

The Transferable Skills Development Programme of a Portuguese Economics and Management Faculty: The Perceptions of Graduate Students

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Abstract The Bologna Declaration imposed significant changes in European higher education, placing emphasis on teaching methods that promote students' active learning and the development of skills, including both the skills that are specific to the academic qualification area and the ones that became known as *transferable skills*. The latter have been considered to be fundamental to the promotion of graduate employability. This chapter presents the specific case of the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* of a Portuguese public university and analyses the perceptions of 21 graduate students, in the area of Economics and Management, regarding its relevance and contribution to the development of transferable skills. Through the completion of qualitative questionnaires and the interaction established within three focus groups, the respondents acknowledged the innovative profile of the programme in the Portuguese university context and its contribution to the development of transferable competencies, which they believed to be especially relevant to their future job performance. The graduate students involved considered that the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* should continue to reinforce its commitment to activities and contents which were markedly more practical.

1 Introduction

Significant changes in the labour market, such as the failure of the Taylorist/Fordist model, the globalization of the economy, as well as the emergence of the so-called knowledge-based economies, dictated the higher value attributed to new qualifications and skills in the workplace. During this process, the management of people has moved away from a focus on function and has centred on the individual

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himself, on his flexibility and capacity to adapt to change [1]. Literature suggests that it is no longer sufficient for a worker to be able to perform specialized technical functions; it is essential that he is also capable of demonstrating a wide range of skills which are required in the most diverse professional contexts, i.e. transferable skills [2–7].

Above all, the issues related to graduate employability that have dominated concerns in contemporary European higher education [4, 8–13] highlighted the relevance of including competencies in the curricula, which are expected to promote the new graduate's access to and success in the job market. The Bologna Declaration [14] has established a turning point in these debates, demanding that European universities adopt a new teaching-learning paradigm. This favours active student-centred learning processes and is grounded on the development of skills for each area of knowledge, both technical and scientific, as well as transferable skills.

Various European universities have sought to respond to these challenges through the promotion of a broader spectrum of education. This is centred on activities that foster the skills and attitudes which are valued and required by the employers [15–18], thus contributing to complement students' education and training and positively distinguishing graduates in the labour market. Some examples of universities that have incorporated programmes with these objectives are the Universities of Cambridge¹ and Edinburgh² (United Kingdom), the University of Freiburg³ (Germany), the University of Limerick⁴ (Ireland), the University of Utrecht⁵ (Holland), and the University of Zurich⁶ (Switzerland). In Portugal, one can highlight the Nova School of Business and Economics,⁷ the ISCTE,⁸ as well as the University of Minho.⁹

This chapter presents the case of the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* at the Economics and Management faculty of a public university in the north of Portugal. It further analyses the perceptions of graduate students concerning the relevance of transferable skills in their sound job performance, as well as the contribution of this particular programme to the acquisition and development of these very skills. Since this investigation constitutes a pioneer study of this specific programme, the results could contribute to its improved adjustment to

¹<http://www.skills.cam.ac.uk/undergrads/skills/>.

²<http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/institute-academic-development/postgraduate/taught/courses-events/open-workshops>.

³<http://www.studium.uni-freiburg.de/studium-en/bok-en>.

⁴http://www2.ul.ie/web/WWW/Services/Research/Graduate_School/Current_Students/Training_for_Research_Students.

⁵<http://www.uu.nl/EN/informationfor/intstaffandvisitors/Research/policyprojects/phace/Workshops/Pages/Useyourtransferableskills.aspx>.

⁶http://www.ueberfachliche-kompetenzen.uzh.ch/index_en.html.

⁷http://www.novasbe.unl.pt/php/templates/article_simple.php?id=34.

⁸<http://ibs.iscte.pt/?pt=programa-de-desenvolvimento-pessoal>.

⁹<http://www.eegs.eeg.uminho.pt/>.

students' expectations and needs, as well as to the development and/or improvement of programmes with similar objectives in other university contexts, both on a national and international level.

2 Theoretical Background

The concept of competence stems from Taylor's "Principles of Scientific Management" in 1911 [19]. Through the scientific analysis of work, and particularly the observation of the time and motion of the most competent workers, Taylor was committed to identify the one best way to complete each task and to transform it into a pattern that should be observed by every worker. The objective was to guarantee worker competence and, consequently, to improve the organizational efficiency [19, 20].

Until the 1970s, corporate management was dominated by the logic of continuous mass production, supported by the manual control of manufacturing through the use of the called "craft" skills. This resulted in great specialization, division of labour into small tasks, and control management hierarchy [5]. From this decade onwards, workforce globalization and customer orientation have created the need for companies to rely on multifaceted workers, who are able to adapt quickly to market demands. The production cycle has become shorter, and the responsibility for the manufacturing process has been transferred to the workers themselves [5]. These changes in the organization's operation scheme have led to the fact that people management is no longer centred on function but rather on the individual himself, on his flexibility and ability to adapt to change [1]. In this context, the personal skills and attitudes that will help individuals to adapt to changes and to the new demands in the workplace have assumed great importance [21].

2.1 The Concept of "Competence" and Different Approaches

McClelland [22] was a pioneer author in the definition of the concept "*competence*", in his famous article "*Testing for competence rather than intelligence*". He believed that the traditional selection tests presented several shortcomings; namely, they did not allow for the measurement of all the aspects which are relevant to the performance of an established function. Academic certifications and intelligence tests are not in themselves wholly sufficient in predicting an employee's future performance; it is for this reason that it would be necessary to adopt a more comprehensive concept, namely that of competence.

The term “competence” has since been defined differently in literature, by researchers in the various knowledge areas [23]. Psychology refers to the concept as a measure of ability, associating performance to personality traits and underlying capacities. Management uses a functional analysis of competencies to determine how the improvement of individual performance contributes to the attainment of an organization’s objectives. It sees competence as a key concept for the implementation of a strategic direction in processes such as recruitment, selection, training, performance assessment, promotion, reward systems, and staff planning. Finally, education relates the concept to the idea of preparing for employment and as professional acknowledgement. As a result of this fragmentation, literature in this area is divided into two approaches [5, 19, 24, 25]. These use specific terms and give them distinct meanings: (a) *competence*: understood as a performance standard, i.e. which allows for the efficient performance of a task and (b) *competency*: considered as the behaviour one must reveal in order to carry out the job tasks and functions competently.

In the UK, the concept of competence was associated to the *Management Charter Initiative* (MCI). This undertook an analysis of 3000 managers and culminated in the production of a typology, which established the competencies required for managers in various organizations and in diverse sectors. This initiative was used as a reference for the drafting of the NVQ (*National Vocational Qualification*) in 1988. This defines “competence” as the capacity to perform a specific function, perceived as a performance standard, which allows one to acknowledge and qualify a job as being efficient [24, 26].

In the North American context, the approaches tend to focus on the individual and on the behaviour he must reveal to ensure competent performance [24]. Studies which subscribe to this view were mainly carried out in the context of education/training and deal with the acquisition of tools for more efficient task performance [26].

There is, in addition to the above, another approach to be found in literature which focuses on the person’s qualities and characteristics (*competencies*) as constituting determining factors for higher performance [24, 27, 28]. Levy-Leboyer [29] relates competencies to an individual’s psychological aspects, such as personality traits, skills, and the acquisition of knowledge. Since the latter approach constitutes a comprehensive perspective of the concept of competence [19, 24, 28, 30], it includes all three aspects: requirements or qualities needed for a specific task (*competencies*), observed behaviour (*competency*), and result of an individual’s performance (*competence*).

Woodruffe [25] classifies competencies in two nuclei: (a) technical skills which are specific to the job and (b) generic skills, which can be universal or transferable. In the UK, the DfEE (*Department for Education and Employment*) and the *Association of Graduate Recruiters* (AGR) proposed a classification of competencies [7], which is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Classification of competencies

Competency title	Definition
Key (or core) skills	The general skills required for various jobs, which include basic literacy and numeracy, as well as a set of transferable personal skills such as the ability to work well with others, communication, self-motivation, and the ability to organize one's own work and to use information technology
Vocational skills	The skills required for specific jobs or occupation groups, which are less useful outside these areas. They are less general than <i>key skills</i> , but can be transferred from a job in a specific area to another
Job-specific skills	Skills which are specific to a particular job or even an organization, also designated as technical skills

Source Adapted from Stewart and Knowles [7]

Lawrence [31] proposes a typology which has been adopted in the USA:

- (i) Academic skills (knowledge and skills associated with the academic disciplines of reading, writing, mathematics, and science);
- (ii) Employability skills (used to perform effectively, which are transferable to a broad range of occupations, such as teamwork, decision-making, and problem-solving); and
- (iii) Occupational and technical skills (specific technical and occupational knowledge and skills which are job-specific, such as knowledge of sales methods, engine repair, and database programming).

The concept of “key (or core) skills” [7] thus draws closer to “employability skills” [31], in the sense that both refer to skills which are transferable to different subject areas and professional contexts. The following section analyses this concept in greater detail, from now on designated in this chapter as “transferable skills”.

2.2 Transferable Skills: Definition of the Concept

As is the case for a wide-ranging concept of competency, there is also no consensus as to the concept of transferable skills. Various typologies have been proposed, and designations for the concept have been put forward. Tien et al. [32] have presented some examples of these designations and have situated them geographically, namely “*employability skills*” (*National Skills Standard Board*, USA); “*core skills*” (United Nations); “*key competencies*” (Australia); “*core skills/key skills*” (Great Britain); “*employability skills*” (Canada); and “*basic competencies*” (Taiwan). Other designations for the concept are, for example, “*Transferable Skills*” (*Training Agency*, UK) and “*Common Skills*” (*Business and Technology Education Council*, UK).

According to Mansfield [5], transferable skills are all the competencies which are not technical, specific, or occupational. For Assiter [2], transferable skills are the

generic capacities which allow individuals to attain success in a wide variety of tasks and occupations. The *Department for Education and Employment* (DfEE), in the UK, considers transferable skills to be those competencies which are essential for performance in all sectors and at all levels [3]. Drummond et al. [4] mention these as skills which can be transferred to contexts outside the academic field of study, and Gibbons-Wood and Lange [33] describe them as being those which support competent behaviour in all areas.

Harvey et al. [12] suggest two categories of transferable skills: (i) personal attributes, which comprise knowledge, continuous learning, flexibility and adaptability, self-regulation, self-motivation, and self-confidence and (ii) interactive attributes, which encompass communication, relationships, group work, and the ability to influence.

At Luton University in the UK, the study carried out by Atlay and Harris [34], which was the result of the communication established among this university, its employer partners, and the community, subscribes to a competency model that is divided into four large areas: data collection and processing, communication and presentation, planning and problem-solving, as well as social development and interaction.

In Australia, a study undertaken by Kearns [35] separates transferable skills into four large groups: (i) preparation for employment and working habits; (ii) interpersonal skills (supported by personal attributes and values, such as emotional intelligence and the understanding of oneself); (iii) entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity; and (iv) skills related to learning, thinking, and adaptability. This study also emphasizes the competency model adopted by the United Nations, which contemplates three categories: core skills (communication, teamwork, planning and organization, responsibility, creativity, customer orientation, commitment to continuous learning, and technological awareness); core values (integrity, professionalism, and respect for diversity); and management skills (leadership, vision, the development of others, confidence building, performance management, decision-making, and judgement).

In the context of the European project *Tuning*, whose objective was to establish an exchange of information and collaboration in the development of quality, efficiency, and transparency in more than 100 European universities, both generic and specific skills were analysed and associated to different areas of study. In the report for the first phase of this project, the authors González and Wagenaar [36] classified general skills into 3 groups: (i) instrumental skills (cognitive, methodological, technological, and linguistic abilities); (ii) interpersonal skills (social interaction and cooperation, and critical and ethical consciousness); and (iii) systemic skills (the ability to analyse the whole and understand how the parts work together, as well as how to combine and apply skills and knowledge to different situations), with the last of these groups requiring the prior acquisition of skills from the first two. This project highlights the most important skills as being: the ability to analyse and synthesize; the ability to learn, solve problems, and apply knowledge to practice; the ability to plan and organize, to work autonomously, and to adapt to new

situations; the ability to establish interpersonal relationships and work in a team, to communicate orally and in writing (in a native language and in a second language); and the ability to manage information and, finally, the concern with quality.

2.3 *The Development of Transferable Skills in the Academic Context*

The Bologna Declaration [14] produced a paradigm shift in the teaching-learning process of European higher education. This has become more student-centred and has focused on student's ability to obtain knowledge and acquire new skills. It also advocates the increasing importance of transferable skills in graduates' employability [36, 37], which ensues from the belief that technical skills are insufficient in the context of the present model of work organization and given the current competition and demands of the labour market. Literature, however, reveals that there is a gap between the skills developed at universities and those which are required in the workplace [38, 39], precisely pointing to the need for new skills, as well as to the complementarity of transferable and technical skills.

Various studies have focused on the British academic context [10, 13, 40–45], where there seems to be a predominant perception that graduates are rather badly prepared for the conditions they will be confronted with in the labour market [8]. For example, the purpose of the development of the initiative “*Enterprise in Higher Education*” (EHE) in 1987 was to surpass these shortcomings in training. Binks [8] mentions that the two reasons for implementing this initiative were that: (i) students are not often exposed to work situations during the course of their academic careers and (ii) the curriculum is designed in such a way that it does not encourage students to acquire other skills. This initiative led to the introduction of new teaching-learning strategies in various higher education institutions, which aimed to improve students' ability in the transferable skills required by the labour market [42]. An example of these experiences is that of the University of Nottingham, which implemented a systemic approach to analyse training needs, with a view to the constant improvement of learning, teaching, and assessment [8].

On the basis of a review of literature, Drummond et al. [4] briefly presented three broad approaches that can be implemented by higher education institutions to develop skills within the curriculum:

1. *Embedded or integrated development*: the development of skills in an integrated manner within the curriculum; this can occur at different levels of the programme (randomly interspersed, core modules, mapped skills with/with no progression, and project-based development);
2. *Parallel (stand-alone) development*: the development of skills in free-standing modules, which are not integrated into the curriculum; and

3. *Work placements or in work-based projects*: the student spends a period of time in practice, which is the case of *sandwich* courses. These consist of a theoretical component and of a practical one, with the integration of time periods spent in a professional context, which allow for experience in the real-life context of work. This model is considered by employers as the best way to develop students' employment-related skills.

2.4 The Development of New Skills from the Students' Perspective

Several studies have sought to analyse the perceptions of students in higher education regarding the acquisition of transferable skills during their academic path, as well as when they begin their professional lives [12, 13, 41, 43, 44]. The study carried out by Nabi and Bagley [13] evaluated graduates' perceptions in relation to the importance and quality of the transferable skills acquired during their academic path. It focused on students' satisfaction with the course itself, their university experience, as well as preparation for their future career. This study revealed that graduates tend to rate the importance of skills highly than their own ability in those. The results also presented employers' views as to the quality of transferable skills, indicating that these should be improved and adjusted to the needs of the labour market. Identical conclusions were reached by other studies, which reveal dissatisfaction in relation to the skills acquired by students in the academic context [40].

The study by Rosenberg et al. [46], in the North American context, examined the transferable skills required for job performance, the way in which these are developed during the course of an academic career, and the need for additional training after concluding a degree. This study was grounded on the perceptions of three distinct groups: recent graduates, the faculty that taught them, as well as the human resource managers who recruit them. More specifically, the participants in this study responded to a survey that included 47 items measuring eight dimensions of transferable skills: basic literacy and numeracy, critical thinking, management, leadership, interpersonal, information and communication technologies (ICTs), systems thinking, and work ethic disposition. This study confirmed the importance of transferable skills and of the communication across students, the university, and employers in the development of these skills.

The study conducted by Whittle and Eaton [45] analysed the introduction of a transferable skills development module in the first year of a degree in medicine at a British university, as well as its repercussion throughout the course. Students perceived that it has enhanced their self-confidence during the educational process and contributed to develop their skills in most areas, particularly with regard to self-learning skills. The results suggest that students feel they are better prepared to succeed in a learning system that grants them greater responsibility and independence for their own development of skills.

Despite the fact that most studies attribute great importance to transferable skills, there are studies which tend to mitigate it. For example, the study developed by Laughton and Montanheiro [43], which sought to assess the perceptions of recent graduates who were integrated in professional life, concluded that the latter gave little importance to transferable skills when applying for a first job.

In the Portuguese university context, the research conducted by Cabral-Cardoso et al. [47] sought to determine the extent of the importance of transferable skills to the graduates' competent job performance, as well as the contribution of higher education institutions and employment entities to their acquisition and development. The study started with a list of 40 transferable skills which were identified by the authors as being dominant in literature. These are indicated in Table 2.

The study by Cabral-Cardoso et al. [47] concluded that there is a consensus between students and employers as to the transferable skills which are considered to be the most important in the labour market. Both groups attributed great value to instrumental skills, such as work planning and organization, problem-solving, information and communication technologies, personal relationships, and continuous learning. However, it is the employers who tend to evaluate more favourably the importance of transferable skills in everyday work, while students tend to underestimate them and consider technical skills to be essential. In addition, it is the employers who tend to attribute greater relevance to the following transferable skills: numeracy, foreign languages, business sensitivity, capacity for teamwork, and conflict management.

Table 2 List of the most common transferable skills found in the literature

ICT	Innovation/creativity	General knowledge	Initiative
Oral communication	Leadership	Continuous learning	Persistence
Written communication	Information collection and processing	Attention to detail	Self-control
Teamwork	Planning and organization	Influence/persuasion	Decision-making
Customer orientation	Intercultural competence	Questioning skills	Motivation/personal drive
Problem-solving	Critical thinking	Listening skills	Conflict management
Numeracy	Ethics	Interpersonal relationships	Motivating
Foreign languages	Business sensitivity	Action planning	Networking
Autonomy	Stress tolerance	Negotiation	Risk-taking
Adaptability	Self-confidence	Self-presentation	Developing others

Source Based on Cabral-Cardoso et al. [47]

3 The Case of the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* in a Portuguese faculty of Economics and Management

The Bologna Declaration significantly changed the European higher educational system, particularly by placing emphasis on student's role and favouring active learning based on the development of skills, both of those specific to each academic qualification area and of transferable skills. These changes stimulated the development of a *Transferable Skills Development Programme* in the faculty of Economics and Management of a public university located in the north of Portugal. The aim of this programme, which was implemented in the academic years of 2012/2013, was to complement the development of the transferable skills already included in the course syllabus through a range of activities and initiatives. It also proposed to enhance students' awareness of the importance of these skills as a distinguishing factor, which generates opportunities of success in the labour market.

The programme has been groundbreaking in the context of this Portuguese public university, which distinguishes itself from others by of its own regulations, structure, and operation. In its implementation year (2012/2013), the programme was directed to Master's degree students, a fact which coincided with a curricular revision for these courses. In fifteen of those master courses, a 7.5 ECTS curricular unit was included; this consisted of a Methodology/Project module (4.5 ECTS) and a Transferable Skills module (3 ECTS). The latter was related to participation in activities of the *Transferable Skills Development Programme*. At present, this programme is also available for Honours and Doctorate degree students, although priority is given to the Master's degree students due to the integration of these activities into the regular study plan and their corresponding ECTS credits.

The activities and initiatives developed within the framework of this programme specifically aim to promote the acquisition and development of ten skills, which have been deemed to be relevant for students graduating from the Economics and Management area. During the first phase, the identification of these skills resulted from a revision of literature [47, 48], and in the subsequent phase, it ensued from the assessment undertaken by the employers who maintain regular contact with this faculty and collaborate on several of its activities (e.g. workshops, lectures, and field days). The following skills, which are included in the programme, emerged from this analysis: (1) interpersonal relationships, (2) teamwork; (3) leadership, (4) communication, (5) creativity and innovation, (6) ethical awareness and critical thinking, (7) planning and organization, (8) ICT, (9) problem-solving, and (10) results orientation.

The activities developed by the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* throughout the academic year are based on two typologies, which presuppose different levels of participation by the students: (1) courses and workshops and (2) lectures and events. The "courses" consist of activities developed over various sessions, which are related to useful work tools in the academic context, as well as in professional life, with a maximum duration period of 12 h (e.g. SPSS, Excel,

Stata, and NVivo). The “workshops” comprise single sessions of presentation and discussion of practical content, followed by activities and exercises performed by students. These workshops deal with themes such as job-seeking, career development, leadership, interpersonal relationships, problem-solving, decision-making, organization, self-development, and research techniques. These activities presuppose the active participation of students and are limited to a maximum number of participants (between 20 and 50). In the “lectures”, a guest speaker (e.g. CEOs from reference companies, former students from this faculty in prominent positions in the labour market) presents his life story and that of his professional experience, which lasts from 1 to 3 h. The “events” involve the organization of events around a central theme (e.g. a series of lectures, round-table discussions, and parallel sessions), which can last from a few hours to the entire day. The number of participants in these last activities is higher and is only conditioned by the seating capacity of the auditorium or the premises used. Within this framework, there are also study trips to companies in various sectors of activity, which are an opportunity for students to obtain some knowledge of the everyday running of companies. Included in the programme are also large events such as employability day (the Job fair), research day, and job sessions (days of training provided by companies)

In 2015/2016, this *Transferable Skills Development Programme* was in its fourth operative year. During this year, there was an increase in student participation, adding up to a sum total of 1476 students (920 participants from the 1st cycle, 487 participants from the 2nd cycle, and 69 participants from the 3rd cycle), which refers to 6424 effective acts of participation in the 129 organized activities. One must emphasize that current programme feedback results from the assessment of each of the activities, which is done on paper by the participating students. The intervening parties who collaborate in the various activities (e.g. speakers and trainers) supply informal feedback about these, and thus, there is no duly recorded written assessment.

4 The Research Design and Sample

The purpose of this study is to get to know the perceptions of graduate students attending the faculty of Economics and Management of a public university in the north of Portugal, regarding the importance of the transferable skills to their present and/or future job performance. It specifically aims to analyse their opinions concerning the contribution of the recently created *Transferable Skills Development Programme*. Due to the fact that there are very few similar studies in Portugal [47], and to the absence of studies addressing this specific programme, the present study is of an exploratory nature. Therefore, we considered suitable to adopt a qualitative method and resorted to two data collection instruments. In the first phase, graduate students were asked to complete a qualitative questionnaire with the objective of gathering basic information about the topic. This questionnaire consisted of the following three questions:

1. Which are the ten transferable skills that you consider to be the most important?
2. How do you evaluate the *Transferable Skills Development Programme*?
3. Which suggestions of improvement would you like to present to the *Transferable Skills Development Programme*?

Subsequently, the same graduates were divided into three focus groups. This number was regarded as sufficient, since the study contemplates a very particular population [49]. This technique has been considered propitious to stimulate the individuals' interactive discussion of ideas regarding each topic [50]. These objectives are particularly relevant when the theme has been minimally explored. Five questions were presented to each focus group with the purpose of generating discussion among the participants. The order of presentation varied, according to the dynamics established:

1. Which are the ten transferable skills you consider to be the most important and why?
2. What is the relevance of the transferable skills, when compared to the technical skills, for the competent job performance of young graduates and why?
3. How do you evaluate your ability in the transferable skills that you have identified as especially relevant?
4. Which factors contributed/have contributed to the development of these transferable skills?
5. How do you evaluate the role performed by the organization you are employed by in your acquisition/development of these transferable skills?
6. How do you evaluate the performance of the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* in your acquisition/development of these transferable skills?

Twenty-one graduate students from five different Master's degree courses participated in this phase. Each group consisted of seven students, a number that has been considered adequate [49, 51]. The sample shares two features that are deemed fundamental to the objectives of this study: (1) the individual has already benefitted from the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* and (2) the individual has already had some relevant professional experience. The existence of common core features shared by the participants, thus making the focus groups more homogeneous, is considered fundamental when aiming to capitalize on the experience shared on a given topic [52], as well as to generate relaxed and open conversations [53].

The sample consisted of 16 Portuguese women and 5 men, one of these was Portuguese and the four others were Brazilian. They were, therefore, all Portuguese native speakers. The youngest respondent was 23 years old, and the oldest was 41; the average age was approximately 31 years. All individuals were employed at the time of the research. The fact that some of the graduate students already knew each other was evaluated as propitious to a greater interaction and debate of ideas [49]. Each focus group meeting lasted approximately 1 h 15 min and was audio-recorded. Several field notes were collected by one of the researchers during the focus group meetings.

The following chapter presents the main results of this research. Emphasis is placed on the results revealing shared opinions by the graduate students, as well as on more peculiar viewpoints. Fictional names were used to protect the participants' anonymity.

5 Findings

5.1 *The Importance of Transferable Skills Versus Technical Skills*

The study participants assessed the technical skills as indispensable to competent job performance, yet they believed it was important to conjugate these with transferable skills. They thus evaluate them as complementary, and such has been advocated by the literature [30, 54, 55]. These results are different from those obtained by Cabral-Cardoso et al. [47] a decade ago, when it was found that students tended to underestimate transferable skills and to consider technical skills as being more essential. The following excerpts illustrate this current perception of the complementary relationship between transferable and technical skills:

Samuel (27 years): *They go hand-in-hand. As you acquire more technical competence, you will get to develop your technical skills better.*

Bruno (35 years): *You must have deeply-rooted technical skills to be able to develop your transferable skills. One thing complements the other, but each one on its own is not really valued. You must have them together.*

Some participants commented that the real understanding of the importance of transferable skills only occurs during professional experience. This was expressed by Helena (32 years): "The professional experience I now possess is what showed me the importance of having transferable skills too". This result corresponds with the study undertaken in New Zealand by Rainsbury et al. [55], which revealed that whereas business graduates attribute equal importance to transferable and technical skills, business students without professional experience assess transferable skills as being less relevant. During the discussion of this topic, a participant exemplified the important use of transferable skills when exercising her professional activity:

Helena (32 years): *More than giving the customer an impression of the technical skills I possess, it will be my use of transferable skills that will convince him to buy.*

Several respondents revealed the perception that while technical skills are expected and required at any organizational level, mastering transferable skills is especially relevant in higher job positions and crucial in building a career:

Maria (27 years): *I agree with that view [the great relevance of transferable skills] when talking about a higher job position.*

Lucas (34 years): *They [in the organisation] focus on technical skills when we're in lower job positions but if you want to climb the ladder, then transferable skills are essential.*

The results therefore suggest that the students without professional experience at this faculty of Economics and Management may be less sensitive to the great importance of transferable skills in the current corporate world [43, 56]. This aspect could limit their participation in initiatives developed by this institution, namely those of the *Transferable Skills Development Programme*.

5.2 The Most Relevant Transferable Skills

Through the completion of the qualitative questionnaire and during the focus group meetings, the research participants chose and discussed which transferable skills they believed to be the most important to their current and/or future professional activity, from the list considered by Cabral-Cardoso et al. [47] in their research also conducted in the Portuguese context (represented in Table 2). Table 3 summarizes the graduate students' opinions and presents illustrative quotes.

These results are rather different from those found 10 years ago by Cabral-Cardoso et al. [47], when working with students and graduates from the north of Portugal. It coincided only in the relevance attributed to planning and organization skills, as well as motivation/personal drive. On the other hand, the

Table 3 The ten most relevant transferable skills according to the study participants

Transferable Skills	Illustrative quotes
Planning and organization	Eva (32 years): <i>The skills that are lacking when people leave university, such as how to organise, knowing how to plan, being able to solve difficult problems...</i>
Problem-solving	Helena (32 years): <i>One of the skills I find important to develop is that of problem-solving</i>
Adaptability	Lucas (34 years): <i>Having the capacity to adapt... For example, in my career we are always changing from one place to another</i>
Creativity and innovation	Bruno (35 years): <i>Creativity is very important! But, at the same time, it is one of the skills which is most difficult to develop</i>
ICT	Maria (27 years): <i>Mastering information technology is a key selection criterion to my organization</i>
Leadership	Lucas (34 years): <i>All military personnel must have this skill [leadership]</i>
Teamwork	Samuel (27 years): <i>Teams must be able to work towards the same goals</i>
Oral communication	Diana (35 years): <i>I highlight oral communication: if I can't understand and adjust my discourse to who is on the other side, I may lose out on the business</i>
Interpersonal relationships	Monica (30 years): <i>It's important to know how to work with different people: people from different contexts, with particular experiences and specific problems</i>
Motivation/personal drive	Maria (27 years): <i>Being motivated helps you to deal with frustration!</i>

importance of oral communication and interpersonal skills expressed by participants in this current study was also detected in the study carried out by Andrews and Higson [18], which covered four European countries (UK, Austria, Slovenia, and Romania). In the case of ICT and teamwork skills, these were already evaluated as being especially pertinent by graduate and undergraduate students further afield in New Zealand [55]. Various other studies point to an identical perception of the importance of skills in the areas of planning, organization, oral communication [11, 13, 40], adaptability [57], leadership [6, 46], motivation/personal drive [7], as well as creativity and innovation [40]. The results indicate that there has been some development in comparison with the data collected by Cabral-Cardoso et al. [47]. Moreover, they show greater proximity between the perceptions of students in Portugal and those of other countries regarding the identification of the transferable skills that are deemed as particularly important to competent job performance. This result does not seem to be extraneous to the increasing similarity of the structures and curricular programmes of higher education [58], as well as to the complex needs imposed by the increasingly global business world.

From the list of transferable skills presented in Table 3, participants elected the following as being those which they already reveal significant development: problem-solving, adaptability, and motivation/personal drive. On the other hand, they admitted a weaker development in the skills related to interpersonal relationships. The respondents also considered that some of these transferable skills are easier to acquire/develop through formal mechanisms and programmes (e.g. ICT) than others (e.g. creativity and innovation).

5.3 Mechanisms and Programmes for Developing Transferable Skills

Graduates expressed the view that the development of transferable skills is a continuous and permanently unfinished process, whose construction ensues from a variety of experiences and contexts. The following comment illustrates this statement:

Olivia (29 years): All these skills can be continuously developed. I don't think someone gets here and says: "I'm at this level, I've finished, and it's over". By other words, everything can be developed.

Various participants expressed the belief that the employer should invest in training programmes and actions to develop collaborator's transferable skills, specifically the ones that are markedly relevant to the individual's performance and, consequently, to the organization's overall strategy and success. Examples were provided regarding training on customer service skills:

Maria (27 years, employed): The organization provides training on technical and transferable skills. [For example,] in emotional and conflict management, which is very important in the case of permanent customer service.

Teresa (26 years, employed): *The hospital where I work also provides compulsory training in transferable skills, which is the case of communication with patients. This is compulsory for all professional categories.*

Some of the respondents considered, however, that the lack of investment in transferable skills development programmes by employers constitutes no excuse for the employee to stagnate in this area. On the contrary, they referred that employees should play an active role in seeking the best means and mechanisms to develop transferable skills continuously, namely by resorting to external training:

Julia (29 years): *The skills which are missing... I try to respond with training, for example in technologies, in languages...*

Diana (35 years): *Same opinion here: although I have no access to training at work, I can also look for training outside.*

Lucas (34 years): *I agree with you. You must have personal initiative (...) if you're interested, if you have the initiative, you end up learning! If you don't, you're going to stagnate in your career.*

Furthermore, the participants in this study listed other mechanisms and sources which they believe to contribute to the acquisition and development of transferable skills. The replies underline the importance of the family context (useful in the acquisition of moral values), social interaction (e.g. with school or work colleagues), hobbies (e.g. the development of teamworking skills, resilience, and tolerance of stress through sporting activities), volunteer work, as well as other activities in the academic context (e.g. participation in student associations). The individuals added to this the development of transferable skills which ensued from any experience in the world of work, even if this was during a short period of time and very different from their academic qualification area (e.g. the development of customer service skills). This result is in line with the “discourse of experience” [59], which portrays the belief by students that any experience in the organizational environment contributes to the acquisition of transferable skills and positively differentiates the student from his colleagues. Two participants emphasized the conjugation of various experiences as being favourable to the development of transferable skills:

Maria (27 years): *We are the sum total of everything around us, family, school, hobbies...*

Lucas (34 years): *Totally agree: Transferable skills are the result of experiences accumulated throughout life.*

5.4 Perceptions of the Transferable Skills Development Programme

The study participants highlighted the importance of the university's role in providing programmes and tools for the acquisition and development of transferable skills, a position which is in accordance with what is found in the literature [60, 61].

In this regard, the participants acknowledged the positive contribution of the *Transferable Skills Development Programme*, and underlined its “innovative and distinctive profile” in the context of Economics and Management faculties in Portugal, as well as its “sound structure and wide-ranging programme”, “excellent content”, and “enriching lectures”. This positive view seems to be associated with the great correspondence between the skills developed in the programme and those which the study participants consider to be the most relevant, as presented in Table 4.

In addition to this generally positive assessment, the participants highlighted the great usefulness of the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* for students without working experience. The following comment illustrates this opinion:

Monica (30 years): *It's very useful. The Transferable Skills Development Programme allows you to address specific needs which the courses, be they Master's or Honours, are unable to do, namely in the development of transferable skills. It contributes to students feeling more confident in the world of work.*

Various suggestions of improvement of the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* were then presented. These focused on a better adjustment of programme time schedules for employed students, as was explained by the following respondent:

Table 4 The transferable skills developed in the Transferable skills development programme versus the transferable skills valued by the study participants

Transferable skills	Transferable skills development programme	Valued by the study participants
Planning and organization	✓	✓
Results orientation	✓	
Problem-solving	✓	✓
Adaptability		✓
Critical thinking	✓	
Creativity and innovation	✓	✓
ICT	✓	✓
Leadership	✓	✓
Teamwork	✓	✓
Oral communication	✓	✓
Interpersonal relationships	✓	✓
Motivation/personal drive		✓
Ethical awareness	✓	

Teresa (26 years): *You should direct the programme to the after-work time period as well. Our choices [from the available content] end up being rather restricted and are made, above all, because of our respective time schedules.*

Most of the participants further consider that the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* should continue to reinforce its commitment to clearly practical activities and contents. The following comment reveals the dissatisfaction ensuing from content evaluated as being more theoretical and abstract:

Julia (29 years): *I did the conflict management course. But I can say that, basically, it dealt with theoretical psychological concepts, which were difficult to implement in practice.*

A couple of participants also questioned the selection of some of the topics covered in the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* and considered them to be less suitable for their work objectives, as the following comments reveal:

Angela (24 years): *The programme also contemplates skills which are important when carrying out research, contents which are more theoretical and are not so important for companies. But most of us don't want to do research; we really want to get into the business world.*

The conversation then moved to the benefits of a curricular traineeship programme, with several students concluding that the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* does not act as a replacement for it. Various respondents showed the preference for a traineeship period at a company:

Olivia (29 years): *The shortcoming of our Master's is that there is no traineeship phase. The Transferable Skills Development Programme is, supposedly, for us to have useful skills in the work context. But wouldn't a period of traineeship be far more effective and efficient in getting to develop those skills?*

Monica (30 years): *A [better] way of acquiring these skills would be on the basis of work, on the basis of traineeship, even if it only lasted a month or two.*

This perception on the part of the graduate students that contact with the “real-world problems” by means of a traineeship phase is fundamental to the development of transferable skills was also identified on the studies conducted by Andrews and Higson [18] and Crebert et al. [62], namely with regard to leadership, oral communication, and interpersonal relationships skills.

In summary, despite the innovative characteristics of the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* in the Portuguese university context, and its outstanding contribution to the development of transferable skills among its graduate and undergraduate community, this research points to the need for greater adjustment to students' requirements and expectations. The graduate students who participated in the study presented several suggestions which may contribute to the improvement of this specific programme, as well as to be taken into consideration by other faculties/universities when designing programmes and tools with similar mission and goals.

6 Conclusions

The Bologna Declaration imposed significant changes in European higher education, placing emphasis on teaching methods that promote students' active learning as well as on the development of skills, whether specific to the academic qualification area or to what became known as *transferable skills*. The latter have been considered to be fundamental to the promotion of graduate employability. This research sought to learn the perceptions of graduate students, from the faculty of Economics and Management of a public university in the north of Portugal, regarding the importance of acquiring and mastering transferable skills and, especially, in relation to the contribution of the recently created *Transferable Skills Development Programme* in this regard. Results point to the great importance attributed by graduate students to transferable skills so as to promote great job performance and a successful career. Of the ten skills classified as the most relevant, graduates included professional skills (e.g. planning and organization, problem-solving), communication skills, interpersonal skills, and personal skills (e.g. adaptability and motivation/personal drive). The current activities of the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* focus on the general development of these transferable skills.

During the three focus group meetings, a view prevailed that the programme should reinforce its commitment to practical activities which promote the development of skills that meet the needs of the corporate world. Additionally, various participants advocated their preference for a curricular traineeship programme, considering it a particularly efficient means for developing such transferable skills. These results point to the need for the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* to especially focus on activities of an eminently practical nature, such as workshops of a longer duration and/or which are undertaken in an organizational context. The results also suggest a need to increase the number of visits to companies, as well as of other activities providing opportunities for closer proximity to those in leadership positions. Despite the diversity of activities and their time schedules, the individuals indicated the need for a better adjustment of the schedule of activities to the availability of working students, advocating the development of more activities in the time periods after work and at the weekend.

What seems to be particularly relevant is the graduate students' belief that the awareness of the importance of transferable skills for and successful career-building only really occurs after acquiring some relevant work experience. This result highlights the need for those responsible for the programme, as well as for the supervisors of the various Honours and Master's degrees at this faculty of Economics and Management, to generate greater awareness among students for the importance of the transferable skills. Some of the lectures promoted by the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* seem to be excellent platforms for the reinforcement of this message, namely the ones given by speakers who share their life stories and their professional paths—such as former graduates from this faculty of Economics and Management that occupy prominent positions in the market, as

well as CEOs from companies of reference. Finally, this study reveals that the *Transferable Skills Development Programme* must be subjected to an efficient and continuous system of evaluation by graduate and undergraduate students. This should include room for the presentation of suggestions of improvement.

Although this research study contemplated a specific programme and academic context, the emerging results and recommendations could be equally relevant in the development and/or adjustment of any academic programme, within any Portuguese or European academic framework, aiming to set up a first-rate tool for the development of transferable skills among students and graduates. This would complement the often inadequate role of Honours and Master's degree course plans in this regard.

There are some limitations in this study which deserve special reference, since they provide clues for future investigation work. The first of these is related to the limited participation of some of the focus group respondents, although that was constantly encouraged by the researcher who moderated these activities. The collection of data using the semi-structured interview technique could have revealed richer and more uninhibited perceptions on the part of these participants. On the other hand, the initial intention of the study to include undergraduate students ended in failure, as practically none of these agreed to participate (only one). It therefore seems pertinent for future research studies to focus on the comparison of the perceptions of both graduate and undergraduate students, from this faculty of Economics and Management, concerning the relevance of transferable skills and the contribution of the *Transferable Skills Development Programme*, since both groups benefit from this programme. Lastly, it would be useful to know the views of people who occupy leading positions in the companies from this region of Portugal and who often cooperate with the programme. These opinions would be useful in providing comments on the programme itself and, more especially, with regard to the transferable skills, they most value in their recently graduated collaborators.

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