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Soft skills and the needs of university students: what skills are needed to prepare for entry into the workforce?

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Abstract

In a context where access to the labour market now requires, in addition to subject-specific knowledge, the application of communication, interpersonal, organisational and adaptive skills, soft skills are playing an increasingly important role in discussions concerning students' employability. This article examines the perceptions of students at Ibn Zohr University regarding their needs in terms of transferable skills and their sense of readiness for entry into the labour market. The study adopts a qualitative approach based on three focus groups comprising fifteen students, both male and female, from various faculties at Ibn Zohr University, ranging from first-year undergraduates to Master's 2 students. The results show a strong consensus regarding the importance attached to soft skills and a perceived lack of opportunities to develop them in practice. Participants clearly distinguish between the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and the ability to apply it in professional contexts. In particular, they mention difficulties relating to public speaking, self-confidence, stress management, organisation, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving and showcasing their skills. Difficulties in accessing work placements, a lack of professional contacts, and the need for guidance, support and a listening ear also emerge as significant aspects of their experience. The analysis shows, however, that students do not constitute a homogeneous group: their skills and knowledge differ according to their

prior experiences, notably their participation in extracurricular activities, their opportunities for practical experience and their individual career trajectories. The article draws on human capital theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory and career construction theory to interpret these findings.

Keywords: soft skills; employability; university students; entry into the labour market; transferable skills.

1. Introduction

Access to employment for higher education graduates can no longer be understood solely in terms of holding a degree or specialised knowledge. The issue of employability also relates to the ability of students and recent graduates to draw on a range of skills that enable them to thrive in professional environments characterised by interaction, adaptation, cooperation and uncertainty. Research on employability thus highlights the growing importance attached to generic and cross-disciplinary skills in the transition from higher education to the world of work. A systematic review of employability training emphasises, in particular, that higher education institutions are increasingly being called upon to develop skills that go beyond purely disciplinary knowledge (Abelha et al., 2020).

In this context, *soft skills* occupy a special place. Depending on the approach, they encompass communication,

interpersonal, organisational, behavioural and adaptive skills. Their value lies precisely in the fact that they can be applied in a variety of professional situations, regardless of a specific disciplinary field. Research on employability highlights, in particular, the importance of skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity, adaptability and managing relationships with others. Succi and Canovi (2020) demonstrated, through a comparison between students and employers, that interpersonal and behavioural skills are a key component of graduates' employability.

In Morocco, this issue takes on particular significance in a context where higher education faces the challenge of bridging the gap between academic training and entry into the labour market. Recent research focusing on the Moroccan context highlights the importance attached to soft skills and their relationship with employability. Jouhari and Ezzahid (2023), for example, studied the link between transferable skills and employability in the Moroccan context and emphasise the importance of non-technical skills in gaining access to employment. More recent research conducted amongst Moroccan students and graduates also highlights the importance of communication skills, adaptability, leadership and problem-solving in building employability.

However, an analysis of soft skills requirements cannot be limited to identifying the skills sought by employers. It is also important to consider the perspective of those most directly affected: the students themselves. This shift in perspective is essential, as students do not view their education as a mere accumulation of knowledge. They gradually develop an understanding of their own abilities, their limitations and the demands they will face in their future professional lives.

It is precisely this aspect that this article seeks to examine. The study does not aim to conduct an audit of Ibn Zohr University's degree programmes, nor to objectively evaluate the entirety of the teaching provided across the various institutions. It focuses exclusively on students' perceptions, their experiences and the way in which they assess their own readiness for entry into the labour market.

The research question is therefore as follows:

To what extent does university education meet students' needs in terms of soft skills and thus contribute to their preparation for entering the labour market?

Two qualitative hypotheses guide the analysis:

H1. Students associate the development of soft skills with their preparation for the demands of working life and

recognise a need to develop these skills during their university studies.

H2. Students' sense of mastery of soft skills and the opportunities to apply them in real-life situations contribute to their sense of readiness for future entry into the labour market.

The aim is therefore not to test these hypotheses statistically, but to examine how they manifest themselves in participants' accounts and what nuances these exchanges reveal.

To address this issue, the study draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks. Becker's human capital theory enables us to understand training and the acquisition of skills as investments likely to increase the resources available on the labour market. Lent, Brown and Hackett's Social Cognitive Career Theory then allows us to incorporate the issue of self-efficacy, learning experiences and contextual factors that may enhance or limit a student's ability to shape their career path. Finally, Savickas's career construction theory, particularly through the concept of career adaptability, enables us to view the transition to employment as a process in which students must develop resources such as confidence, a sense of control, curiosity and forward-looking thinking.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Human capital theory: from knowledge to professional resources

Human capital theory provides an initial relevant framework for understanding the relationship between education, skills and entry into the labour market. Becker (1964) regards education and training as forms of investment in individuals' productive capacities. The knowledge and skills acquired are therefore not merely academic achievements; they can also constitute resources that can be mobilised in working life.

From this perspective, higher education contributes to the development of human capital through the acquisition of knowledge, qualifications and skills. However, the views gathered in this research suggest that the concept of human capital should be broadened beyond disciplinary knowledge. Students believe that possessing knowledge does not automatically guarantee their ability to perform effectively in a professional environment.

This distinction is clearly evident in the comments gathered. A student at ENCG explains:

'For me, soft skills are almost as important as technical knowledge. You can get good marks and know your subject area, but if you don't know how to communicate, present an

idea or work with others, it becomes difficult in a company.’ (E1, ENCG, Master’s Year 1)

This comment reveals a relatively integrated conception of competence. Technical knowledge remains important, but it must be accompanied by the ability to apply it in professional interactions.

Human capital can thus be viewed here as a combination of both subject-specific knowledge and transferable skills that can be applied in practice.

2.2. Social Cognitive Career Theory: self-efficacy and contextual factors

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), developed by Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994), offers an interpretation of academic and professional development centred in particular on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals and contextual factors. The theory emphasises that career trajectories do not depend exclusively on individual characteristics. They are also shaped by learning experiences and the resources or constraints present in the environment.

This framework is particularly well-suited to our corpus. Students do not merely discuss skills they do or do not possess. They also refer to the experiences that have enabled them – or prevented them – from developing these skills: presentations, group work, work placements, voluntary activities, study days, workshops or extracurricular experiences.

Thus, a student who states that she lacks confidence when she has to speak in public is not simply describing an individual characteristic. Her account refers to her experience of speaking in public and her perception of her own ability to perform in such contexts.

The SCCT also helps to interpret the difficulties with career guidance and access to the world of work mentioned by participants. A lack of contacts, difficulties in finding a work placement or a lack of support can be viewed as contextual factors that may limit opportunities for experimentation and, indirectly, the development of professional confidence.

2.3. Career construction and professional adaptability

The third framework employed is that of Career Construction Theory, developed by Savickas. This approach views a career as a process of gradual construction during which the individual must make sense of their experiences and develop resources enabling them to cope with career transitions.

The concept of **professional adaptability** is particularly relevant to our study. Savickas and Porfeli (2012) identify four fundamental resources: *concern* for the future, *control*, curiosity and confidence. These dimensions enable us to analyse how individuals prepare for professional transitions and changes.

The comments gathered from the students relate directly to several of these dimensions. The need for guidance can be linked to the difficulty of visualising one’s future and developing a career plan; the request for support relates to the need for resources and points of reference; the lack of confidence expressed by some students directly relates to the dimension of *confidence*; finally, the desire to gain a wider range of experiences and practical situations can be associated with a process of discovery and exploration.

This theory thus complements the two previous ones: whilst human capital emphasises the accumulation and enhancement of resources, and the SCCT focuses on the sense of efficacy and contextual factors, Savickas’s approach enables us to understand career preparation as a process of adaptation and construction.

3. Research methodology

3.1. A qualitative approach centred on students’ perceptions

The research adopts an exploratory qualitative approach. This choice is justified by the aim of understanding how students perceive their needs for soft skills, the experiences that have contributed to their development, and the obstacles they encounter in preparing for entry into the labour market.

The choice of a qualitative approach allows us to focus on the richness of the discourse and the diversity of experiences rather than on the statistical measurement of variables. The aim is therefore not to produce a representative estimate of all students at Ibn Zohr University, but to identify patterns, differences and patterns of perception based on the discussions held.

3.2. Participants and fieldwork

The fieldwork involved students from Ibn Zohr University. The corpus comprises fifteen participants divided into three focus groups of five students each.

The sample was designed to include a diversity of profiles. The participants come from several institutions: the National School of Commerce and Management (ENCG), the Higher School of Technology (EST), the Faculty of Legal, Economic

and Social al Sciences (FSJES), the Faculty of Arts and Humanities (FLSH) and the Faculty of Sciences (FS).

Their academic levels range from the first year of a bachelor's degree to the second year of a Master's degree. The groups comprise male and female students at different academic levels. This diversity is not intended to produce a statistical comparison between institutions or academic levels, but rather to gather a variety of student experiences.

To preserve the anonymity of participants, students are identified by the codes E1 to E15. Names and any information that could identify them are not used in the analysis.

3.3. Focus groups as a space for discussion

The use of focus groups also proved relevant for a topic centred on perceptions, needs and experiences. The group dynamic enabled participants to respond to others' comments, expand on certain ideas and compare their experiences.

One of the first observations made during the fieldwork concerned precisely the students' willingness to take part in the discussions. The participants agreed to discuss the issue of soft skills and were willing to talk about their educational journeys, their difficulties and their expectations.

This willingness to speak out is in itself an interesting contextual factor. It does not allow us to conclude that all students feel a general need to be listened to. It does, however, show that the issue of their skills, career guidance and professional preparation is a topic of discussion significant enough for them to engage actively.

3.4. Analytical treatment

The discussions were analysed thematically. The analysis focused on several dimensions: perceptions of soft skills, skills considered to be weak, practical experience, the sense of professional readiness, barriers to entering the world of work, and the expectations expressed regarding support.

Particular attention was paid to areas of agreement amongst participants, but also to individual differences. This latter aspect is important, as not all students have reached the same level of development in their transferable skills.

4. Results and analysis

4.1. A widely shared awareness of the importance of soft skills

The first finding to emerge from the discussions concerns the recognition of the importance of soft skills. The students interviewed do not appear to regard these skills as incidental or secondary to subject-specific knowledge. On the contrary, they associate them directly with the demands of working life.

This perception is particularly evident in the comments of E1:

'For me, soft skills are almost as important as technical knowledge. You can get good marks and know your subject area, but if you don't know how to communicate, present an idea or work with others, it becomes difficult in a company.' (E1, ENCG, Master's Year 1)

This comment is of particular interest as it draws a distinction between academic success and the ability to function in a professional environment. The student does not deny the value of technical knowledge. Rather, she considers that its professional effectiveness also depends on skills that enable it to be applied in interactions with others.

This view is confirmed by other participants. A student from the Faculty of Science explains:

'In my course, there's a strong emphasis on scientific knowledge. That's important, of course, but when you're looking for an internship or a job, you realise that you also need to know how to communicate and work in a team.' (E6, FS)

The transition from university to the workplace thus appears to be a shift in focus. Students perceive university as a space for building knowledge, whilst the workplace appears to them as a space in which this knowledge must be complemented by interpersonal and behavioural skills.

This perception is consistent with research on employability, which emphasises that subject-specific knowledge is an important component of employability, but that it is linked to other resources such as generic skills, experience and the ability to manage one's career path. The CareerEDGE model, for example, combines subject-specific knowledge, generic skills, experience, career development learning and emotional intelligence (Dacre Pool et al., 2014).

However, this should not be interpreted as a dichotomy between *hard skills* and *soft skills*. Rather, students appear to favour a complementary conception of competence. Their

difficulty lies in the feeling that mastery of knowledge alone is not sufficient to guarantee their ability to perform effectively in a professional context.

4.2. ‘Being trained’ does not necessarily mean ‘feeling prepared’

The second major dimension of the corpus concerns the sense of professional preparedness. Students acknowledge the benefits of their university education, but several of them state that they do not feel fully prepared to enter the world of work.

E4 expresses this view explicitly:

‘I’d say I’m moderately prepared for the world of work. I know certain things thanks to my studies, but I don’t know exactly what a recruiter will expect of me.’ (E4, FLSH)

For her part, E7 states:

“I don’t feel fully prepared. I think university gives us a solid foundation, but there’s a lack of more practical preparation for working life.” (E7, FS)

These comments allow for a considerably more nuanced interpretation of the results. The students are not saying that their education is useless. On the contrary, they acknowledge that it provides them with a ‘solid foundation’. The feeling of inadequacy arises in relation to the transition from this academic foundation to the practical situations they anticipate having to face.

This distinction is fundamental. The problem identified by the participants is not necessarily a lack of training, but rather the challenge of translating that training into professional competence.

E15 sums up this tension particularly well:

‘I think there’s a difference between having a degree and feeling professionally ready. The degree is important, but you can finish university without knowing how to communicate with an employer, how to manage a conflict or how to fit into a team.’ (E15, ENCG)

This distinction between a degree and professional readiness aligns with a conception of employability that does not reduce it to the mere possession of a qualification. Employability also involves the ability to mobilise various resources during periods of transition and when seeking employment.

The findings are also consistent with recent research showing that initiatives promoting practical experience play a

significant role in developing students’ employability. A systematic review published in 2025 concluded, in particular, that initiatives incorporating practical experience have a particularly positive impact on graduates’ employability.

4.3. Education perceived as more theoretical than practical

The distinction between education and vocational preparation becomes clearer when participants discuss the relationship between theory and practice.

E12 states:

‘I feel we have a lot of theory. Sometimes I wonder how certain knowledge will actually be useful to me in my future job. I would have liked to have had more practical scenarios.’ (E12, ENCG)

E14 draws a particularly significant distinction between academic and professional situations:

“In lectures, we’re often given a problem with an expected answer. At work, sometimes nobody gives you the answer. You have to think it through and come up with something.” (E14, FLSH)

This contrast between academic and professional problems reveals a different conception of learning. In the former case, the student operates in a relatively structured environment, where the instructions and the expected answer are generally defined. In the latter, they anticipate more open-ended situations, characterised by uncertainty, the need to take the initiative and the absence of a predetermined solution.

The sense of professional preparedness would thus depend not only on what the student knows, but also on their ability to act when the parameters of the situation are not entirely defined.

From this perspective, practical experience should not be reduced to a simple work placement. Participants also mention group work, presentations, simulations, projects and voluntary activities. They therefore appear to be calling for an increase in experiential learning opportunities.

This observation is consistent with the international literature on the development of employability, which highlights the role of learning experiences and environments that enable students to apply their knowledge in diverse contexts. (Abelha et al., 2020; Otermans et al., 2024).

4.4. The weakest skills: communicating, organising oneself and working with others

Analysis of the discussions reveals a convergence around several skills.

4.4.1. Oral communication and public speaking

Oral communication is one of the most frequently mentioned areas.

E3 explains: ‘Personally, I lack confidence most of all when I have to speak in front of a group of people. At university, we give presentations, but that isn’t always enough to learn how to speak in public properly.’ (E3, FLSH)

This account highlights two elements: a personal difficulty linked to self-confidence and a perception of the limitations of certain opportunities for practice.

Speaking in public is presented here as a skill that is not acquired solely through knowledge of the rules of communication. It requires repetition, exposure to a variety of situations and feedback. Communication skills are therefore seen as skills that are gradually developed through practice.

4.4.2. Self-confidence and stress management

Self-confidence and stress management are also mentioned as areas requiring improvement.

E5 says: “I’d like to develop my stress management skills, professional communication skills and, above all, how to present myself in an interview. We aren’t always told how to showcase our skills.” (E5, ENCG)

The difficulty, therefore, does not lie solely in the ability to answer a technical question. It also concerns the way in which the student presents themselves, talks about themselves and highlights their skills.

This aspect ties in directly with the Self-Efficacy Theory of Cognitive-Social Behaviour (SCCT). In this theory, a sense of self-efficacy plays a central role in how an individual views their actions, goals and chances of success (Lent et al., 1994). The feeling of not knowing how to present oneself or showcase one’s skills can thus be interpreted as a weakness in one’s perception of their ability to handle certain professional situations.

4.4.3. Organisation and time management

Students also mention organisational skills.

E9 explains: ‘Above all, I need to improve my organisation. When you have several tasks and several deadlines, you need to know how to manage your time and your priorities. These are things that aren’t really taught as subjects.’ (E9, EST)

This comment shows that certain skills are difficult to link to a specific academic discipline. Time and priority management are developed more through situations in which students have to organise their work, meet deadlines and prioritise between several tasks.

4.4.4. Teamwork and leadership

Teamwork also emerges as a skill that some participants wish to develop further.

E8 states: “For me, teamwork is something we need to learn more about. Doing group work at university and working with a team in a company aren’t exactly the same thing.” (E8, EST)

This distinction is important: simply taking part in a university group project does not automatically equate to the ability to work within a professional organisation.

E13 adds another dimension: “I think what I lack most of all is leadership. When I work in a group, I sometimes prefer to follow others rather than take the initiative. I think we should be put in more situations where we have to take on responsibilities.” (E13, EST)

The skill sought is therefore not merely cooperation. It also concerns taking the initiative and the ability to take on responsibility.

4.4.5. Problem-solving and autonomy

E14’s account highlights the ability to solve problems in situations where the solution is not provided.

This skill lies at the intersection of soft skills and cognitive skills. Students do not always make a strict distinction between the two dimensions. Rather, they seem to be seeking an overall ability to analyse a situation, make a decision, propose a solution and take action. Problem-solving thus appears to be a skill particularly relevant to the transition into the world of work, where the situations encountered do not necessarily correspond to exercises already learnt.

5. Opportunities for practical application deemed insufficient

5.1. Knowledge of soft skills is not enough to acquire them

A key finding emerges across all groups: students state that they recognise the importance of soft skills, but consider that this awareness alone is not sufficient for their development.

The distinction between knowing that a skill is important and actually being able to apply it is a recurring theme in the discussions. Participants therefore highlight the need for more group work, simulations, presentations, projects, voluntary activities and work placements.

One of the comments gathered sums up this view: ‘We know we need to be able to communicate, work in a team and speak in public, but we also need opportunities to practise.’ This remark highlights a common thread running through the discussions: practice is seen as a prerequisite for developing soft skills.

This view is consistent with research highlighting the value of practical experience in developing employability. Studies on experiential learning show, in particular, that situations enabling students to apply their skills can strengthen their perception of their own employability.

5.2. Work placements: a sought-after but hard-to-access experience

Work placements occupy a special place in the discussions. Students recognise their importance, but at the same time mention difficulties in gaining access to host organisations. This difficulty is also evident in comments regarding a lack of contacts and guidance.

‘We know how important work placements are, but we don’t necessarily know how to find a company or who to approach.’ This situation creates a kind of paradox. Work placements are seen as a means of developing skills and discovering the world of work, but gaining access to this experience already requires certain abilities in terms of guidance, research and networking.

Work experience thus becomes both a necessary resource and one that is difficult to access. This aspect is significant for our research question, as it shows that the sense of preparedness does not depend solely on the content of the course. It also depends on the opportunities offered to students to engage with professional environments.

6. Guidance, support and listening: a need that goes beyond the transfer of knowledge

Students also express a clear need for support.

‘We don’t always know who to turn to for guidance regarding our career plans.’

This difficulty relates not only to developing a career plan but also to knowing what resources are available. The need for support therefore appears to be a call for a link between the course and the student’s career plans.

Guidance does not seem to be perceived solely as the choice of a course of study. It also concerns the decisions that accompany the transition into the world of work: finding work placements, identifying opportunities, preparing for interviews, showcasing skills and understanding professional expectations.

The need to be listened to complements this aspect. Discussions have shown that students were particularly willing to talk about their experiences and difficulties. However, care must be taken not to turn this observation into a psychological generalisation. Rather, the finding can be interpreted as reflecting a need for a space to discuss issues relating to their educational pathway, skills and professional future.

This demand ties in with the contextual dimension of the SCCT: the resources available to students can either facilitate or limit their ability to turn their intentions into actions. Guidance and support can thus be viewed as contextual resources capable of supporting the development of their career path.

7. Significant variation in levels of soft skills

One of the most interesting findings of the study, however, lies in the diversity of the participants’ profiles.

It would be simplistic to regard the fifteen participants as a homogeneous group facing exactly the same difficulties. On the contrary, the discussions show that some students already possess a relatively satisfactory level in several skills.

Some participants describe themselves as organised, relatively confident or already at ease in certain communicative situations. For them, the need is not necessarily to acquire a skill from scratch, but rather to consolidate it through more practice, time and encouragement.

This diversity is also linked to previous experiences. Some students took part in extracurricular activities at secondary school. These activities gave them the opportunity to take on responsibilities, speak in front of a group, stick to timetables, work as part of a team or organise activities.

Other students, by contrast, have devoted their school years mainly to their studies and report having had very little experience of extracurricular activities. Their exposure to situations requiring public speaking, organisation, responsibility or leadership has therefore been more limited.

This difference shows that the development of soft skills does not necessarily begin at university. It may result from a range of experiences accumulated throughout one's academic and personal journey. The level observed in a student may thus be linked to several factors: previous experiences, extracurricular activities, opportunities for practice, social environment, academic background and individual characteristics.

However, care must be taken not to interpret this observation as a causal relationship. The qualitative data reveals a diversity of pathways and perceptions, but it does not allow for a statistical measurement of the effect of each of these factors.

This heterogeneity is nonetheless a significant finding. It means that students do not enter higher education with the same experiential capital. Some already possess communication and organisational skills developed through previous experiences; others encounter such situations at a later stage.

This observation can be linked to the SCCT, which attaches great importance to learning experiences in the development of self-efficacy beliefs. It also aligns with career construction theory, according to which individuals gradually develop coping resources based on their experiences and their relationship with their career path.

8. Discussion

8.1. From acquired knowledge to its professional application

Firstly, the results allow us to qualify an overly simplistic dichotomy between university education and the professional world. Students do not consider university education to be devoid of value. Several explicitly acknowledge that it provides them with knowledge and a disciplinary foundation. Their dissatisfaction relates instead to the difficulty of transforming these gains into resources that can be directly applied in professional situations.

This distinction can be interpreted through the lens of human capital theory. Educational investment produces knowledge and skills, but the professional value of these resources also depends on their ability to be applied in practice. The statement by E15 — that 'having a degree' does not automatically mean 'feeling professionally ready' — precisely reflects this tension.

From this perspective, soft skills should not be regarded as an alternative to subject-specific knowledge. Rather, they constitute complementary resources that enable students to draw upon, present, communicate and adapt their knowledge in professional contexts.

This interpretation is in line with recent literature on employability, which emphasises the complementary nature of subject-specific knowledge, generic skills, experience and career development. The CareerEDGE model is a particularly useful reference in this regard, as it integrates these different dimensions into a multidimensional conception of employability.

8.2. The decisive role of experience

The second key finding concerns the role of experience. Students are not simply asking for 'more soft skills courses' but rather for more situations in which they can practise these skills. This distinction is important.

A skill such as public speaking is not developed solely through knowledge of communication techniques. It requires speaking, experimenting, possibly failing, receiving feedback and trying again. The same applies to leadership, problem-solving and time management.

This aspect ties in with experiential approaches to employability. Recent research into university-based initiatives shows, in particular, that practical experiences are a key driver of employability development.

Within the body of research examined, work placements occupy a special position because they theoretically bring together several dimensions: discovering the professional environment, applying knowledge, communicating with professionals, working in a team, organisation and adaptability. However, access to work placements is precisely one of the obstacles mentioned by participants. The development of soft skills therefore depends in part on effective access to experiences that enable them to be practised.

8.3. Sense of self-efficacy: know-how and feeling capable

The findings can then be illuminated by Social Cognitive Career Theory. Several accounts point to a difference between possessing a skill and feeling sufficiently capable of applying it. The case of public speaking is particularly revealing. A student may have already given presentations and yet still feel a lack of confidence when she has to speak in front of a group.

This distinction lies at the heart of the issue of self-efficacy. In SCCT, beliefs about one's own abilities influence the way an individual perceives professional situations, goals and actions.

The need for encouragement mentioned by some students can thus be interpreted as a need to gradually build up this confidence. Successful experiences, feedback, repetition and exposure to professional situations can help transform a fragile skill into one that is more firmly mastered.

The SCCT also helps to explain why difficulties in accessing work placements, professional contacts and career guidance are not merely peripheral issues. They constitute contextual factors that can influence opportunities for learning and experimentation.

8.4. Professional adaptability as a cross-cutting skill

The third theory provides further insight. Students describe situations in which they will need to be able to adapt, solve problems without a pre-established answer, manage multiple tasks, work with different people or take the initiative. These expectations reflect a view of career entry as a transition requiring adaptive resources.

In career construction theory, adaptability is based in particular on concern for the future, control, curiosity and confidence. Savickas and Porfeli (2012) operationalised these dimensions in the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale.

The results can therefore be interpreted through these four dimensions:

- **Concern:** students reflect on their professional future and on what a recruiter will expect of them;
- **Control:** some people would like more autonomy, organisational freedom and the opportunity to take the initiative;
- **Curiosity:** work placements, networking events and practical experiences are sought after as ways of discovering the world of work;

- **Confidence:** several students identify self-confidence and the ability to speak in public as skills to be developed.

This analysis helps us understand that soft skills are not merely skills intended to 'appeal' to a recruiter. They also serve as resources enabling students to navigate an uncertain career transition.

Recent research confirms the relevance of the concept of adaptability in understanding students' preparedness and employability. A systematic review published in 2026 identifies, in particular, self-efficacy, contextual factors and career-related skills among the variables associated with students' adaptability.

9. An integrated interpretation of the results

Comparing the three theoretical frameworks enables an integrated interpretation of the results.

Human capital theory helps us understand the importance students attach to the knowledge and skills acquired during their studies.

SCCT helps to explain why these learning outcomes do not necessarily produce the same sense of preparedness in all students: experiences, self-confidence and contextual factors differ.

Finally, **Career Construction Theory** enables us to view professional preparedness as an evolving process in which students gradually develop adaptive resources.

These three perspectives converge on a conception of employability that cannot be reduced to the mere possession of a degree.

Some students arrive at university with a significant wealth of experience, particularly through extracurricular activities. Others need to develop these skills gradually. Some are already self-confident but wish to improve their organisational or communication skills; others identify more significant difficulties relating to public speaking, leadership or stress management.

The role of the university can therefore be seen not as that of an institution which should produce an identical graduate profile, but as that of an environment capable of multiplying opportunities for experience and development, in order to narrow the gaps between students.

10. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine, from the students' perspective, how university education meets their needs in terms of soft skills and contributes to their preparation for entering the labour market.

The results from the three focus groups firstly reveal a strong awareness of the importance of soft skills. Participants clearly link these skills to the demands of working life and consider that subject-specific knowledge, whilst essential, is not always sufficient to feel professionally prepared.

The main finding, however, concerns the perceived gap between acquiring knowledge and being able to apply it in real-life situations. Students describe their education as relatively theoretical and express a need for more practical exercises, simulations, projects, group work, work placements and contact with the professional world.

The skills considered to be weak are varied: oral communication, public speaking, self-confidence, stress management, organisation, time management, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, adaptability, professional communication and the ability to showcase one's skills.

The results also show that students do not form a homogeneous group. Their levels vary depending on previous experience, extracurricular activities, opportunities for practical experience and individual pathways. Some already possess a range of skills and wish above all to consolidate them; others feel a greater need for development.

Finally, the difficulties relating to access to work placements, a lack of professional contacts, guidance and support show that preparation for entering the labour market is not solely a matter of acquiring skills individually. It also depends on the availability of opportunities to put these skills into practice and reinforce them.

The first hypothesis is thus supported by the data: students do indeed associate soft skills with their professional preparation and express a need for development. The second hypothesis also receives qualitative support: students who have had practical experience and opportunities seem better able to identify their abilities, whilst those who have had fewer opportunities to gain experience express greater difficulties or uncertainties.

However, these results do not allow us to establish a causal or statistical relationship between university education and employability. Rather, they highlight students' perception of

a need to strengthen the link between knowledge, experience, cross-disciplinary skills and career support.

The aim, therefore, would not be to replace subject-specific knowledge with soft skills, but to strengthen the link between them. A university education designed to facilitate entry into the labour market could thus create more opportunities for students to apply their knowledge, take initiative, work with others, communicate, solve problems and gradually come to terms with the realities of the workplace.

Further research could explore this issue in greater depth using a larger sample and compare students' perceptions across different institutions, levels of study and professional experience. It would also be useful to cross-reference students' perspectives with those of lecturers, programme coordinators and recruiters in order to examine any discrepancies between the skills perceived as important by the various stakeholders.

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