

'Attitudes do matter': Generic competences in the selection of Business graduates^(*)

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Abstract

Purpose (mandatory)

This research aims to determine what competences are considered critical for team and human resources (HR) managers when selecting inexperienced Business graduates. Secondly, we aim to find out differences existing among businesses and organizations according to company size, and very particularly, the resources used with respect to the inexperienced graduate personnel selection practices.

Design/methodology/approach (mandatory)

To this end, we have performed an empirical study consisting of two qualitative data-gathering processes and a survey. Firstly, we completed twelve in-depth interviews, followed by three world cafés with HR managers and consultants. Secondly, a survey was also conducted with 186 experienced Business graduates, team managers or middle-level staff.

Findings (mandatory)

The main results support the idea that generic competencies are the ones most appreciated in graduates. Attitudes are among the generic competencies considered most critical in inexperienced Business graduates. In particular, intra-personal, followed by inter-personal attitudes and values, were the most frequently cited and highly valued competencies. In contrast, most of the specific knowledge competences that are required for Business graduates are taken for granted. For its part, we found that excelling inexperienced graduates are those who show convincing proofs of holding attitudinal competences, signaled through some experience of international interchange programs, or pre-graduate internships in companies. Also, we found that HR managers and consultants show clear differences of preference for a set of competences or another depending on the size of the recruiting company. In particular, generic competences of knowledge, abilities, attitudes and values rate higher among small firms than larger ones.

Originality/value (mandatory)

Finally, we give recommendations for faculties and business schools headed to a more intensive development of generic competences, and the learning of skills on how to tailor curricula during studies and how to find jobs.

Keywords

Business Competences, Graduates in Business Administration, University Education, Human Resources Requirements.

1. Introduction

During the last five decades, progress has been made in education and training programs, to the extent that there has been a methodological “paradigm shift”, from a teaching-centred vision to a learning-centred one in which the student’s role should be more active (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). However, nowadays there is no consensus on a concrete universal list of competences, or even with respect to the meaning of the term *competence* (Winterton *et al.* 2006). In fact, its meaning has been subject to different interpretations dependent on the discipline or the passage of time (Wagenaar 2014).

According to Boyatzis, the best candidates are those who outperform in the so-called “threshold competencies”. These are “those competencies only demonstrated, more frequently demonstrated or demonstrated in a more sophisticated way by superior performers” (Emmerling and Boyatzis 2008, p.11). There is also recurring evidence of works highlighting the importance of soft skills (Salas-Velasco 2012), or generic competences. These appear to be particularly relevant to the graduates’ successful performance. In fact, it has been empirically proven that generic competences are particularly useful for employees to adapt and improve their performance, especially when facing some degree of misallocation from the “vocational” (i.e., specific) competences acquired during their university years to those other competences that are necessary for a job (Heijke, Meng and Ris 2003). Other researches have studied some particular soft skills. This is the case of Gruzdev M.V. *et al.* (2018), who analyze the social skills of company employees and the valuation of these by employers. Their results show a high importance of these skills and a mismatch with the training received on them.

In contrast to their importance as per job performance, the assessment of a general competence usually proves to be especially difficult, compared to the situation with specific competences.

Thus, it is paramount to gain insight into recognising them, both directly or from the use of accessible and closely related features (i.e. *proxies*). Hence, our study's central aim is to detect how human resources managers measure or recognise those generic competences considered to be "threshold" or critical. Secondly, we aim to point out contrasts between the different practices, resulting from the diversity of organizations demanding graduates, fundamentally in terms of their size, and particularly in respect to the resources used in personnel selection processes. Some studies have already pointed out the importance of training in aspects such as effective leadership skills and emotional competences in a particular sector, as is the case of the public sector (Matjie 2018). Others have done so in specific professional fields, such as the training of soft skills in the hotel and restaurant sector (Kiryakova-Dineva et al.,2019).

The next section reviews the relevant literature on competences and raises the research propositions. In the third section, we explain the qualitative and quantitative data-gathering and its analysis. We then discuss the results obtained. Our last section explains the conclusions, limitations and possible avenues for future research.

2. Background literature on competences in the case of Business graduates

During the last decades, significant progress has been made in higher education teaching and assessment. The shift, from a logic of instruction to a logic of learning, has rendered the first one obsolete (Wright, Bitner and Zeithaml 1994, Barr and Tagg 1995, Peterson 2001). To a large extent, this is due to a number of key contributions from two research streams in Psychology, namely, in Educational Psychology, and in the Psychology of Learning and Motivation. The first one, represented in the works by Bloom *et al.* (1956), Kratwohl *et al.* (1956), and the recent adaptation from Anderson *et al.* (2001), gave taxonomies of cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains in Education and is still widely used as a means of describing learning outcomes in education programmes (O'Neill and Murphy 2010). For its part, the second research stream paved the way to acknowledge these learning outcomes in the form of *critical incidents* (Flanagan 1954), *competences* (White 1959) or *competencies* (McClelland 1973), as training and evaluation tools to be developed by students not only in education or training, but in their everyday working life.

The design of teaching and professional programmes in terms of competences has gained relevance in the last 40 years. However, throughout these years, the evolution into a fully developed theory of competences is yet to be complete for to a number of reasons. First, there have been a high number of alternative definitions and several propositions for classification in

the literature, adding confusion to the need to better understand its meaning and practical use (Rothwell and Lindholm 1999, Winterton, Delamare-Le Deist and Stringfellow 2006, Wagenaar 2014).

Second, despite the initial enthusiasm concerning this new paradigm, a certain degree of skepticism arose from the difficulties in extending the competences framework to graduate training and evaluation programmes. What is more, the initial quantitative empirical studies did not obtain very clear conclusions, even to the point of attributing competence development more to qualities intrinsic to the person than due to their acquisition through the training process (Pascarella and Terencini 1991, Boyatzis and Saatcioglu 2008). Past studies did not differentiate competences development during college from their development *as a consequence of* college training (Pascarella and Terencini 1991). Also, it seems that the preferential sequence of assessed skills in fresh graduate differs from recruiters to trainers of graduate programs (Nusrat and Sultana 2019).

Third, some of the first studies evaluating the results in higher education gave pessimistic conclusions regarding the quality assessment of learning outcomes in training or Master's degree programmes (Porter and McKibbin 1988, Mentkowski *et al.* 1990, Boyatzis, Stubbs and Taylor 2002). It must also be noted that progress has been much less significant in student assessment. In some European Higher Education Area countries, "the most critical problems are a lack of recognition of the value of student evaluation of teaching, independent learning and the use of learning outcomes" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2015, p. 17).

All in all, past relevant literature on competences has been focused on evaluation of training programmes, from psychological and Education Science disciplines, largely through the students' points of view of their own development, with the general aim of improving competence training programmes (Boyatzis 2008, Boyatzis and Saatcioglu 2008, Boyatzis 2011). There is also research revealing students' own impressions concerning their employability, and the distance between their ideas and employers' preferences (Tymon, 2013, Cavanagh *et al.* 2015).

Our research aim is to determine if there is a consensus among employers on what competences they consider as *threshold* (Emmerling and Boyatzis 2012, p.11). These tend to be mainly generic competences, helping graduates to perform successfully in a job. On the other hand, there is a practical aim, namely, to serve as an orientation to Faculty and academic programme directors in Business and Economics, towards development of those competences that are most demanded on the job market.

Generic competences that predict outstanding leadership, management or professional performance in a candidate comprise three categories: (1) cognitive intelligence competences; (2) intrapersonal abilities or emotional intelligence competences; and (3) interpersonal abilities, or social intelligence competences (Boyatzis 2008, Boyatzis and Saatchioglu 2008). The first ones are exemplified in tasks such as “systems thinking” or “pattern recognition”. A cognitive competence can be defined as “an ability to think or analyse information and situations that leads to or causes effective or superior performance” (Boyatzis 2008, p.8). The latter two configure what is meant by emotional intelligence competences (Boyatzis, Stubbs and Taylor 2002, citing Goleman 1998). Taking these categories into account, we formulate the following research propositions:

RP1: The most demanded competences, considered determinants for candidate selection, are of a generic type.

RP2: The more general a required profile is, the greater likelihood of candidates being selected considering their general cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal competences.

RP3: In job-hiring processes for inexperienced graduates, the selection will place greater emphasis on generic cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal competences than on specific competences.

Apart from the candidates’ own competences, companies’ preferences determine their interest for a type of profile to select from. Firms need to find a balance across ages, profiles and experience levels within their human resources. The size of the firm and its intellectual capital conditions have a profound effect on its recruiting preferences. Firms need to invest heavily in the selection, appraisal, rewards and development of their human resources (Tichy, Fombrun and Devanna 1981). Larger firms tend to invest more resources in order to perform these tasks.

Finally, empirical data from past research in general support the idea that large firms are more competent at attracting and retaining talented people (Hiltrop 1999). Furthermore, it has been found that upward in-firm mobility is more likely to be experienced in large than in small firms (Cheng and Kalleberg 1996, Francesconi 2001). In addition, training programs in big firms tend to be systematically administered, and the recognition of their usefulness to improve performance is clearly assumed by top management (Gray 2004). In contrast, there are a number of reasons supporting the evidence that managers of SMEs are less interested in training programs for the workforce than in big firms (Reid and Harris 2002, Gray 2004, Manimala and Kumar 2012). Employee retention figures among SMEs tend to be comparatively lower than in big firms (Barber et al. 1999, Cardon and Stevens 2004, Williamson et al. 2002). On the one hand,

due to restrictions in training resources, SMEs are more prone to look for cadres bringing more immediate results with less training effort. On the other hand, jobs tend to be more generalist in SMEs than in large firms. These differences clearly condition the appraisal of competences and candidate selection. From this logic, SMEs are supposed to look for candidates with a strong general competences base, helping them to adapt more easily despite the misallocation effect (Heijke, Meng and Ris 2003) that these candidates may feel concerning the required conditions versus their specific competences in the case of being selected. For their part, big firms employ resources to pursue a career programme path to specialisation for its selected candidates. Furthermore, these firms tend to have more specific needs in terms of demanded qualifications and competences. As a consequence, although generic competences are also important for these firms, we expect a deeper focus on specific competences. Thus, our research proposition is:

RP4: General competences tend to be more important for SMEs than for big firms. For their part, specific competences tend to be relatively more important for big firms than for SMEs.

A hiring process is potentially effort-demanding and costly for an employer. In practice, both the candidate and the recruiter face a problem of limited information. Additionally, the recruiter faces a risk of adverse selection. Thus, mutual information becomes a determinant for an effective match in the recruitment process (Spence 1973, Bidwell 2011, Salas-Velasco 2012). The candidates will have to do a signaling effort if they are to be selected over competitors, and the recruiter needs to invest time and resources to select the best candidates. As a result of this, limitation of resources and talented candidates will once more put some firms at a disadvantage with respect to selection and retention of employees. Thus, these firms will show a greater tendency to look for easy-to-grasp signals of competences: they will be attentive to acquaintances' references, examine the candidates' CVs and make their selection after interviewing those who are, *a priori*, the best, without using expensive or technically complex human-resource selection tools. In contrast, larger firms will tend to apply additional procedures to measure these competences, such as psychological tests or knowledge exams.

These facts support the following research propositions:

RP5: Larger firms make use of formal tests and exams to a greater extent than SMEs.

Thus, derived from RP5, we formulate RP6:

RP6: Small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) have a tendency to rely solely on proxies of competences, such as recommendations from acquaintances, examining the candidate's CV and the job interview.

3. Empirical study

The empirical study consisted of two qualitative data-gathering techniques and a survey. This multiplicity of data-gathering techniques aims to achieve validation through triangulation (Denzin 2017). Firstly, an in-depth interviewing process with 14 experts in a total of 12 interviews working in the areas of training, human resource selection and management, was conducted during May, June and the beginning of July 2016 (see Table 1). Secondly, three *world café* events were organized in three cities located in Northern Spain, namely, Bilbao, Vitoria-Gasteiz and Donostia-San Sebastián, during September 2016. In total, forty-four expert members of the *Colegio Vasco de Economistas-Ekonomisten Euskal Elkargoa*, a trade association of economists and business graduates participated. In order to orient the interviews and world cafés properly, we drew on a guideline developed in a previous edition of a study with the participation of two of the co-authors (Periáñez et al. 2009). This guideline contains a competences map divided into four specific groups: (1) knowledge; (2) abilities; (3) attitudes; and (4) values. The following table gives an account of the sample composition of experts for the in-depth interviews.

Table 1. Sample of interviewed experts

Interview No.	Expert No.	Sex	Profile description	Type of organization	Size
Int.1	Exp.1	Male	CEO	IT (Software production) firm	Small
Int.2	Exp.2	Male	CEO	HR Consulting firm	Small
Int.3	Exp.3	Male	Head of HR	Energy production and distribution	Large
Int.4	Exp.4	Male	Senior member of technical cabinet	Employment and training service public organization	Large
Int.5	Exp.5	Female	Senior member of technical cabinet	Employment and training service public organization	Large
Int.6	Exp.6	Male	Senior member of HR Dept.	Banking	Large
Int.7	Exp.7	Male	HR Consultant	HR Consulting firm	Small
Int.8	Exp.8	Female	Head of team	IT (Software production) firm	Mid-sized
	Exp.9	Male	Team member		
Int.9	Exp.10	Male	HR Consultant	HR Consulting firm	Large
Int.10	Exp.11	Female	Head of HR	Food & non-durables retail firm	Large
Int.11	Exp.12	Male	Senior consultant	Employment and training service dept. at a public university faculty	Large
	Exp.13	Female	Senior consultant		
Int.12	Ref.14	Male	Head of branch	IT (Software)	Mid-sized

Second, in each of the above-mentioned three world café sessions (Brown, Isaacs and Wheatley 2005), two members of the team conducted the meetings. As a group qualitative research technique, world café sessions allow participants to take part actively, encouraging reflection and dialogue in a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. World café sessions allow the combined use of multiple techniques for recording ideas, making it possible to recognize the individual preferences and those of the group, and respect the diversity of opinions (Estacio and Karic, 2016).

All the participants were both economists specialized in training or human resource administration (HR), and members of a professional association of economists and business graduates in an autonomous community in Northern Spain. One of the conducting researchers used a screen board to take note of the main ideas and suggestions put forward by the attendees during the meeting. These notes were photographed and transcribed into a series of spreadsheets. Later, the lists of competences and issues discussed were merged into three groups: 1) competences classified according to the above-cited list of types of competences, 2) future trends, and 3) suggestions for the case of the degree studies in Business Administration. A total of 3 meetings were held, with 9, 12 and 27 people, respectively, each in a separate city. At each meeting, individuals had to sit in groups of 3 to 5. In rounds lasting 10 minutes, at least 2 members from each table had to move to a different one, totaling 3 rounds. One member stood permanently at each table as note taker.

Lastly, a telephone survey was conducted with 992 team and HR managers from November 15th to December 15th 2016. The selected respondents were chosen from a sampling frame of 4,880 registered members of a professional association of Business and Economics graduates, and had all belonged to it for least 7 years. The rate of valid completed interviews was 40.4%, totaling 401 respondents.

4. Main results

4.1 Results from the in-depth interviews

From the series of in-depth interviews, regarding the selection process of graduates without relevant working experience and junior graduates, it can be seen that non-specific competences prevail over specific ones. This is also supported by the literature review. These competences, listed in order of decreasing importance are attitudes first, followed by abilities (skills), values, and lastly, knowledge competences.

Attitudes and values as competences:

Although the academic literature does not mention values as differentiated from attitudes, the team considered it relevant to contrast the differences in meaning, for a number of reasons. First, the field-work was conducted in Spanish for which, depending on the context, both words may differ significantly. Second, and more important, all of the interviewed experts considered that there is a distinction between the two concepts in the competences list. Finally, for some respondents, values remain a key aspect and precede attitudes in importance.

Regarding the list of values as competences, although respondents recognise the importance of taking values into account in job selection, there is no consensus on what features make these different from attitudes. Nor is there a common meaning. However, one of the most frequently repeated values is commitment and responsibility, followed by an ethical stand and integrity. Less cited and valued are humility, social and environmental sensitivity, and a sense of belonging.

One of the most salient opinions regarding values comes from a HR consultant, and gives a reason for which values tend to be missed in job selection processes:

It is just that values are a very delicate issue. [...] Attitudes are another issue. Thus, we never dare to interfere with values. But another thing is we always say that affinity from personal attitudes with respect to company values is the best indicator of permanence commitment over time.
[Ref.5, Int.2, Exp.2]

The attitudes most demanded by the majority of the experts consulted were the following, listed in order of the number of times they were repeated: a) being proactive, b) empathy and sociability, c) having an optimistic and positive attitude, d) willingness to form part of a team, e) ambition, f) willingness to teach, share and motivate, g) openness to self-criticism and reflection, h) inquisitiveness to innovate, i) willingness to continuous improvement, j) openness to assume difficulties, and k) tolerance to frustration.

Proactivity is linked to showing curiosity, being alert, showing readiness to react to risks or changes, having initiative, or being willing to “take a step forward”. Proactivity is not regarded as an ability gained during the degree studies, but rather is supposed to be an intrinsic quality of the candidate:

They are unlikely to be proactive when they have not had to be. [In reference to their university studies and previous years].[...] *But you are what you’ve done in the last 5 years of your life.*
[Refs. 1 and 2, Int.2, Exp.2]

Regarding the willingness to integrate in the team, impressions clearly vary depending on the size of the organization. In the case of managers from small organizations, it is inconceivable not to have this competence:

Here we are 46 people, but growing. No one is just allowed to come in and then act as if "I am one more on the list to go unnoticed" [Ref.2, Int.12, Exp.14]

In contrast, in a large firm the idea of this competence is seemingly assumed in a more abstract way, in terms of being aligned to the values and attitudes of the organization itself.

Companies like ours offer stability, a future, but people get confused. [...] For us, being forward-looking, integrating in a particular project, and loyalty to that project are very important. [Ref. 2, Int.3, Exp. 3]

Interestingly, although it is positively mentioned by some respondents, ambition is not one of the most highly regarded competences in a graduate. Provided it is revealed in a positive way if aligned to the firm's interests, it is an acceptable competence:

We needn't condemn individual ambition. But it is something difficult to see, as they [i.e., those holding this feature] tend to collide a lot with the group. [Ref.1, Int.10, Exp. 11].

A relevant idea comes from the ease or difficulty to measure attitudes as competences. Only large organizations employ series of psychometric tests, and show availability of resources for detecting those attitudes that result more appropriate, even though it is comparatively more difficult than detecting knowledge or ability-based competences.

It is more subtle, but in the end, what is at stake is obtaining evidence from interviews. And then come the attitudes – it is true that projective personality tests help a lot. [Ref.5, Int.3, Exp.3]

Abilities as competences:

Although these abilities sometimes appear to overlap, the most frequently mentioned, listed in order of decreasing importance, are: a) team-working; b) oral and written fluency; c) ability to learn; d) adaptability to different situations, different environments; e) analysis and synthesis ; f) planning and managing time correctly; g) problem-solving; h) negotiation; i) ability to decide in the face of risks; j) creativity; and k) being autonomous and well-organised.

The most frequently valued condition from the experts consulted is that the candidate shows good qualities for team-working. However, rather than an ability, it consists of a number of

abilities. It must be understood as a set of competences owing to which the employee acts in desired or effective ways within the team:

Team-working means knowing how to manage the task you've been given. It means time, resources, and a deliverable. Sometimes it means passing the baton to someone correctly, accordingly. [Ref.1, Int.4, Exp.4].

Another salient idea emerges regarding the ability for oral and written fluency. Here, this element is assumed to be a necessary feature in university people that many graduates shamefully lack:

[Referring to graduate candidates' oral expression in an interview:] *Often, I feel sorry for the poor guys, because they don't know how to express themselves fluently. This is a great weakness of the university* [Ref.1, Int.5, Exp.5]

Sometimes you come across people who simply do not reach the basics of completing a good report [Ref.2, Int.7, Exp.7]

Regarding the ability to learn, this again is a quality that is mixed with other competences mentioned such as working autonomously, adaptability to different situations, capacity for analysis and synthesis, or solving problems. Once more, it is a highly valued competence, especially in the case of graduates in Business Administration or Economics, due to the rapid changes in businesses.

I prefer someone who manages his [or her] knowledge well, who knows where to find it, who knows how to learn.[...]For me, the capacity to learn is the most important thing [Refs.1 & 2, Int.5, Exp.5]

The employee who learns without help from you ends up being a very valuable asset. [Ref.1, Int.4, Exp.4]

Then, what really matters? It is having that capacity to adapt and absorb information quickly, and to develop new abilities as soon as possible. [Ref.1, Int.9, Exp.10]

Finally, leadership as a competence was repeatedly commented on in some detail in nearly all of the interviews. However, interestingly, it was considered as not such a good feature by graduate candidates. On the contrary, leadership attitudes are appreciated among experienced managers, or at least junior to senior cadres, when integration in the firm's values has been amply demonstrated. Nor are all the graduate employees in a firm needed for leadership positions:

"Leadership ability?" Come on, not everybody can become a leader! [Ref.1, Int.1, Exp.1]

Maybe leadership or the ability to negotiate comes rather more from experience, when you are expected to take on other types of tasks.[Ref.1, Int.8, Exp.8]

Knowledge competences:

Noticeably, the evaluation of specific knowledge, despite being somewhat frequent in job selection processes, is often taken for granted. There is also consensus with respect to the fact that evaluating a specific knowledge competence is not difficult.

The most frequently cited knowledge competence was fluency in the English language. Secondly, knowledge of office software and concretely, basic knowledge with spreadsheets, were regarded a must. Third, more than half of the interviewed experts acknowledge multidisciplinary vision as a valuable knowledge competence. Some link it with polyvalence. Others link it with some abilities such as finding and acquiring knowledge fast, or with the capacity to look at projects transversally. In all these cases, multidisciplinary vision is regarded as a distinctive competence in Business and Economics graduates.

I definitely think that Economics graduates [and graduates in Business] do have a wider vision and capability for adapting to different situations [Ref.2, Int.11, Exp.12]

Finally, in all the cases, it turns out that information and communication technologies (ICTs) are mentioned, but only some include greater specificity such as presence on the Internet and social media sites. In three, there is mention of having some background of enterprise resourced planning (ERP) programs. Finally, only in one case is presence in LinkedIn a relevant aspect for every candidate if they are to find a job.

Having examined the opinions on values, attitudes, abilities and knowledge competences, we can partially conclude that in the case of graduates in Business and in Economics, general competences are overwhelmingly appreciated compared to more specific ones, such as those posed in RP1. Also, there is recurrent evidence in the sense that these are the competences examined, above all in the case of inexperienced graduates, as posed in RP3. However, this research proposition along with proposition RP2 (namely, that the more generalist a profile is, the more likely a candidate is to be selected considering their general cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal competences), both need further comparison from contrast with the selection of more experienced graduates in Business and Economics. One of the few salient opinions backing these two propositions was recorded from an HR consultant, referring to communication abilities and the fact that these are not always necessary in some jobs:

I think that each job profile demands very particular abilities [Ref.1, Int.5, Exp.6]

My perception is that all mathematicians, and people who do data analysis, are very strange [people]. But they definitely do their work superbly. They don't need to mix with anyone. [Ref.2, Int.5, Exp.6]

Thus, from these two excerpts we can surmise that, in the case of highly technical jobs, the general competence recognition and valuation is more balanced in favor of the possession of the required set of specific knowledge competences.

Finally, as is seen in the next section, the candidate's age tends to be a proxy of their having acquired more specific competences, such as experience or specific knowledge that is required for the job, in the case of a specific (non-generic) job-profile.

Circumstances, company size and their effect on hiring graduates:

Except for the consultancy firms, all the large surveyed firms plus one of the middle-sized firms manifest that it is more suitable for them to hire inexperienced graduates and train and promote them internally than hiring managers. However, the association between company size and preferences for a more or less generalist type of profile is not clear. The situations found through the interviews point to a more complex reality: regardless of their size, companies seek a balance across profiles, and their search for competences seems to obey this rule:

When you are dealing with technology, the people you look for are under 30. However, as a matter of finding a balanced workforce, you seek a balance in terms of age.[...] Yet we are conscious of the fact that we must find [trained] people because technology is changing fast; this is a very stressful sector. So, you need to have people entering the firm, giving you new ideas... [Refs.1 and 2, Int. 1, Exp. 1]

Also, the lasting economic crisis has taken its toll on chances to train people:

Companies have started to be interested in people from 27 or 28 years of age, and firms do not have a single gram of fat. It is not like before, when they absorbed everything. [...] Another thing is the fact that we all need some transition time in order to deliver value. [Refs.2-4, Int.2, Exp.2]

Despite these general facts, in large firms the opposite is the norm, and thus, preferences lean towards inexperienced graduates with potential for career development:

In our company, and all the big firms like it, first comes internal selection. [...] It's very difficult to find a big firm selecting team managers, department managers or area managers because all that goes through internal promotion. [Ref.1, Int.3, Exp.3]

We always look for inexperienced graduates, partly because of our policy of training our people in-house.[Ref. 1,Int. 6,Exp. 6]

*A very high proportion of the new personnel we have here are inexperienced people, and we are looking forward to having them completing their professional career with us [Ref.1, Int.8, Exp.8]
Here we are a bit special, so we do things our own way. Thus, in our firm we don't care about having to give training [Ref.1, Int.10, Exp.11]*

In brief, our findings are closer to reaffirming the relevance of general competencies, as set out in RP1, than finding evidence for supporting the idea that SMEs and big firms proceed in opposite ways, as is posed in RP4. It seems clear that taking on inexperienced graduates is included in a relevant proportion in every firm's aims, regardless of its size. Also, there is additional insight gained in favour of propositions RP2 and RP3. If the hiring organisation is looking for inexperienced graduates, then it will not expect a command of specific abilities or competences that are rendered normal in a specialist. It will prefer to select younger candidates that excel in generic competences. In such cases, selection will be based mainly on generic competences, as posed in RP2.

Tools for competence assessment in the selection process:

The recorded interviews also give some support to the ideas set forth in RP5 and RP6, namely, more frequent use of formal tests and exams in larger firms versus reliance on proxies of competences in the case of SMEs. Two opposite views from a large and a small firm are seen in the following excerpts:

In the case of a large firm: So, we would say that the scale consists of very detectable knowledge and attitudes through objective tests that are bought and paid for. As for abilities and skills, there are also formulas, prior to the interview, which are used as a tool to pick up on these clues and then to check them out. Values and attitudes are the most dangerous part.

...and these are also the facts that are obtained in the last stage, at the interview. This doesn't mean they are less important. [Refs7-10, Int.1, Exp.3]

In contrast, the following excerpt seems more descriptive of a small firm: *When a candidate is requested from the Economists Association, I am not asking a head-hunting job, or things like that. For these tasks I would have already hired a consulting firm. But I often come across a curriculum, and ask: "This person? What is he [she] like?" Sometimes depending on what they [my bosses] tell me, I decide to pass it to the sales department or maybe to the finance department. Quite often, this is something very cryptic. [Ref.3, Int.12, Exp.14].*

4.2 Results from the group meetings (world cafés)

Most of the results taken from the three group sessions (*world cafés*) back the observations obtained from the in-depth interviews. In each session, during the discussion phase among all the participant groups, we merged knowledge and abilities into one group, and attitudes and values into a second. Later, during the analytical phase of the ideas obtained in the three world cafés, we divided the general list of knowledge and abilities in four groups: 1) general culture; 2) social and communicative; 3) intelligence and adaptation, and 4) specific to Economics or Business graduates. For its part, attitudes and values were reclassified into: 1) self-management or intrapersonal; and 2) relationship management or interpersonal, in the same way as proposed by Boyatzis (2008), and Boyatzis and Saatcioglu (2008). The following illustration describes these classifications through three stages (Table 2).

			No. times in all sessions	
Attitudes	} Attitudes & Values	{ Intrapersonal A&V	27	
Values			{ Interpersonal A&V	17
Abilities	} Abilities & Knowledge	{ Intelligence-adaptation	15	
Knowledge			{ Socio-communicative	11
			{ Culture	10
			{ Specific to graduates in Business or Economics.	10
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-top: 10px;"> <div style="width: 30%; border-top: 1px solid black; padding-top: 5px;"> Stage 1: From Periañez <i>et al.</i> (2009). Used in the in-depth interviews </div> <div style="width: 30%; border-top: 1px solid black; padding-top: 5px;"> Stage 2: Used during discussion in the world café sessions </div> <div style="width: 30%; border-top: 1px solid black; padding-top: 5px;"> Stage 3: Extracted from the literature revision and evidenced from the data obtained in the world cafés </div> </div>				

Considering the number of times the cited group of competences was exemplified as a measure acknowledging relevance, first come the intrapersonal attitudes and values. Interpersonal attitudes and values come second, followed in third place by knowledge and abilities of intelligence and adaptation. Last are the socio-communicative, general culture, and knowledge competences that are specific to Business Administration.

Attitudes and values, as acknowledged in the world cafés:

Looking at the individually repeated attitudes and values throughout the three group sessions, the only one found in all of them was: a) initiative in the front line with customers. The rest were

mentioned in two or just one group meeting¹. Regarding the competences cited in at least two sessions, we have: b) self criticism, c) empowerment, assertion and self-management; d) empathy; e) proactivity; f) commitment and involvement with the company; g) restlessness; h) willingness to work; i) teamwork; j) creativity; k) willingness to learn; and l) positive attitude to change.

Abilities and knowledge competences as acknowledged in the world cafés:

There was a slightly higher coincidence among sessions with respect to abilities and knowledge. A number ranging from 13 to 15 were differentiated in each session, 26 in total not counting repetitions. However, it is from the number of competences cited in all the sessions where consensus is most clearly appreciated. These are: a) global vision; b) general knowledge of the world; c) polyvalence; d) communication abilities; and e) knowledge of foreign languages (mainly English). With respect to the competences cited in at least two sessions, these are: f) office software; g) emotional intelligence; h) capacity for critical thinking; i) reasoning, interpretation of data; j) social networks and ICTs; k) adaptability to change; l) learning capabilities; m) teamwork; n) capabilities for doing international work ; and o) knowledge of accountability and finance.

The results obtained from the world cafés coincide to a large extent with those from the in-depth interviews with respect to the relevance of generic competences over the specific ones. Thus RP1 is again confirmed. Secondly, given that discussion throughout all the sessions referred to graduates in Business, and being all the competences studied of a generic type, we may confirm that there is reason to accept our third research proposition (RP3), namely, that selection processes of inexperienced graduates are based mainly on generic competences.

4.3 Results from the survey with managers

The survey process tests validity of results through statistical inference. Our aim is to test RP4, stating firstly that small firms tend to value generic competences relatively more than big firms, and secondly, that big firms tend to value specific competences relatively more. To this end, the sample of firms was subdivided in quartiles according to their size measured by the number of employees. One variable ANOVA Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric tests (Kruskal & Wallis 1952) were used. The dependent variables were a subset of 19 cognitive, intrapersonal and

¹ For brevity, we omit these least frequently mentioned competences.

interpersonal competences, selected among the highest valued from the 14 experts interviewed during the in-depth interviewing phase. In order to gain simplicity and robustness of results, only the two quartiles at the extremes were taken, leaving a used sample of 95 valid cases for those respondents who had people under their authority, and 91 valid cases for those who confessed to not having had subordinates. Whereas the first group gives an idea of what is relevant in terms of competences from the point of view of the team and section of the firm, the second group represents the perspective of any ordinary experienced working mate.

Table 3. Non-parametric test results for competences across firm sizes (in quartiles)

Competence	Had people under their authority		Did not have people under their authority	
	Kruskal-Wallis ratio value	Relation with size (in quartiles) ^a	Kruskal-Wallis ratio value	Relation with size (in quartiles) ^a
Multidisciplinary vision for handling and solving issues	1.632	Equal medians	0.059	Equal medians
Use of ICTs and the most common software office work programmes	5.098*	Greater in smallest	1.281	Equal medians
Knowing foreign language(s), esp. English	7.940**	Greater in biggest group	0.030	Equal medians
Oral and written fluency	1.632	Equal medians	1.792	Equal medians
Ability to learn	5.784*	Greater in smallest	1.375	Equal medians
Team-working	4.131*	Greater in smallest	0.043	Equal medians
Analysis and synthesis	11.643*	Greater in smallest	0.093	Equal medians
Planning and managing time correctly	5.685*	Greater in smallest	0.008	Equal medians
Adaptability to different situations, different environments	7.676**	Greater in smallest	0.088	Equal medians
Being proactive	3.780	Equal medians	0.848	Equal medians
Willingness to continuous improvement	4.117*	Greater in smallest	2.560	Equal medians
Openness to self-criticism and reflection	14.153***	Greater in smallest	1.321	Equal medians
Optimistic and positive attitude	3.450	Equal medians	0.563	Equal medians
Willingness to teach, share and motivate	10.056**	Greater in smallest	0.298	Equal medians
Empathy and sociability	10.251**	Greater in smallest	0.464	Equal medians
Willingness to integrate in teams	4.060*	Greater in smallest	0.256	Equal medians
Ethical principles and integrity	0.409	Equal medians	0.022	Equal medians

Humility	4.852*	Greater in smallest	0.006	Equal medians
Compromise, responsibility and maturity	7.336**	Greater in smallest	0.033	Equal medians
Being an entrepreneur, working autonomously and on a project-basis	9.050**	Greater in smallest	2.930	Equal medians
Knowledge of web digitalization and the Internet	1.953	Equal medians	0.000	Equal medians
Capacity for continuous learning by themselves	10.215**	Greater in smallest	1.321	Equal medians
International mobility and global vision	2.487	Equal medians	0.047	Equal medians
Knowledge of big data and data analysis	0.015	Equal medians	0.065	Equal medians
Knowledge of the new economy, ethical banking, collaborative economy, etc.	0.065	Equal medians	3.107	Equal medians

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

a. Size factor divided into the following quartiles (2 groups): $Q1 \leq 5$ and $Q3 \geq 120$; $n = 95$ cases, 35 missing or discarded.

It is noteworthy that the obtained results did not show significant differences in the second group of respondents (i.e., those not having had anyone under their authority) in terms of size of companies (Table 3). On the contrary, in the first group, there are significant differences between groups with respect to size in a number of competences. For most of the significant differences, higher scores appear in the first quartile, representing micro-businesses of 5 or fewer employees, compared to firms with 120 or more. Only knowledge of foreign languages obtains an opposite result, with significantly higher scores from the firms in the biggest quartile. This result seems plausible, as big firms are comparatively more internationally focused than micro firms. For the rest of competences, these results correlate with the first part of RP4, namely, that general competences are relatively more valuable in SMEs than in big firms. Finally, there is no clear evidence for the second part of RP4 proposition, as the few added specific competences in this test do not seem to back this idea. For example, knowledge of big data and data analysis or knowledge of web digitalization and the internet do not vary across company size.

5. Discussion and conclusions

More than 50 years have passed since the seminal works in Psychology and Educational Sciences contributing to a paradigm shift from teaching to learning came to light. Through these years, significant progress has been made in defining educational performance in terms of learning

outcomes and competences demanded by organizations and society in general. This process, affecting the pattern of demand for skills and the structure of employment, has resulted mainly from the influence of the key driving forces of technological change, globalization and demographics (Wilson 2013).

In this context, regardless of how proactive or willing they may be, universities alone cannot provide graduates with a comprehensive learning arena for acquiring all the necessary competences that satisfy the purposes and goals of the workplace. Other agents must also participate in the qualification of professionals. Very particularly, students need to engage as learning also results from “an interdependence between the immediate social experience and individuals’ appropriation of that experience” (Billet 2008, p.238). Our study has taken empirical evidence of how this implication is signaled from those students who not only excel in their studies, but also try to gain real working experience through pre-graduate internships in companies, or extra-university training such as foreign languages. Unfortunately, this is not the case of all students, at least at the time of graduation.

Very particularly in the case of public universities in Spain, student admission is not based on personal attributes, such as those frequently ascertained in a typical work-selection process. As a consequence, it could be assumed that the social responsibility of training on demanded generic abilities, attitudes and values will have to be mostly supported by these centres on the assumption that the quality of its graduate studies will be equated to the possession of these competences and success in the job market by their former students. Hence, not only is there an impossibility to select the best but the obligation to train in these non-ascertained competences.

Public centers and faculties should focus their Bachelor’s programmes on better development of transversal competencies. In the here studied case of Bachelor’s degrees in Business, faculties must offer more and better training programmes that focus on developing the ability for team working, oral and written fluency, continuous learning, or analysis and synthesis, among others. With respect to cross-cutting knowledge competencies, faculties should particularly increase their efforts concerning the English language and office software, to mention the ones most frequently cited. Finally, attitudes very much appreciated from organizations include being proactive, empathy and sociability or having an optimistic attitude, to mention the most often stated.

With the aim of detecting those generic competences considered critical in inexperienced graduates in Business, we find that organizations put emphasis on certain generic competences.

Very particularly with this type of candidates, certain attitudes and values are most important, followed by abilities and knowledge competences. This result goes hand in hand with previous literature.

Along these lines, it would be advisable to create specific subjects and to propose some relevant transversal competences in different subjects for Business students, such as ICTs, use of social networks, digital marketing, use of spreadsheets, during the initial courses.

A final important aspect for university graduates is curricular development improvement activities related to company presentations at the university. The possibility of comparing curricula of graduates newly hired by companies and those of students in later years of study can also be very useful for the latter in order to make decisions regarding their training or curricular specialisation.

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