

# Building up Undergraduate Skills – empirical evidence from a Portuguese University

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## **Abstract:**

*This paper presents preliminary results of the PSP Project currently undergoing at the Faculty/School of Economics and Management (FEG) of the Catholic University of Portugal (CUP). The PSP Project addresses the students' soft skills development within the context of HEI. Works related to contemporary Person-Environment Fit Theories (Chartrand, 1991; Rounds and Hesketh, 1994; Rounds and Tracey, 1990 in Swanson and Fouad, 1999) emphasise the correspondence between one's personal characteristics and labour context where individuals choose to work: congruence is relevant for both individuals and other constituents. The present study holds the concept of soft skills as the key concept to foster a common understanding between universities and employers concerning employability. Evans and her colleagues (2001) showed that there are different interrelated skills involved for a successful change in an individual's career organized into 5 clusters. Two main studies were conducted. Study one aimed to identify the Market-Valued Skills Profile of graduates from Economics and Business. Data collection followed two sequential stages: in the first, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR managers; in the second stage, data was collected by means of two focus groups which included former students. The data show that soft skills are crucial to economics and management graduates' employability and revealed the main skills valued by employers and former students. Study two aimed to assert how confident were the students regarding soft skills, at the early stage of their studies. Moreover, it seemed important to relate the skills' development to both individual characteristics and to life experiences, as critical aspects of developmental processes. A sample of 100 first-year students was surveyed using a self-report questionnaire with a 5-point Likert-type scale drawing on existing scales (Miles and Grummon, 2006; University of Salford, 2006). A second questionnaire, Portuguese translation, was also used to assess students' vocational development (Savickas, 2002; Ramos, Crespo, Gonçalves and Coimbra, 2002). Additional data was collected through open-ended questions specifically focusing on vocational experience (e.g. work experiences or working career). Results show that students have a very positive self-perception regarding their soft-skills development, even if they have reported limited extra-curricular activities. Research findings draw attention to the need for developing new practices of teaching and assessing students' progress, explicitly focused on: (1) the development of the soft skills most valued by employers and former students, and (2) the students' self-perception of skills development and related job expectations.*

## **Background and Context**

This paper presents preliminary results of the PSP (PIC) Project<sup>1</sup> currently underway at the Faculty/School of Economics and Management (FEG) of the Catholic University of Portugal (CUP). The CUP has a longstanding tradition of Management/Business Administration in Portugal, being one of the first universities to offer undergraduate training in this field of studies. As part of the Portuguese Higher Education Institutions (HEI), the CUP faces the challenges introduced by the *Bologna Agreement*, especially the reduction of courses' length from five years on average to three years. Although at CUP students are encouraged to proceed to postgraduate studies, it is possible that graduates now start applying for entry-level positions earlier than before. As a result, the quality of the training provided during the three years became an issue for both universities and employers.

The latter seemed concerned with the maturity of recent graduates as well as the sort of skills they develop in the university. The former are keen in assuring the employability of graduates in order to remain competitive, and for that they need to reassure employers. In the recent past, employers had already voiced criticism regarding the range of skills and competencies developed within the university context. In other words, they thought that a five-year long degree emphasised technical skills rather than soft skills. Indeed soft skills are increasingly relevant as a means of distinguishing between increasingly equal graduates (Brown and Hesketh, 2004).

Hence, the PSP Project addresses the students' soft skills development within the context of HEI thereby attempting to meet some of the employers' requirements. The first step to tackle this issue was the implementation of an Integrated System of Competencies Development (ISCD) at FEG. This system comprises two interrelated stages. The first regards Skills' Assessment and aims to promote students' awareness and self-appraisal of their skills. The second stage refers to the Skills' Development Strategy. The Skills' Development Strategy includes: (a) a Curricula Developmental Model which implies working closely with the lecturers in order to embed employability into the curricula; and (b) a Coaching Model for students

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<sup>1</sup> PIC stands for *Portfólio Individual de Competências*. A possible translation could be "Personal's Skills Portfolio" (PSP).

where tutors and other HEI staff will help students to define and implement their Individual Development Plan. Results obtained with the Skills Development Strategy are not included in the present paper<sup>2</sup>. The ISCD draws on career development perspectives. For example, Savickas *et al.* (2002:37) point out that “Individuals who displayed planful competence in developing their careers also displayed greater psychological competence in general”. Savickas *et al.* rationale rests upon the reinforcement of the relationship between students’ vocational maturity and their soft skills development. Hence, they conclude that “greater career maturity means (...) greater realization of one’s potential”.

### ***Theoretical background***

Works related to contemporary Person-Environment Fit Theories (e.g. Chartrand, 1991; Rounds and Hesketh, 1994; Rounds and Tracey, 1990 *in* Swanson and Fouad, 1999) emphasise the correspondence between one’s personal characteristics and labour contexts where individuals choose to work<sup>3</sup>. This correspondence relies on two basic assumptions: (i) subjects tend to search for congruent environments with their own *self*, (ii) there’s mutual interaction subject-environment and this same interaction may end up in more congruence (satisfaction, self-fulfilment) or less congruence (dissatisfaction, bad performance, job turnover) between personal characteristics and professional environment requirements, in which adjustment process is reciprocal (“jobs change people and people change jobs” – Holland, 1997 quoted *in* Swanson and Fouad, 1999). Additionally, Swanson and Fouad (1999) consider that the adequacy between students’ skills and their future working context will increase when students’ self-knowledge is more developed (“look around and look ahead” – Savickas, 1999), thus potentially contributing to higher levels of performance and satisfaction (Swanson and Fouad, 1999).

Hence, the present study holds the concept of soft skills as the key concept to foster a common understanding between universities and employers concerning employability. The relevance of soft skills has been stressed both by employers and graduates. Indeed, Portuguese researchers (e.g., Cabral-Cardoso *et al.*, 2006) have thoroughly analyzed perspectives stemming from each side, and asserted that both graduates and employers consider that HEIs need to boost soft skills development<sup>4</sup>. This suggests that new teaching and assessing practices are required, especially those concerned with the development and assessment of students’ soft skills. In other words, HEIs need to bring the soft skills into the curricula, and encourage students and lecturers as well as tutors to the continuous awareness and development of soft skills. In order to accomplish this goal, however, it is necessary to determine which competences are to be developed.

Evans and her colleagues (2001) showed that there are different interrelated skills that contribute to a successful change in an individual’s career, “involving self steering capacities, and integrated social cognitive and technological dimensions together with life-long learning” (CEDEFOP, s. d., cit in Evans, 2001:3). Such skills are organized into 5 clusters: (1) Methodological Skills; (2) Social Skills; (3) Skills related to Values and Attitudes; (4) Learning Skills; and (5) Technical Skills. Such skills are taken as “interlinked and interdependent of human actions” (CEDEFOP, s. d., cit in Evans, 2001:3). Therefore, this model implies “a holistic perspective of skills with growth, movement and future development” (Evans, 2001:3) and it was named after starfish as the Starfish Model (Evans, 2001).

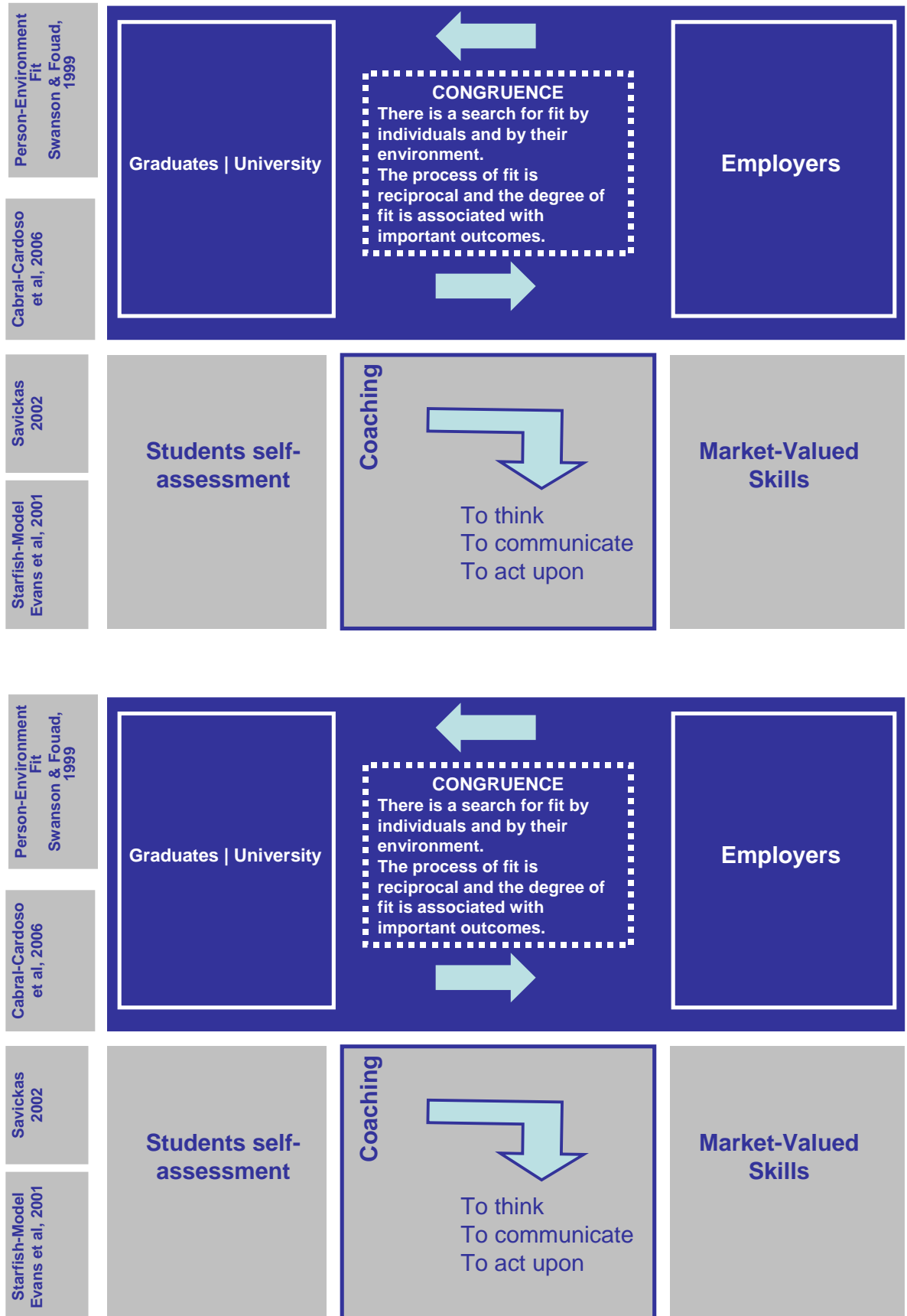
The following theoretical framework is presented to support the present research:

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<sup>2</sup> Findings obtained within the second part of the ISCD will be object of a specific paper.

<sup>3</sup> “The reciprocal nature of person-environment fit reflects a systems’ perspective whereby change in one element influences the other elements in the system to create and imbalance” (Swanson and Fouad, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Even if other contexts emerge as relevant for students’ employability and for their skills development, namely extracurricular activities and work experiences



The PSP Project is grounded on two empirical studies, which were conducted in FEG, during 2006/7.

## Study 1

### *Purpose and Method*

The first study aimed at identifying the Market-Valued Skills Profile of Economics and Business's Graduates. Data was collected throughout focus groups and interviews conducted with firm representatives and alumni, namely, Human Resources Managers (HRM) and graduates from CUP currently holding managerial positions, both junior and senior. Hence, the data collection followed two sequential stages. In the first stage, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR managers from SMEs and large-sized Portuguese firms in order to identify firm HRM recruitment and selection strategies and policies regarding Economics and Business Studies graduates (Table 1).

*Table 1: Individual Interviewees with Human Resources Managers*

<b>Participants HRM</b>	<b>Work organization</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>
(1) Ms. C	Call Me Corporation (Telecommunications)	32	Female
(2) PB	Happy Drinking (Beverage)	48	Male
(3) Ms. Y	Be Safe (Insurance)	25	Female
(4) Ms. S	Choose a destiny, we will take you there (Road Construction)	44	Female
(5) Mr. Soc	Posh Car (Distribution)	45	Male
(6) Mr. L	Posh Car (Distribution)	53	Male

The interviews were followed by two focus groups, the first included Business alumni (Table 2), and the second their Economics counterparts (Table 3). Both focus groups covered different graduation years to reflect different levels of seniority. The following tables show the composition of focus groups according to gender, graduation year, seniority and work organisation.

*Table 2: Participants in Focus Group 1 (Management alumni)*

<b>Participant code   Work organisations</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Graduation year</b>	
(1) Mr. O	Banking	Director of Corporate Marketing	34	Male	1996
(2) Mr. E	Non-profitable organization HEI Accountancy firm	Consultant, Lecturer, Firm owner	43	Male	1992
(3) Mr. Sp	Consultancy	RH Consultant	32	Male	1999
(4) Ms. R	Import	RH Director	31	Female	2000
(5) Mr. B	Professional Tools for Construction	Financial Department Director	36	Male	1994
(6) Mr. BS	Construction Materials	Board of Directors	38	Male	1993
(7) Mr. R	Engineering and Construction	Financial Department Director	33	Male	1997
(8) Mr. SM	Banking	Financial Department	34	Male	1996
(9) Mr I	Banking	Vice-President	33	Male	1997

*Table 3: Participants in Focus Group 2 (Economics alumni)*

Participant code   Work organisations		Position	Age	Gender	Graduation year
(1) Mr Sy	Auditing	Financial Director	30	Male	2002
(2) Ms. M	Banking	Assistant	29	Female	2001
(3) Mr. All	Multinational Manufacturer household cleaning	Manager	29	Male	2001
(4) Ms Al	Distribution	Manager	29	Female	2001
(5) Mr T	Telecommunications	Analyst	29	Male	2001
(6) Mr W	Consultancy	Consultant	29	Male	2003
(7) Mr. H	Health Care	Manager	27	Male	2003
(8) Mr Y	Consultancy and Auditing	Consultant	30	Male	2001

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Finally, their content was analysed using QSR NVivo.

### ***Results and Discussion***

Although interviewees' accounts were similar regarding key skills that graduates should possess at the beginning of their career, data analysis was carried out into two separate parts. First, the contribution of individual HRM interviews was analysed to produce a map of the Market-Valued Skills. Secondly, the perception of alumni regarding their skills development when they graduate was also equated. The skills identified among HRM can be split both in technical (operating) and in soft skills, though results show that soft skills significantly contribute to promoting the employability of economics and management graduates. Technical Skills were not further considered since they are at the core of the formal curricula, and therefore beyond the goals of the PSP Project. **Ms. S**, a HR manager, explained that technical skills were not part of the debate since:

“well...the technical skills are not an issue”. She further justified her views saying that *for us it is more important the school where the graduates are coming from, and then we assume that students from a particular school with an average grade of 14<sup>5</sup> will have a good level of technical skills, which will be enough to perform the job at that level, anyway”.*

In fact, four out of five interviewees referred the existence in their firms of a key skills framework that employees were required to master, e.g., team work, creativity, professionalism. The skills identified are behavioural/ soft skills. As **Ms C**, 32 years old, HRM at *Call me Corporation*, pointed out, “soft skills are really important when selecting a candidate for a job”. This is consistent with the view of **PB**, 48 years old, HRM at *Happy Drinking*, who discriminated the six skills his firm was looking for in recent graduates: “clients and consumers orientation, respect for the individual, team work, responsible citizenship, integrity and ethics”...**Ms SM**, 44 years old HRM at *Choose a destiny, we will take you there*, also asserted that:

*“our skills dictionary comprises four key skills: team work, loyalty and integrity, client orientation and creativity, they are behavioural skills, it is very important for us and utmost that our employees will identify and are involved with the organization, that they fit well, that they are able to work in teams, that they work together and share information”.*

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

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

<sup>5</sup> On a scale from 0 to 20. It corresponds to a 70% in the UK marking system.

**(1) Methodological Skills** (Problem-Solving; Systemic Thinking; Personal Management; Creativity): **Ms. C** stressed the relevance of systemic thinking:

*“the awareness of the individuals in daily working life is very important and it is not very common. You know it is important to be able to read the political and economical context and transpose it to the firm, otherwise we are missing opportunities”.*

**(2) Social Skills** (Communication, Assertiveness; Interpersonal Relationship; Teamwork). As **Ms. C** stated:

*“social intelligence above all... in our days we have individuals capable to perform a job, technically speaking, but when they arrive to an organization they clash internally and even with the clients... “. Furthermore, she stressed that “some relevant skills are firstly, networking, and secondly team work and managing teams, leading and motivate individuals”, and added the need to “try to understand the other”...*

Social skills are also highly valued by **PB** who thought:

*“team work is crucial for working in organizations ...cooperative work is an ability that students need to develop... “stars” are less and less relevant, we do not need outstanding individuals working alone, we need ordinary people working very well in group”... “we value the attitude of our collaborators”...*

**(3) Skills related to Values and Attitudes** (Persistence; Responsibility; Integrity and Ethics) are also recurrent in the interviews with employers. To illustrate them, **PB** called the attention to the employees’ attitudes, saying that “we need combative individuals...someone that it is able to grab a task and to carry it out to the end”. He then added that:

*“creativity it is also very important, (it is up to graduates with high potential to develop exceptional things, a project, to take the risk ... this is something that the university is not encouraging [capable of giving them]”.*

Integrity and Ethics was the most valued of skills related to values and attitudes, being spontaneously mentioned by four out of the five interviewees.

**(4) Learning Skills** (Motivation to learn; Openness to Change; Pursuit of Quality and Excellence; Knowledge Management). According to **Ms. C**, individuals have “to face challenges, to search for new opportunities”...Emphasising employees’ entrepreneurship, she also added that in her firm...” there is an important assumption (...), it is the investment in continuing training”. Hence, she stressed the need...”to be open minded, to adapt easily, to understand the context where you are”. **PB** corroborated the importance of learning skills: “it is very important that graduates to demonstrate their willingness to learn, you know, the so called intellectual humility, to have the drive to learn more”.

In broad terms, the results found among alumni are similar to those of the HRM interviewees regarding the type of skills that a business and economics graduate should have. Once again the emphasis is upon the soft skills rather than technical skills. As the moderator of the focus group suggest towards the end of the meeting: “I think that we covered quite well the issues related to soft skills but little was said regarding the technical skills.” In fact, the relevance of teamwork, the communication effectiveness, the time and pressure management, the ability to adapt to change and learning as a continuing process were some of the topics discussed. The data was also categorised drawing on the Starfish Model (Evans, 2001), using the four soft skill clusters as the main theoretical categories. To make it brief only few examples will be provided:

Cluster	Paradigmatic Anecdotal evidence
<b>Methodological Skills</b> (Problem-Solving; Systemic Thinking; Personal Management; Creativity)	<b>“we developed the ability to adapt, we get the tols to understand what is around us”</b> Ms. R, 31 years old HRM at Import
<b>Social Skills</b> (Communication, Assertiveness; Interpersonal Relationship; Teamwork)	<b>“continous assessment was important to promote the development of teamwork or comunication skills”</b> Mr B, 36 years old Financial Department Director at a Professional Tools for Construction <b>“When I left University I had a clear impression that I knew</b>

	<b>less that I need but more than I thought in terms of communicating with people, understand how to reach to a decision making”</b> Mr B, 36 years old Financial Department Director at a Professional Tools for Construction
<b>Skills related to Values and Attitudes</b> (Persistence; Responsibility; Integrity and Ethics)	<b>“the university can help students to develop a certain work ethics”</b> Mr T, 29 years old, Telecommunications Analyst.
<b>Learning Skills</b> (Motivation to learn; Openness to Change; Pursuit of Quality and Excellence; Knowledge Management)	<b>“I see my degree as my google tool, it is a source of information... what is relevant is that I do know what information I need to look for and where to go”</b> Mr. O, 34 years old Director of Corporate Marketing at a Bank

## Study 2

### *Purpose and Method*

Further research was warranted to assess the resulting Market-Valued Skills Profile amongst students, leading to the second study. Its goal was to assert how confident were the students regarding such skills, at the early stage of their studies. Moreover, it seemed important to relate the skills' development to both individual characteristics and to life experiences, as critical aspects of developmental processes. Hence, a sample of 100 first-year students (66 males and 34 females) was surveyed (see Table 4). The questionnaire aimed to assess the Market-Valued Skills Profile and drew on, existing self-reports (Miles and Grummon, 2006; University of Salford, 2006). To ensure that all the dimensions enlisted in the Market-Value Skills Profile were assessed, a few other items were added. This resulted in 155 items questionnaire, and 5-point Likert-type scale was used. To test this instrument, internal consistency was analysed, using Cronbach's alpha, which held to satisfactory values (0.97). A second questionnaire was also used to assess students' vocational development (Student Career Concerns Inventory, Savickas, 2002), and more specifically the Portuguese translation (Ramos, Crespo, Gonçalves and Coimbra, 2002). Additional data was collected through open-ended questions focusing on vocational experience (e.g. work experiences or working career). Thus, students were asked questions regarding their extra-curricular experiences, namely (1) work experiences, (2) volunteer work experiences, (3) civic engagement, (4) complementary training, (5) geographic mobility experiences and (6) other extra-curricular experiences, and were required to describe them briefly. In each case, data was codified according to the length of the experience (a minimum of 6 months period to be considered a significant experience) and to the diversity of the reported activities, in a scale ranging from 1 to 4, that is to say that higher scores were given to longer and more diversified experiences.

*Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for social economic composition of study 2 participants*

	f	min	max	mode	mean	St. deviation
Age		17	36	18 (54%)	18.92	2.18
Gender						
▪ Male	66					
▪ Female	34					
Degree						
▪ Economics	35					
▪ Management	65					
Marital Status						
▪ Single	99					
▪ Married	1					
Household						
▪ Living with family	74,7					
▪ Living with friends	10					
▪ Living alone	10					
Moving away to study						
▪ Yes	23					
▪ No	68					
▪ Missing values	9					

Mother's qualification				6	5.05	1.44
▪ < Compulsory education	9					
▪ Secondary education	26					
▪ Higher education	52					
▪ > Higher education	6					
▪ Missing values	7					
Father's qualification				6	5.09	1.50
▪ < Compulsory education	11					
▪ Secondary education	22					
▪ Higher education	53					
▪ > Higher education	8					
▪ Missing values	6					

## Results and Discussion

### *Students' self-perception regarding their soft-skills development*

Results show that students have a very positive self-perception regarding their soft-skills development (Table 5). The highest score was obtained for *Social Skills* (M=4.09, STD=0.56). *Skills related to Values and Attitudes* and *Methodological Skills* had analogous scores (m = 3.76, sd = 0.61 and m = 3.78, sd = 0.66, respectively), while *Learning Skills* (M=3.57, STD=0.58) obtained the lowest scores. Although this is still a positive result, it is nonetheless inconsistent with that obtained by Cabral-Cardoso (2006), since in his study, learning skills stand out as the skill individuals perceive as more developed. However, the different results might result from the different methodology used in both studies. This is to say that Cabral-Cardoso used a single item questionnaire for each individual competence (2006: 57). In the present study, the cluster *Learning Skills* resulted from the average score of five different but interrelated skills: Improving one's own Learning, Adapting to Change, Sense of Quality, Lifelong Learning and Information Processing. This choice drew on Evans' (2001) holistic approach that deems skills as "interlinked and interdependent" (2001:3). However, if we look at each of the skills listed individually, the higher score in Cabral-Cardoso's (2006) research is similar to the score obtained for Improving Own Learning in this study, which also stands out as one of the highest scores (m = 4.11, sd = 0.54).

Table 5: Students' Self-Perceptions regarding their Skills Development

Clusters and Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation	Clusters and Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>Social Skills</i>	4.09	0.56	<i>Skills related to Values and Attitudes</i>	3.76	0.61
▪ Written Communication	4,15	0,70	▪ Integrity and Ethics	4,15	0,59
▪ Oral Communication	4,02	0,53	▪ Persistence	3,79	0,69
▪ Interpersonal Relationship	4,11	0,48	▪ Responsibility	3,40	0,69
▪ Teamwork	4,09	0,51	<i>Learning Skills</i>	3.57	0.58
<i>Methodological Skills</i>	3.78	0.66	▪ Improving Own Learning	4.11	0.54
▪ Personal Management	4,09	0,67	▪ Adapting to Change	3.20	0.59
▪ Problem-Solving	3,94	0,54	▪ Sense of Quality	3.57	0.57
▪ Creativity	4,05	0,52	▪ Lifelong Learning	3.55	0.53
▪ Systemic Thinking	3,33	0,62	▪ Information Processing	3.41	0.68

### *Students' investment in extra-curricular activities and the inter-relation to career and skills development*

Students reported limited extra-curricular activities (see Table 6). One possible explanation for this result may rest upon students' social economic condition. Most of our students are young (m = 18.92, sd = 2.18; 99% of them are less than 24 years old), and, for the most part, had middle and upper class origin. They were also in the university for the first time and were full-time students. The absence of extra-curricular activities might relate to family's strategies although it might also derive from the heavy academic schedule and curricula rigidity existing in the university. That is, despite recent changes, students are still expected to attend lectures



which last for 30 hours a week, in addition to having to spend time with studying and researching, individually or working in teams. If this reasoning proves right, then it also helps understand the low scores obtained with students' reported work-experience ( $m = 2.37$ ,  $sd = 1.25$ ), volunteer-work ( $m = 1.64$ ,  $sd = 1.01$ ), and civic engagement ( $m = 2.35$ ,  $sd = 1.45$ )<sup>6</sup>. Indeed these results suggest a discrepancy between students' personal investments and those currently valued by employers (Oliveira and Sottomayor, 2006; Guimarães, 2006). In fact, the importance of students' personal investments was highlighted by **Miss Y**, 25 years old HRM at *Be Safe* from study 1, who thought that "extracurricular activities ... it is like a puzzle...the voluntary work, the work developed within the students union... all of these aspects of one individual life are summing up".

Table 6: Students' Extra-Curricular Experiences

Extra-Curricular Experiences	Mean	Std. Deviation
Work-experience	2,37	1,25
Volunteer-work	1,64	1,01
Civic engagement	2,35	1,45
Mobility experiences	1,38	0,79
Complementary training	3,19	1,33
Other extra-curricular experiences	3,78	1,046

Additionally, students' investments on mobility experiences were rare ( $m = 1.38$ ,  $sd = 0.79$ ). In fact, most of CUP students are still leaving at home: only 23 percent of respondents had to move to a different city to study (see Table 4). On the other hand, most of the surveyed students perceived an international career as an attractive option. If students' employability expectations are to be met, specific skills should be built up along with the academic experience. For example, **Mr I**, 33 years old currently pursuing a career in banking abroad, told that his Erasmus experience encouraged him to apply to such a position: "when applying to an international position it is very important demonstrate in the CV that one is pursuing that goal [working abroad] for quite sometime, I am sure that my Erasmus experience contributed positively to my application" (Study 1, Focus Group 1, Participant 9). **Ms. Y** also stated that "those who went on an Erasmus experience had to face and to overcome some barriers, they do not have the mother or the father to help them out (...) if they needed money they had to try to find a way to get it...", and concluded that "moving out from home will contribute to [develop an] individual's autonomy" (Study 1, 25 years old HRM at *Be Safe*). Hence, mobility experiences (such as Erasmus) in particular, alongside other extra-curricular experiences, emerge as employability promoters (Guimarães 2006) and actually, they have been strongly encouraged at CUP for some time.

The literature discusses the role of life experiences in individuals' career development, as for example, that of leisure activities (Munson and Savickas, 2002). However, the added-value of life experiences depends upon its length and diversity (Coimbra, 1991). Therefore, individuals with higher scores on extra-curricular activities, that is, with longer and more varied experiences, are expected to show higher scores on career development. However, in this study the data did not support such association (see Table 7). Correlations between career development as measured by the Student Career Concerns Inventory (Savickas, 2002; Ramos, Crespo, Gonçalves and Coimbra, 2002) and each individual extra-curricular activity are non-significant (see Table 7). There are several reasons that might shed light on such results. First, the timing of the survey: the initial self-assessment took place at the beginning of the academic year. Thus, first-year students lacked the opportunity to accomplish previous significant investments lined up with their career options, if they had had considered them at all. In some cases, students are the children of SME entrepreneurs and the degree becomes instrumental, possibly, as they are destined to work in the family business. In other words, being shielded

<sup>6</sup> The fact that CUP is a private university and charges high tuition fees is likely to influence family strategies, concentrating students' investments in academic related activities.

from competition in the labour market, they may lack the motivation to engage in extra-curricular activities, at least at the initial stage of the academic career at the university.

Table 7: The association of Students' investment in extra-curricular activities to career development

Extra-Curricular Experiences	Career Development	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
work-experience	-0.09	0.25
volunteer-work	0.09	0.28
civic participation	0.05	0.54
mobility experiences	0.10	0.22
complementary training	0.15	0.05
other extra-curricular experiences	0.04	0.63

In turn, Munson and Savickas (2002) suggest that individuals with higher scores on extra-curricular activities are also expected to show higher scores on skills development. In the same vein, Cabral-Cardoso (2006) compared the contribution of the university with other training experiences (such as continuing education/training and work experience) and found that the latter play a more important role than the former in the development of soft skills. The study results show that although students reported limited extra-curricular activities, their self-perception regarding soft-skills development was generally very positive, as already mentioned (see Table 9). This divergence suggests that students do not associate skills development to work/other life experience. In fact, the data show a lack of association between both variables: the majority of the correlations between skills and extra-curricular activities are non-significant yet again. Those results seem to suggest that students might hold unrealistic self-perception of their skills development. In fact, the research data show that they fail to produce evidence to support the confidence displayed. This hypothesis is supported by anecdotal data from Study 1. In the individual interviews, **Ms. SM**, 44 years old HRM at *Choose a destiny, we will take you there* said "the school plays a role in managing students expectations regarding the labour market. How can they possibly think that a position as a Director is suitable for a fresh graduate?". This hypothesis is also strengthened by Cabral-Cardoso's (2006) study which draws attention to the gap between graduates self-assessment and firms' perceptions of graduates' proficiency on the same soft skills. If this hypothesis proves to be right, then there is a need to adjust students' self-appraisal to students' actual skills' mastery. The PSP Project gains relevance in this context, especially through the aforementioned Skills Development Strategy.

Data provided by Study 2 was also equated with the relationship of skills' development to students' career development (see Table 8). Although the correlation scores are not strong, ranging from low to moderate, significant positive correlations emerged between career development and the majority of self-reported soft skills. The higher correlation values were observed for Integrity and Ethics ( $r=0.39, p=0,00$ ), Teamwork ( $r=0,38, p=0,00$ ) and Interpersonal Relationship ( $r=0,36, p=0,00$ ). These results are consistent with other studies. Savickas, Briddick and Watkins (2002:24), although using different instruments, also found "that more mature attitudes toward planning and exploration related to an adjustment style characterized by extroversion in interpersonal relationships and by a positive orientation to social norms". Moreover, they concluded "greater career maturity means (...) greater realization of one's potential". Savickas and his colleagues' assertion reinforce the interpretation of the relationship between students' vocational maturity and students' soft skills development in this study.

Table 8: Students' Market-Valued Skills Profile and their vocational development

Clusters and Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation	Career Development	
			<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Social Skills</i>	4.09	0.56		
- Written Communication	4,15	0,70	<b>0,24</b>	<b>0,00</b>
- Oral Communication	4,02	0,53	<b>0,31</b>	<b>0,00</b>
- Interpersonal Relationship	4,11	0,48	<b>0,36</b>	<b>0,00</b>
- Teamwork	4,09	0,51	<b>0,38</b>	<b>0,00</b>
<i>Skills related to Values and Attitudes</i>	3.76	0.61		
- Integrity and Ethics	4,15	0,59	<b>0,39</b>	<b>0,00</b>

- Persistence	3,79	0,69	0,10	0,20
- Responsibility	3,40	0,69	<b>0,23</b>	<b>0,00</b>
<i>Methodological Skills</i>	3.78	0.66		
- Personal Management	4,09	0,67	<b>0,22</b>	<b>0,01</b>
- Problem-Solving	3,94	0,54	<b>0,33</b>	<b>0,00</b>
- Creativity	4,05	0,52	<b>0,34</b>	<b>0,00</b>
- Systemic Thinking	3,33	0,62	<b>0,29</b>	<b>0,00</b>
<i>Learning Skills</i>	3.57	0.58		
- Improving Own Learning	4.11	0.54	<b>0,35</b>	<b>0,00</b>
- Adapting to Change	3.20	0.59	0,13	0,10
- Sense of Quality	3.57	0.57	<b>0,23</b>	<b>0,00</b>
- Lifelong Learning	3.55	0.53	0,13	0,10
- Information Processing	3.41	0.68	<b>0,16</b>	<b>0,04</b>

Table 9: Students' Market-Valued Skills Profile and their vocational experiences

Clusters and Skills	Work-Experience		Volunteer-Work		Civic Participation		Mobility Experience		Complementary Training		Other Extra-Curricular Experiences	
	r	p	r	P	r	p	r	p	r	p	r	P
<i>Social Skills</i>												
▪ Written Communication	-0.09	0.23	-0.01	0.85	0.03	0.75	-0.10	0.22	0.05	0.56	-0.12	0.13
▪ Oral Communication	0.02	0.81	0.12	0.12	<b>0.20</b>	<b>0.01</b>	-0.01	0.95	0.09	0.26	0.01	0.88
▪ Interpersonal Relationship	0.00	0.97	0.16	0.04	0.14	0.08	-0.08	0.34	0.05	0.52	-0.03	0.70
▪ Teamwork	0.05	0.50	0.17	0.03	0.18	0.02	-0.09	0.23	0.08	0.29	-0.01	0.89
<i>Values and Attitudes</i>												
▪ Integrity and Ethics	0.03	0.72	<b>0.21</b>	<b>0.01</b>	0.10	0.19	-0.12	0.12	0.05	0.49	0.07	0.37
▪ Persistence	0.01	0.85	0.16	0.04	0.13	0.10	-0.07	0.41	0.16	0.04	0.05	0.49
▪ Responsibility	0.06	0.48	0.12	0.14	0.12	0.14	-0.03	0.67	<b>0.23</b>	<b>0.00</b>	0.01	0.93
<i>Methodological Skills</i>												
▪ Personal Management	-0.17	0.02	-0.03	0.74	0.10	0.20	-0.05	0.57	<b>0.24</b>	<b>0.00</b>	0.00	0.99
▪ Problem-Solving	-0.08	0.29	-0.04	0.60	0.09	0.25	0.01	0.94	<b>0.19</b>	<b>0.01</b>	0.06	0.46
▪ Creativity	0.02	0.82	<b>0.26</b>	<b>0.00</b>	0.18	0.02	-0.07	0.37	0.09	0.24	0.08	0.30
▪ Systemic Thinking	0.07	0.37	<b>0.25</b>	<b>0.00</b>	0.17	0.03	0.06	0.46	0.15	0.05	0.04	0.63
<i>Learning Skills</i>												
▪ Improving Own Learning	-0.04	0.57	0.08	0.29	0.17	0.03	-0.02	0.77	0.15	0.06	0.00	0.97
▪ Adapting to Change	<b>0.25</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.20</b>	<b>0.01</b>	<b>0.20</b>	<b>0.01</b>	0.16	0.04	0.00	1.00	0.01	0.91
▪ Sense of Quality	0.05	0.49	<b>0.21</b>	<b>0.01</b>	0.16	0.04	0.01	0.93	<b>0.19</b>	<b>0.01</b>	0.07	0.39
▪ Lifelong Learning	<b>0.25</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.20</b>	<b>0.01</b>	<b>0.20</b>	<b>0.01</b>	0.16	0.04	0.00	1.00	0.01	0.91
▪ Information Processing	0.01	0.91	0.09	0.24	0.11	0.17	-0.07	0.40	0.09	0.24	0.03	0.71

## Conclusion

Research findings in Study 1 demonstrate the need to implement new practices of teaching and assessing students' progress focusing on the development of soft skills. More specifically, the results corroborate the importance for High Education Institutions (HEI) to establish integrated teaching and assessment tools in order to keep students and lectures/tutors focused on the continuous awareness and development of soft skills. Furthermore, other contexts emerge in Study 1 as relevant for students' employability, leading to the development of equally valued skills, namely, extracurricular activities and work experiences. Moreover, Study 2 stressed clearly shows that CUP needs to promote students' awareness of the importance of non-academic experiences in order to support their positive self-expectations. In addition, the results also indicate that there are other useful sources of skills' evaluation, such as feedback from peers, lecturers and other stakeholders. The cooperation between universities and firms was pointed out as a positive initiative that should be encourage. Hence, ISCD might benefit from the active cooperation of professional managers who could contribute to the building up of the Skills Profile of economics and management graduates (Study 1). Their contribution might also be crucial at the stage of skills appraisal, thereby closing the gap between firms and HEI. Besides, this research also recommends that the curricula need to integrate, as much as possible, the suggestions provided by employers and graduates. The gap between students work expectations and

employers requirements may also be levelled if HEI provide students with systematic and structured contacts with graduates with significant work experience who could act as mentors, as part of the process of learning. Finally, and in order maintain students, lecturers and tutors focused on the need to develop soft skills as a major advantage in the labour market, it seems crucial to develop an integrating teaching and assessment tool – a students' skills audit - created to monitor students' progress on the development of soft skills during their stay in the university.

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