Is it more than employability?
Revisiting employers' perception of graduates' attributes

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Abstract

Higher education is confronted with two broad missions, either prepare graduates for the world of work, or prepare well-rounded students that combine broad-spectrum qualities of citizenship, responsibility, and professional expertise. The employability skills have been widely studied, while the attributes related to holistic education are still scarcely investigated. This paper examines the skills and other attributes that employers seek when hiring graduates. It confronts the perceptions of employers regarding the skills associated with employability and the abilities and characteristics linked to holistic education. This is an exploratory research based on original and qualitative data collected in 2020 through interviews with employers (n=8) from different sectors in Portugal. Empirical findings indicate that all employers prioritise employability skills, such as communication, teamwork, and learning abilities. We found more dispersion regarding the attributes of holistic education and a large consensus was found for interdisciplinarity, self-reflection, and personal and social responsibility. The data show that the attributes that help to address society's problems and challenges still seem to be regarded as quite irrelevant in the recruitment process.

Keywords: Employability skills; holistic education; employers' perception; Portugal.

1. Introduction

In recent decades graduates' employability has been recognised as the core mission of higher education institutions, which should develop certain skills and attributes to prepare them for the world of work and smooth their transition into the labour market (Boden and Nedeva 2010; Sin and Amaral 2017). Higher education thus has an instrumental role and should contribute to individual success and economic performance. Is this a consensual mission of HE? More recent proposals include the development of the "whole student" (Quinlan 2011) and the citizen professional (Doherty 2011) to highlight the mix of expertise, citizenship, and the personal and social responsibility needed to address society's problems.

How do employers view these new proposals? The answer is still missing in the literature. While a considerable literature has been devoted to employability skills (see Suleman 2018 for a survey), the demand for other attributes associated with holistic education deserve scrutiny. This paper addresses this gap through an analysis of the skills and other attributes required by employers when hiring graduates. More specifically, it confronts the perceptions of employers regarding two broad types of attributes: the skills associated with employability and the abilities and characteristics linked to holistic education.

An extensive literature has proposed catalogues of employability skills. For example, Andrews and Higson (2008) made a distinction between soft and hard skills; and Branine (2008) advises that employers seek person-oriented rather than job-oriented skills. Some add more types of skills and overcome the limitations of a dichotomic proposal. Olivier *et al*. (2014) found six broad clusters of skills: i) foundation skills, which include written and oral communication, problem solving, and critical analysis; ii) adaptive capacity, which involves the ability to adapt to new situations and foreign workplaces, to learn autonomously, develop new ideas, and innovate; iii) team working and interpersonal skills; iv) IT skills; v) employability skills related to coping with pressure and stress, being flexible and adaptable, and meeting deadlines; and vi) technical and domain specific skills. Despite those efforts to create a catalogue of employability skills, little has been reached. The bundle of employability skills includes communication, teamwork, analytical and critical thinking, learning abilities, IT skills, organization, and planning skills (Suleman 2018).

Another stream of the literature examines the attributes related to holistic education. This departs from the idea of "wholes" and focuses on relationships: "the relationship (…) between mind and body, (…) between various domains of knowledge, (…) between the individual and community, and the relationship between self and Self. In the holistic curriculum the student examines these relationships so that he/she gains both an awareness of them." (Miller 1988 in Miller *et al*. 2019: 5) Two major contributions help to define the attributes of holistic education. One is provided by the Chicago declaration, in 1990, which defined the basic principles of holistic education, notably to view students as individuals;

acknowledge the role of experience; develop holistic education, taking care of its implications in the educational process; recognize the new role of educators and the importance of their own inner growth; give freedom of choice; educate for human development, participatory democracy, global citizenship and earth literacy; and spirituality within education, keeping in mind that education should nourish the healthy growth of the spiritual life (GATE 1990).

Another stream can be attributed to Jacques Delors (2003), who described the four pillars of education. Although not applying the label of holistic education, the pillars seem closely related to it. They include learning to know, which refers to knowledge and cognitive abilities; learning to do, linked to professional qualification and skills utilization; learning to live together and with others, to underline the interdependency and shared goals and projects; and learning to be, insofar as education must contribute to the development of the whole person (spirit, body, intelligence, sensitivity and social responsibility).

In addition to these pioneer contributions the literature provides several proposals that include attributes of holistic education, notably global citizenship (UNESCO 2014); entrepreneurship (Oganisjana and Matlay 2012); interdisciplinary knowledge (Stukalina 2008); leadership and self-reflection/self-awareness (Quinlan 2011); personal and social responsibility (Reason et al. 2013); ecological awareness (GATE 1990); and moral intelligence (Clarken 2010). This helps in designing the catalogue of attributes of holistic education.

2. Data and methodology

This is an exploratory research based on original and qualitative data collected through interviews with employers (n=8) in Portugal. The sample includes firms from different sectors of activities (see Table 1 for details of the sampled firms). Two methods based on Suleman's (2018) proposal were used to identify the skills and other attributes required of an ideal candidate in the hiring process. One is unsupervised method, i.e., the interviewee freely enumerated the skills required; the other is supervised, in which each interviewee was asked to select seven attributes from a catalogue of skills and other attributes. We asked the interviewees to provide specific examples in which two candidates reached the final step of selection. The goal was to determine the major attributes that allow a candidate to get the job, and of course whether those attributes are related to employability skills and/or holistic education.

The data were collected between March and June 2020, mainly via Skype due to the pandemic situation; only two interviews were face-to-face. The characteristics of the firms and sociodemographic information of interviewees are in Table 1. All interviewees were involved in recruitment processes, although holding different job positions. They are therefore aligned with the company's vision regarding talent search. As can be noted, the

sample includes medium and large firms from different sectors, but the IT is the most represented. Although interesting, the findings should be examined with caution given the size and diversity of the sample.

Table 1. Characteristics of the firms in the sample.

Firm	Sector	Size (group)	Multinational	Age of the group (years)	Interviewee
F1	IT	170	Yes	15	HR Specialist
F2	IT	90	No	8	Business Manager
F3	IT	23000	Yes	22	Recruitment Coordinator
F4	IT	205	Yes	32	HR Specialist
F5	Industry	12000	Yes	101	HR Generalist
F6	Financial	8000	Yes	26	HR Manager
F7	Hospitality	1200	No	17	HR Technician
F8	Pharmaceutical	2000	Yes	62	Global HR Lead HRIS

3. Empirical findings

Table 2 shows the skills and attributes demanded for graduates. The different methods used to collect these data allowed us to discriminate which requirements are well-established in the employers' perception and those that are probably outside the priorities of employers. It must be noted that a mix of specific and soft skills appears as a requirement for almost all employers when they freely enumerate job requirements. Furthermore, it seems that the employability skills are mentioned spontaneously (unsupervised method) and/or chosen (supervised method) consistently by the interviewees. Those skills are consolidated as key requirements, and to some extent suggest a preference for ready-to-work candidates. This bundle includes both specific and general, or hard and soft skills: "*We need people who can talk to the customer; they need to know how to talk to the clients and their teammates*" (F1); "(...) *being able to understand the relevance and importance of teamwork and not just working on their individual part are very important things when working in multidisciplinary teams*" (F8); "(...) *What we pay attention to (...) [is the] way of thinking, analytical thinking. (...)*" (F3); "*(...) they need to show interest (...) and willingness to learn and develop*" (F5).

We now turn to the skills that were not reported by some firms. This is especially notable in the case of IT skills, which were not mentioned or chosen by the interviewees of the firm in the manufacturing sector, the hotel business, or pharmaceuticals. On the other hand, it can be noted that in the IT and Finance sectors the interviewees insisted on it. Other skills are also absent in the priorities of some of the sampled firms (e.g. foreign language).

Table 2. Empirical findings.

Skills/ Attributes	F1 IT	F2 IT	F3 IT	F4 IT	F5 MANUF	F6 FIN	F7 HOS	F8 PHAR
Communication	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	SUP	SUP	UNS; SUP
Team work	SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	SUP	UNS; SUP
Analytical and critical thinking	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	SUP	SUP	UNS; SUP		SUP
Learning abilities	UNS; SUP	SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	SUP
IT user or programming	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP	SUP		UNS; SUP		
Organisation and planning		SUP		SUP	UNS; SUP		SUP	UNS; SUP
Foreign language	UNS	UNS; SUP	UNS; SUP			UNS; SUP		SUP
Interdisciplinar knowledge		UNS	UNS	UNS	UNS	UNS		UNS
Global Citizenship				UNS	UNS	UNS		UNS
Entrepreneurship	UNS	UNS		UNS; SUP			UNS; SUP	
Leadership						UNS		UNS; SUP
Self-reflection ability	SUP	UNS		UNS; SUP	UNS	UNS; SUP		
Moral intelligence					SUP		UNS; SUP	
Personal and social responsibility	SUP	SUP	SUP		SUP		UNS; SUP	
Ecological awareness								

UNS: Unsupervised; SUP: Supervised method.

We found some dispersion in the attributes related to holistic education. Firstly, all cells regarding ecological awareness are blank. In other words, no interviewee considered it to be a key attribute in the hiring process. Secondly, the consensus herein is less evident than the one around employability skills reported in Table 2.

Thirdly, attributes such as interdisciplinary knowledge and global citizenship were mentioned by more than half of the interviewees, but the extent and mix are unclear. The pharmaceutical and one of the IT firms prioritise recruitment of engineering graduates, but noted that it should be in different specialisations within engineering: "*The preference is*

usually chemical engineering because it is effectively the area that provides them the best [knowledge] background, but we do not exclude other areas". For other firms interdisciplinarity means openness to hiring from different fields of education and subsequently prepare the graduate(s) with specific skills through workplace training: "*We have seen more people who have degrees in other completely different areas*; (…) *There are also those who have other types of courses and who later have [specific] training*, (…) *and this turns out to be very good*" (F2).

Global citizenship was mentioned spontaneously by four companies, indicating the sense of knowing how to live and work with others: "(...) *the conscience of the other, that is, non-discrimination* (…)" (F8), or having a purpose at work and the ambition to have a positive impact in the world: "(…) *understand to what extent you want to use that little bit of knowledge that you take with you and how you want to use it to have an impact - preferably, positive*" (F4). However, the interviewees did not include it when confronted with a catalogue, i.e., global citizenship was excluded from the seven most important attributes required of graduates by all the sampled firms.

Self-reflection is an attribute that collected considerable agreement (five firms) and it is viewed as an indicator of candidates' maturity and ability to learn from experience: "(…) *also understand what the person wants in the future and understand if they already have their path lined up in their minds*" (F2).

Finally, other attributes related to holistic education obtained far less agreement. This is the case of leadership, moral intelligence, and personal and social responsibility. The first is perceived as an attribute that enables the candidates to help their firms succeed: "(…) *it means that we won't have people following others blindly. People must have a critical sense and from here on they can create greater things*" (F6). Moral intelligence means having a sense of integrity: "*good candidate*"; the interviewee assumed that technical skills can be acquired at the workplace: "*We think that we often need good people and that the technique we are able to teach on job*". This interviewee also reported, freely, that personal and social responsibility are key attributes of a whole candidate: "(…) *an added value, we are constantly evolving and the business has to adapt to new realities and value other variables that were not previously considered or seen as a priority*" (F7). Four other firms also considered personal and social responsibility as an attribute of desirable candidates – three firms from IT and the single manufacturing firm.

4. Conclusions

This study examined employers' requirements when hiring graduates and sought to relate them with the two major missions of higher education: employability/world of work and holistic education. Employers seem to search for ready-to-work candidates, endowed with a

balanced set of hard and soft skills (Andrew and Gibbs 2008) and cognitive abilities. Consequently, the skills associated with employability achieved broad consensus among the sampled employers (Olivier *et al*. 2014). However, some firms prioritised IT skills (F1, F2, F3, F4, F6), while others omitted it (F5, F7, F8). We question whether it is deemed to be irrelevant or that it is taken for granted in the context of widespread digitalisation. We suspect that this skill is outside the core business. The same holds true for foreign language.

The attributes related to holistic education achieved less consensus. We underscore that moral intelligence (Clarken 2010), personal responsibility (Reason *et al*. 2013), and environmental awareness (GATE 1990) were not spontaneously mentioned by most respondents as attributes valued in candidates. However, the literature suggests that the commitment to social and environmental concerns, as well as ethical practices on behalf of organisations, are not only a requirement that must be met in accordance with numerous national and/or global regulations, but also add value to organizations and help to build a positive image and obtain stakeholder involvement (EC 2018; SHRM 2012).

These findings deserve further scrutiny and caution should be taken in their interpretation and generalisation. We have a small sample, concentrated in few sectors, and this is an exploratory research. Nonetheless, we collected data through two methods, unsupervised and supervised. The latter could raise interviewees' awareness for non-recurring attributes. However, although directly confronted with attributes of holistic education, a few interviewees indicated them to be important attributes. The most striking finding pertains to the ecological awareness; no one attributed importance to it. Is it irrelevant to employers? Is it taken for granted? These issues must be studied, as they are relevant for the implementation of sustainable management models in companies and to the current mission of higher education institutions.

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