary learning space capable of fostering the acquisition and development of transferable skills. Methodologically, the bibliometric approach has enabled us to produce a structured mapping of the literature and to identify its main themes.

This research nevertheless has certain limitations, linked to the use of a single database, a targeted keyword strategy and the restriction to open-access articles. These choices ensured the consistency of the analysis but may have led to the exclusion of certain relevant publications. They also serve as a reminder that bibliometric results remain sensitive to the quality of data cleaning and the parameters selected.

Several avenues for further research emerge. It would be useful to extend the analysis to other databases, to complement this bibliometric analysis with a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the content, and to pay particular attention to contexts that are still under-represented in the literature, particularly in the Global South. Overall, this study confirms the relevance and topicality of the subject, whilst showing that para-academic engagement remains insufficiently established as a fully integrated field of research.

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