



# Soft skills and the corporate social dimension: the perspective of university graduate employers

Ana Vázquez-Rodríguez<sup>1</sup> · Anaïs Quiroga-Carrillo<sup>1</sup> · Jesús García-Álvarez<sup>1</sup> · Daniel Sáez-Gambín<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Today's job market is characterised by intense competition among young graduates with the same qualifications. Consequently, soft skills have become particularly important in the processes of attracting and recruiting talent because they allow improvements in productivity, innovation, and internationalisation within businesses. This study aims to determine the soft skills that Spanish employers demand most from university graduates within the Spanish context. More specifically, it seeks to provide evidence related to the demand for these skills according to variables such as Corporate Social Responsibility, employers' social engagement, and candidates' participation in non-formal education activities. To this end, a quantitative methodology was applied, using a sample of 83 employers from different businesses. The results show that the soft skills in most demand were related to interpersonal relationships, self-management, and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, there were differences in this assessment related to employers' social engagement and graduate participation in non-formal education activities. The study has implications for higher education institutions' strategies and for students' academic and professional development, contributing to a better fit between education and business.

**Keywords** Soft skills · Employers · University graduates · Employability · Corporate social responsibility · Job market signalling · Employer branding · Higher education institutions

## 1 Introduction

The modern job market has become a place of 'positional competition' in which young people are confronted with a limited number of available jobs (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Brown et al., 2004). Moreover, the mismatch between labour supply and demand has caused employers to focus on high standards and critically reviewing applicants' merits during recruitment processes (Nuijten et al., 2017). This scenario of intense competition in the job market among graduates with the same formal qualifications and the overcrowding

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✉ Ana Vázquez-Rodríguez  
ana.vazquez@usc.es

<sup>1</sup> ESCULCA Research Group, Department of Pedagogy and Didactics, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain

of higher education (Figueiredo et al., 2017) has led to the emergence of a particularly selective labour environment with three interrelated points of interest. Firstly, companies have focused their policies on talent acquisition and retention and on seeking highly qualified young graduates (Leekha & Sharma, 2014). Secondly, universities are more aware of their role in graduate employability, incorporating ‘pedagogies for employability’ (García-Álvarez et al., 2022; Pegg et al., 2012) into their strategies. Thirdly, university graduates are facing labour uncertainty which forces them to increase their personal capital in order to improve their situation in the job market (Brown & Hesketh, 2004).

In view of the current employment situation, universities must focus on taking responsibility and acting to promote their students’ employability (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). In this context, the definition of graduate employability addresses a person’s self-awareness of the competences for moving in social and occupational environments that are ever more unstable and turbulent—meaning that there is a particular link to adaptability and resilience (World Economic Forum, 2023). Employability is understood as a multi-dimensional idea, affected by several variables, including human and social capital, career management, and the external and contextual factors of the labour market (Clarke, 2018).

In today’s knowledge economy, and given the challenges posed by technology, green transition and demographics, soft skills have become particularly important in recruitment processes (World Economic Forum, 2023). These are skills which allow for effective action in various workplace environments, while increasing productivity and business performance, working in different types of teams, and stimulating innovation and economic growth (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Blair & Deming, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2023). Graduates can demonstrate their skills and personality traits to employers, as well as their suitability for future employment. Higher education institutions (HEIs), in response to the pressure from political agents and employers, have increased their efforts to implement programmes aimed at improving the competency related to their qualifications in order to address the underlying mismatch between the academic and business worlds (Clarke, 2018; Succi & Canovi, 2020). However, the contemporary job market is highly unstable, which significantly alters graduates’ opportunities for professional development. At present, having access to a job assumes that one understands job transition as a highly complex process in which, besides the skills needed, there are external factors which play a role, such as the macroeconomic conditions of the labour market, employment policies, and employers’ beliefs and expectations (Bailly, 2008; Bennett, 2018; Bridgstock, 2009).

With regard to the context of this study, as an EU member state, Spain has articulated its political efforts to address the high level of youth unemployment and the precariousness and social exclusion of its young population, including those with university qualifications (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2023). This was set out in the *First Youth Action Plan 2022–2024* (INJUVE, 2023), which includes measures aimed at strengthening public education and incorporating new models of soft skills training for young people’s social and professional development in order to respond to the complexity of the socioeconomic system. Consequently, this issue represents one of the main topics of education policy, which has led to a significant increase in the number of publications in multidisciplinary journals on the subject.

Despite the growing interest in research on the soft skills required in today’s labour market, there are still some outstanding issues in the literature. The first concerns the assessment of these skills in a homogeneous way, given the diversity of denominations and their alignment with the needs identified in different professional contexts (García-Álvarez et al., 2022; Suleman, 2018). Secondly, there are specific gaps on the influence

of Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Volunteering or the employer's social engagement in the assessment of soft skills in graduate recruitment processes, an area still unexplored in the literature. In this vein, Boehncke's (2023) systematic review focusing on the role of Corporate Social Responsibility in high potential recruiting concludes that soft skills are rarely considered in current research discourse, although they are central to recruiting employees that master the task settings of future leadership positions.

In the context of socially responsible companies, it is interesting to analyse whether the participation of graduates in non-formal education activities has a signalling effect during the recruitment process, as they are expected to possess certain soft skills. Available evidence has demonstrated the impact of young people's involvement in non-formal education on their employability (Santos Rego et al., 2018). These socially responsible experiences (e.g. volunteering or participating in community activities) could have a signalling effect by demonstrating a range of skills that may prove their potential fit within the organisation (Souto-Otero, 2016). In this respect, we found little evidence of differences in the assessment of soft skills during the recruitment process when the employer is aware of the candidate's previous involvement in non-formal education or extracurricular activities. However, it has been reported that employers value these experiences, as they associate them with interpersonal skills and social engagement of potential candidates (Brown & Campion, 1994; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Cole et al., 2007). In general, these literature gaps are identified as central to this study and will allow us to determine whether there is a specific profile of skill requirements for university graduates as a way of attracting talent based on the corporate social dimension.

Therefore, our study focuses on determining which soft skills employers demand most from university graduates across Spain as a developed country. Specifically, it provides evidence of the demand for these skills based on company profiles and employer characteristics. In general, the interest of the study focuses on two lines of analysis that shed light on the situation in the Spanish labour market in terms of recruitment of university graduates from the employers' perspective. On the one hand, from a signalling perspective (Spence, 1973) and young people's need to increase their 'personal capital' to enter the job market (Brown & Hesketh, 2004), we study the value of participation in non-formal education activities as a signalling effect during recruitment processes. We expect that potential employers will value university students' involvement in these activities during recruitment as that would reflect certain competences and personality traits of interest to the business. On the other hand, in a labour context of highly selective human capital, from the perspective of employer branding—focused on differentiating a company's characteristics as a potential employer compared to competing organisations (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004)—we analyse whether the corporate social dimension influences the demand for soft skills. More specifically, we examine whether variables related to Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Volunteering as well as employers' social engagement make a difference to the soft skills they expect of the graduates. Socially responsible organisational behaviour is expected to involve the assessment of soft skills that are linked to a greater attraction and maintenance of talent in organisations (Hurrell & Scholarios, 2011).

To respond to these lines of analysis, the study addresses the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1. What are university graduates' soft skills that employers value most in the recruitment process?

- RQ2. Is there a relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility and the assessment of soft skills?
- RQ3. Is there a relationship between the employers' social engagement and the assessment of soft skills?
- RQ4. Does the assessment of soft skills differ according to university graduates' participation in non-formal education?

Thus, the interest in this paper is in analysing the importance employers attribute to soft skills in the Spanish context—a context characterised by high rates of unemployment and job insecurity. This may have implications in the promotion of policies by HEIs, as well as in the provision of relevant information about the most in-demand skills, so that university graduates have the knowledge to get involved in processes to improve their personal capital.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Human capital and job market signalling theory—The role of soft skills

Human capital theory argues that education and training are the most important investments (Becker, 1994). Investment in education improves an individual's knowledge and skills, which are essential for increasing income in terms of occupation, as well as economic welfare (Schultz, 1961). Based on this theory, employers' decision-making initially focused on university graduates' qualifications (Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021). Today, in a scenario marked by the overcrowding of higher education and the ready availability of graduates with similar qualifications (Figueiredo et al., 2017), recruitment standards have changed, and employers must choose between several candidates perceived as 'the most talented'. The consequence of this transformation has been to place greater importance on complementary employability indicators beyond formal qualifications (Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021).

According to the theory of job market signalling, any recruitment decision is made under conditions of uncertainty, involving an 'investment decision' for employers (Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1973). The key point of this approach is that an individual's knowledge and skills cannot be directly observed and so recruitment managers must rely on assessing candidates through the 'signals' they provide. These 'signals' are individual characteristics or specific activities provided, such as employment history (curriculum vitae), academic history—education level and continuing education—or biographical characteristics—age, gender, and family situation—(Forrier & Sels, 2003).

More specifically, signalling approaches represent fundamental contributions to the understanding of current processes of university graduates' transition to the world of work. In a volatile work environment, formal qualifications alone no longer provide sufficient information to identify candidates' potential in the workplace (Santos Rego, 2014). In this approach, and given that formal credentials are seen as a basic requirement for employment, recent international studies of recruitment processes have underlined the value of skills in entering the job market (Blair & Deming, 2020; Brown & Souto-Otero, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2023). However, in contrast to the hard skills associated with technical skills, current recruitment processes emphasise the

importance of university graduates' soft skills transversal competences, core competences, transferable skills, or employability skills; García-Álvarez et al., 2022).

Much has been written about what differentiates soft skills from other types of competences. While hard skills refer to the technical and academic knowledge and skills needed to do a job (Andrews & Higson, 2008), soft skills include all those transversal competences that enhance individual employability in a fluid, dynamic, and uncertain labour market (Blair & Deming, 2020). Furthermore, globalisation and working in multinational contexts have led to a demand for university graduates with soft skills that enable them to operate in culturally diverse contexts (Jones, 2013). Empirical evidence indicates that these are the skills most in demand by employers because they make it possible to improve individual performance in various tasks, while fostering personal development and interaction with others (García-Álvarez et al., 2022). Broadly speaking, these skills consist of knowing how to manage new situations, being creative, working in groups, possessing critical thinking, being sociable, taking responsibility and demonstrating leadership (Fajaryati et al., 2020a, 2020b; Suleman, 2018). These skills would also indicate a relatively short period of adaptation to the job, as well as low training costs for employers (Humburg & Van der Velden, 2015).

Owing to the importance of soft skills—and despite universities in the international context strengthening their policies and strategies through 'pedagogies for employability'—the business community has identified numerous skill gaps (World Economic Forum, 2023) and has expressed dissatisfaction with the extent to which HEIs provide these skills (Baird & Parayitam, 2019). In Spain, this issue is even more worrying in light of youth unemployment rates, with sustained evidence of a mismatch between the skills graduates acquire and those the job market demand (Teijeiro et al., 2013). In addition, studies have highlighted gaps in certain soft skills that are essential for the workplace (Bartual & Turmo, 2016), and university graduates have been found to not sufficiently demonstrate these skills to employers, which is a problem in their transition to the world of work (Baird & Parayitam, 2019).

As a result, in order to strengthen occupational positioning and the need for adjustment to existing jobs, young people must enhance their personal capital, which includes the set of qualifications, professional experiences, (non-formal and informal) learning activities, soft skills, individual attributes and/or personality traits (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2023). In this regard, as part of lifelong learning, university students can improve their employability through participation in non-formal education activities—in extracurricular, leisure and sports activities, volunteering, national and international mobility, youth organisations, and social entrepreneurship, among others. It can also be a means of compensating for their limited professional experience in accessing employment and helping to demonstrate a range of skills that would otherwise not be visible during recruitment processes (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Purcell et al., 2012; Souto-Otero et al., 2012). The main point is that participation in non-formal education can be interpreted as a 'signal' of a personality profile (Spence, 1973), assessed according to employers' belief systems and implicit theories (Bailey, 2008; Cai, 2013), which would substantially increase graduates' employment opportunities (Bangerter et al., 2012; Roulin & Bangerter, 2013).

On the whole, the scientific literature has underscored the potential of graduates' participation in non-formal education as a possible 'pattern of competitive advantage' in the twenty-first century job market (Brown & Campion, 1994; Brown & Hesketh, 2004). The available findings support the positive impact of non-formal education activity on the development of soft skills that, in line with employers' demands, enhance individuals'

options for acquiring and retaining a job (Khasanzyanova, 2017; Santos Rego et al., 2018; Souto-Otero, 2016).

## 2.2 Employer branding and corporate social responsibility

Business organisations must project a positive, attractive image to improve their ability to attract and retain potential university graduates in a competitive job market (Aiman-Smith et al., 2001). Employer branding has therefore become one of the areas of interest for organisations, especially in human resource management (Tkalac & Sinčić, 2018). The origins of this concept can be traced back to the end of the last century with the work of Ambler and Barrow (1996), who defined it as ‘the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company’ (p. 187).

More recently, Aggerholm et al. (2011) proposed a broad definition of employer branding, as ‘communicative relationship building and cross-disciplinary processes, which create, negotiate, and enact sustainable employer-employee relationships, i.e. long-term relationships between an organisation and its potential and existing employees initiated by corporate branding processes integrating the notion of corporate social responsibility’ (p. 106). In short, as Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) stated, employer branding supports the differentiation of company characteristics and their employees from their competitors. This refers to the way an organisation presents itself to potential external employees, as well as to its own employees (Aboul-Ela, 2016). It is an organisational management strategy based on the promotion of the company’s own values, culture, professional development possibilities, and human resources policies, together with other benefits that help enhance the corporate reputation (Tkalac & Sinčić, 2018). All of these are fundamental issues in the contemporary business environment, as they help business organisations to both increase employee engagement and broaden the potential job candidates’ interest (Leekha & Sharma, 2014).

The purpose of employer branding is to differentiate employers in the job market and help them retain and attract the most talented candidates (Monteiro et al., 2020). It focuses on the image the company projects and its attractiveness, and how this affects candidates’ decisions as a signalling effect to apply for jobs (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Younis & Hammad, 2020). Therefore, companies promote various strategies, policies and practices aimed at optimising their reputation. It is a vehicle for building the ‘brand image’, informing potential employees of the organisation’s abilities and the skills needed to do a particular job effectively (Cable & Turban, 2006).

To understand employer branding, one must consider the ‘corporate or organisational image’ and the ‘employer image’. The ‘corporate or organisational image’ as an employer refers to the image projected by a company in the community (Foster et al., 2010). It is important to distinguish between three potential images of the employing institution: a financial image, as a supplier of goods and services (image of a product or of the organisation), and as a socially responsible agent through its Corporate Social Responsibility activity (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). ‘Employer image’ is related to potential candidates’ beliefs about the attributes of an organisation, the conditions of employment, and team working in the organisation (Cable & Turban, 2006). Overall, research has shown that employer and organisational images play an essential role in organisational attractiveness (Younis & Hammad, 2020).

Although branding is not a recent topic, organisations are currently applying these concepts to new areas of management with specific plans in this regard. This is a key strategy in the context of the skill mismatches that companies are facing mismatches that mean companies will find it difficult in the future to attract people with sufficient soft skills to meet the current challenges of industry transformation. In response, companies have identified talent improvement, progression, and promotion processes as key business practices for increasing the organisational talent pool, offering higher salaries and effective training programmes (World Economic Forum, 2023).

One fundamental strategy that companies have followed as part of their organisational strategy is incorporating a Corporate Social Responsibility plan, along with other actions, such as Corporate Volunteering programmes (Tkalac & Sinčić, 2018). Socially responsible organisations, with employers and employees involved in these practices both internally and externally, positively influence the commitment of social agents and strengthen the corporate brand (Carlini et al., 2019). Within this framework, a strong employer brand allows institutions to attract highly qualified talent to address skill gaps in certain soft skills (Hurrell & Scholarios, 2011), while increasing productivity and competitiveness by ensuring a highly trained workforce (Reis et al., 2021). They maintain the talent already captured in the organisation through actions aimed at developing interpersonal skills, promoting creativity, communication, cooperation, teamwork, and conflict resolution (Tkalac & Sinčić, 2018). This undoubtedly represents a clear improvement in terms of efficiency and job satisfaction, linked to the pride of being involved in a socially responsible company (Jones et al., 2014), which in turn contributes to greater employee retention and a better corporate reputation in the job market.

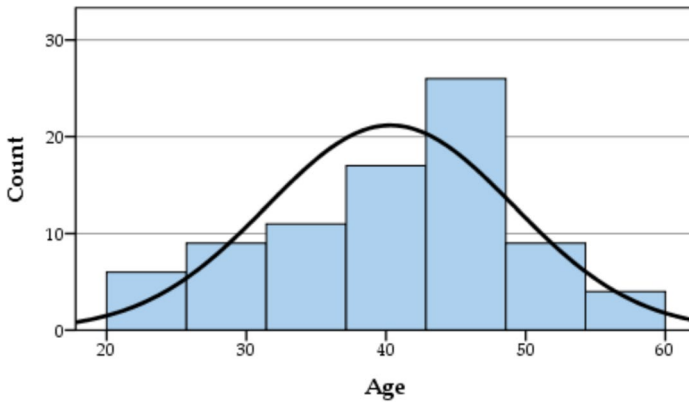
In short, employer branding linked to an organisation's greater social commitment can play a determining factor in a candidates' intention to apply for a job, as it allows graduates to identify a fit with the organisation based on their values and the potential skills that may be needed to operate in the organisational environment (Carlini et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2014). Moreover, university students have been shown to value organisations more when they are perceived as socially responsible and have a suitable employer brand (Maden et al., 2012; Tkalac & Sinčić, 2018).

### 3 Materials and methods

Based on the above, a quantitative study was proposed to identify the soft skills employers demand most from university graduates in Spain, considering various company and employer variables. A questionnaire was designed and applied to 83 people responsible for hiring (human resources managers or other management roles: henceforth called 'employers') in Spain, which included variables related to socio-demographics, company profiles, their Corporate Social Responsibility, a validated scale of soft skills, and the assessment of graduate participation in non-formal education activities.

#### 3.1 Sample

The sample consisted of 83 employers from different Spanish companies, selected by means of non-probability purposive sampling. They were aged between 20 and 57 years old ( $M=40.3$ ,  $SD=8.8$ ), meaning a large proportion of the sample had a high level of work experience (see Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1** Histogram of participants' age

The sociodemographic data are shown in Table 1: 43.4% of the sample were men ( $n=36$ ), 56.6% were women ( $n=47$ ). This is worth noting, since women are usually under-represented in senior corporate positions (National Research Council, 2010; Rice & Barth, 2017). The vast majority (87.9%) had higher education qualifications, having completed bachelor's or master's degrees or PhDs. 32.5% of the employers were company managers, 36.1% were heads of human resources, and the remainder held other senior positions in their companies.

Company profiles are shown in Table 2. The majority belonged to the tertiary sector (66.3%) and a third to the secondary (24.1%) and primary (9.6%) sector. 44.6% operated at the local or Autonomous Community level, 27.7% do so throughout Spain, and 27.7% operated internationally. The majority were micro- or small companies (61.4%), while 13.3% were medium-sized, and 25.3% were large.

**Table 1** Participants' sociodemographic data

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	36	43.4
Female	47	56.6
<i>Education level</i>		
Compulsory Secondary Education	1	1.2
Post-Secondary Vocational Training	2	2.4
Advanced Secondary Education	2	2.4
Advanced Vocational Training	5	6
Bachelor's degree	41	49.4
Master's degree	27	32.5
PhD	5	6
<i>Position within the company</i>		
CEO, manager or administrator	27	32.5
Head of HR	30	36.1
Other senior positions	26	31.3

**Table 2** Organisations' characteristics

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Professional sector</i>		
Primary	8	9.6
Secondary	20	24.1
Tertiary	55	66.3
<i>Field of work</i>		
Local-autonomous community	37	44.6
National	23	27.7
European	3	3.6
International	20	24.1
<i>Size</i>		
Micro company (< 10 employees)	31	37.3
Small company (< 50 employees)	20	24.1
Medium company (< 250 employees)	11	13.3
Large company (> 250 employees)	21	25.3

In general, the sample comprised a heterogeneous mix of managers working in a variety of companies, predominantly small companies in the service sector, in local or autonomous community settings.

### 3.2 Instrument

The instrument designed for the study aimed to analyse employers' assessments of the soft skills required from university graduates to enter the job market. It was designed in three phases. In the first one, we conducted a review of scientific literature, considering various reports and research studies focused on assessing transversal competences in higher education and their importance for employability (Allen & Van der Velden, 2007; González & Wagenaar, 2003). This was followed by an external validation, in which five evaluators, experts in the topic under study, evaluated the items in terms of validity, order and intelligibility. The last phase consisted of a psychometric validation, verifying the psychometric properties of the transversal competences scale by means of various statistics (Regueiro et al., 2021).

The final version of the questionnaire, called 'Questionnaire on Soft Skills in University Graduates–Employers' contained 13 questions and was structured in the following blocks:

- Sociodemographic data: variables relating to gender, age, education level and position within the company.
- Company profile: the professional sector, field of work, and company size.
- Soft skills: respondents rate how important they consider the soft skills to be in the graduate recruitment process on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*) with 17 items, called 'Soft Skills Scale for University Graduate Employability'.
- Corporate social dimension: variables related to the organisation as a socially responsible agent (whether it had a Corporate Social Responsibility Plan and Corporate Volunteer programme) and the social engagement of employers (collaboration with community, social or charity organisations).

- Non-formal education activities: a question on the assessment in the recruitment process of graduate involvement in activities and initiatives related to non-formal education (participation in youth organisations, social action or volunteering associations, and mobility programmes).

The ‘Soft Skills Scale for University Graduates Employability’ aimed to analyse the importance given by recruiting managers to a set of skills exhibited by university graduates linked to employability. This scale had high internal consistency ( $\alpha=0.87$ ) and was validated in the study by Regueiro et al. (2021). The final scale was made up of the items shown in Table 3.

### 3.3 Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed during 2019, with the help of bodies such as entrepreneur confederations, chambers of commerce, professional associations, and internship organisations. The research team drafted an e-mail template for the partners to distribute to their member companies. It explained the purpose of the study, the project framework, as well as relevant ethical considerations. Being responsible for recruitment and human resources and having recruited university graduates were prerequisites for participation. Partner organisations were asked to periodically resend the questionnaire in order to obtain as many responses as possible.

The instrument was completed online using SurveyMonkey. This software was chosen because it is user-friendly, has been tested with various web browsers, computer configurations, and internet services, supports SPSS for data importation, and employs high-level data protection measures.

**Table 3** Scale items

Code	Items
S1	Analytical skills
S2	Synthesis skills
S3	Planning, coordination, and organisational skills
S4	Basic general knowledge
S5	Ability to write and speak foreign languages
S6	Ability to use ICTs
S7	Problem-solving skills
S8	Decision-making skills
S9	Ability to work in a team
S10	Ability to work in an international context
S11	Leadership skills
S12	Knowledge of other countries’ cultures and customs
S13	Initiative skills
S14	Ability to present products, ideas, reports, etc., in public
S15	Effective negotiation skills
S16	Oral and written communication skills
S17	Ability to network with other individuals or teams

The study followed the recommendations of the Bioethics Committee of the University of Santiago de Compostela and complied with the principles of the Helsinki Declaration and the provisions of current Spanish data protection and privacy legislation.

### 3.4 Data analysis

First, descriptive statistics were calculated for the variables, as well as for the soft skills scale, using means and standard deviations of the item scores. Next, the Mann–Whitney U test with Bonferroni correction was used to examine differences in scale means, along with the Chi-square test and Fisher's exact test to determine whether there were differences between certain variables. All analyses were carried out using IBM Statistics SPSS v27, and the significance level was set at  $\alpha=0.05$  for all tests.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 What university graduates' soft skills are most valued by employers in the recruitment process? (RQ1)

We began the analysis by observing the scores given to the different soft skills. As Table 4 shows, in general terms, employers rated all the skills as important in the graduate recruitment processes, since all of them had scores above the arithmetic mean.

Ranked by importance, the most in-demand skills were: teamwork; problem solving; initiative; planning, coordination and organisation; oral and written communication;

**Table 4** Most important soft skills for employers

Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>S9. Ability to work in a team</i>	4.52	0.90
<i>S7. Problem-solving skills</i>	4.49	0.86
<i>S13. Initiative skills</i>	4.35	0.80
<i>S3. Planning, coordination, and organisational skills</i>	4.33	0.95
<i>S16. Oral and written communication skills</i>	4.27	0.86
<i>S8. Decision-making skills</i>	4.24	0.91
<i>S1. Analytical skills</i>	4.17	1.01
<i>S17. Ability to network with other individuals or teams</i>	4.13	0.95
S2. Synthesis skills	3.96	1.02
S6. Ability to use ICTs	3.94	1.09
S11. Leadership skills	3.93	0.91
S15. Effective negotiation skills	3.83	1.09
S14. Ability to present products, ideas, reports... in public	3.80	1.01
S4. Basic general knowledge	3.64	1.08
S5. Ability to write and speak foreign languages	3.51	1.21
S10. Ability to work in an international context	3.36	1.24
S12. Knowledge of cultures and customs of other countries	2.94	1.14

The skills with a mean above 4 (out of 5) are indicated in italics

decision-making; analysis; and networking. This clearly showed that recruitment managers looked for university graduates with relational (S9, S16, S17), cognitive (S1, S7), self-management (S3, S8), and entrepreneurial skills (S13).

The soft skills that employers rated as less important included the ability to synthesise; use of ICTs; leadership; negotiation; public speaking; basic general knowledge; writing and speaking foreign languages; working in an international context; and knowledge of the cultures and customs of other countries. Some of these are basic skills that should be used in the workplace (S2, S4, S6, S14), so employers may consider them as a requirement in performing the tasks inherent to a job. Skills linked to international competence (S5, S10, S12) may not be so necessary in local companies with little contact with the global labour market, leading to a lower rating. Finally, despite their cross-sectional character, certain skills may be less in demand owing to the characteristics of the job, e.g. leadership and negotiation (S11, S15), which are skills specific to positions of high responsibility within an organisation.

However, these results should also be interpreted according to the distribution of the scale scores (see Fig. 2), in order to study the differences and similarities in how important the employers rate the items in the recruitment process.

Employers attached great importance to teamwork (S9) and problem-solving (S7) skills, which were assessed with the highest score. There was a greater dispersion of responses for skills of initiative (S13), planning (S3), communication (S16), decision-making (S8), analysis (S1), and networking (S17). The dispersion was wider still in the ratings for synthesis (S2), use of ICTs (S6), leadership (S11), negotiation (S15), and public speaking (S14). The lowest values were for skills related to basic general knowledge (S4), writing and speaking foreign languages (S5), working in an international

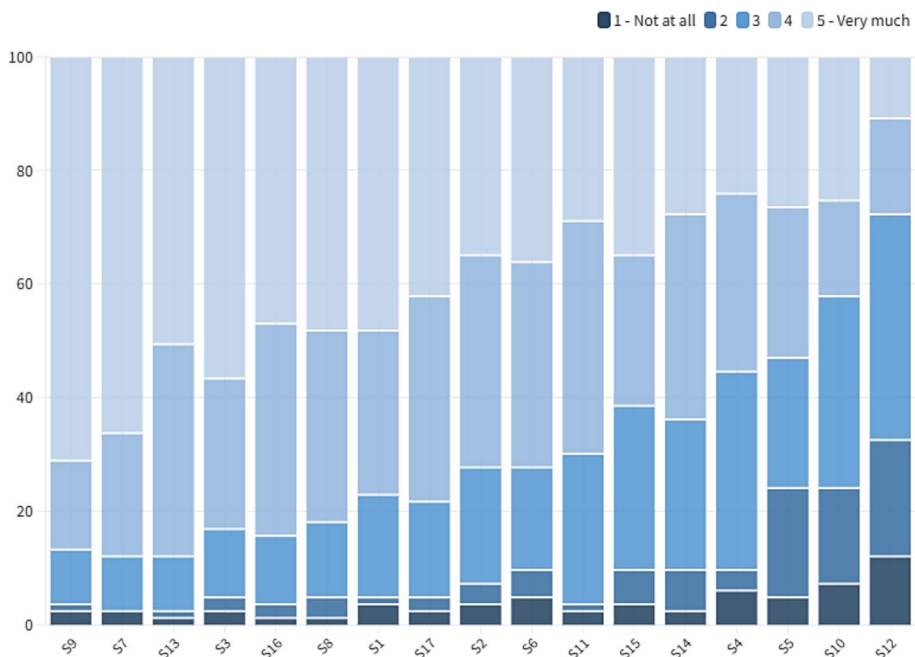


Fig. 2 Distribution of scale frequencies according to the order of importance attributed

context (S10), and knowledge of the cultures and customs of other countries (S12; 1 and 2 out of 5).

#### 4.2 Is there a relationship between corporate social responsibility and the assessment of soft skills? (RQ2)

As shown in Table 5, around half of the companies had a specific plan for Corporate Social Responsibility. These plans represent an important element of the companies' responsibility as they face the challenges related to sustainability and community commitment in the twenty-first century.

Despite Corporate Volunteer programmes not yet being a widespread strategy in Spanish companies, 15.7% had one. Analysis of the two variables with Fisher's exact test showed a significant relationship ( $p < 0.001$ ). All the companies that had a Volunteer programme also had a Social Responsibility plan, but more organisations than expected had neither of these strategies.

We examined whether the Corporate Social Responsibility scenario was generalisable or depended on certain company characteristics. Testing these variables with the company profile (scope, sector, and size) by means of the Chi-square test and Fisher's exact test, there were only significant differences with the variable referring to the company size (see Table 6).

The data indicated significant differences when comparing the company size with having a Corporate Social Responsibility plan:  $\chi^2(3, 83) = 17.460$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Many large business organisations had these plans. However, we found no differences testing the same variable with having a Corporate Volunteering plan using Fisher's exact test ( $p = 0.056$ ). Nevertheless, the expected prevalence indicated a higher proportion of large and medium companies that had these programmes.

In response to the main topic of the research question, we examined whether there were significant differences in the assessment of soft skills depending on whether the companies had a Corporate Social Responsibility plan or a Corporate Volunteering programme. The results of the Mann–Whitney tests indicated that there were no differences in any of the items of the scale. It was therefore appropriate to examine whether the assessment of these skills depended more on employers' social engagement.

**Table 5** Companies' corporate social responsibility

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Social Corporate Responsibility Plan</i>		
Yes	39	47
No	44	53
<i>Corporate Volunteer programme</i>		
Yes	13	15.7
No	70	84.3

**Table 6** Relationship between company profile and corporate social responsibility

Company's characteristics	Corporate social responsibility		$\chi^2$	Corporate volunteering		$\chi^2$
	<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%	
<i>Professional sector</i>						
Primary	3	7.7	1.021	1	7.7	0.397
Secondary	8	20.5		4	30.8	
Tertiary	28	71.8		8	61.5	
<i>Field of work</i>						
Local-autonomous community	14	35.9	2.823	7	53.8	2.780
National	13	33.3		4	30.8	
European	1	2.6		1	7.7	
International	11	28.2		1	7.7	
<i>Size</i>						
Micro company	6	15.4	17.460***	1	7.7	6.092
Small company	11	28.2		4	30.7	
Medium company	6	15.4		3	23.1	
Large company	16	41		5	38.5	

\*\*\* $p < .001$ 

### 4.3 Is there a relationship between the employers' social engagement and the assessment of soft skills? (RQ3)

In terms of employers' social commitment, 71.1% ( $n=59$ ) reported having collaborated with a community organisation. Table 7 shows the types of collaboration reported by the employers.

Most of the employers (53%) were involved in social associations through periodic or one-off financial contributions. 34.9% participated in planned activities, together with 16.9% who acted as coordinators of socially linked projects or programmes. In contrast, participants were least involved in filling a senior position (12%) or having acted as paid staff (6%).

Based on the theoretical contributions of employer branding, we examined the relationship between having a Corporate Social Responsibility plan and the type of collaboration. There was a significant relationship,  $\chi^2(1, 58)=5.295$ ,  $p=0.021$ , indicating that among companies that had such a plan, a higher proportion of employers collaborated with an

**Table 7** Type of collaboration with a community organisation

Type of collaboration	<i>n</i>	%
Periodic contributions or one-off payments	44	53
Participant in programmed activities	30	36.1
Project or programme coordinator	15	18.1
Position (president, secretary, etc.)	10	12.0
Paid staff	5	6

These variables are included in the instrument as a multiple-choice question

organisation on an ongoing basis (as a coordinator, by holding a position or being paid staff). A company having a Corporate Volunteering programme was also significantly related to this type of collaboration according to Fisher's exact test ( $p=0.004$ ).

We then analysed the relationship between collaborating with a community organisation and employer characteristics (gender, education level, age, and position within the company) using the Chi-square test (see Table 8).

Neither gender,  $\chi^2(1, 83)=3.076, p=0.079$ , nor age,  $\chi^2(1, 83)=1.077, p=0.299$ , nor position within the company,  $\chi^2(2, 83)=3.599, p=0.165$ , were related to collaboration in community organisations. Yet the proportion of women who did get involved was higher than the proportion of men, and human resources managers collaborated more than managers and other decision-makers in the company. In contrast, educational attainment was significantly related to this type of collaboration,  $\chi^2(1, 83)=5.311, p=0.021$ , with the percentage of university-educated employers involved being higher than the rest.

We next examined whether the rating of soft skills differed according to this social commitment (see Table 9).

The data indicate that those who collaborated with a community organisation placed greater value on the ability to use ICTs (S6),  $U=937.50, Z=2.43, p=0.015$ ; teamwork (S9),  $U=880.50, Z=2.17, p=0.030$ ; leadership (S11),  $U=895.50, Z=2.00, p=0.046$ ; and oral and written communication (S16),  $U=888.50, Z=1.98, p=0.048$ .

#### 4.4 Does the assessment of soft skills differ according to graduates' participation in non-formal education? (RQ4)

The last research question examined whether the employers' assessment of soft skills differed according to graduates' participation in activities related to non-formal education (participation in youth organisations, social action or volunteering organisations, and

**Table 8** Relationship between employer profile and collaboration with a community organisation

Employer profile	Collaboration with a community organisation		$\chi^2$
	<i>n</i>	%	
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	22	37.3	3.076
Female	37	62.7	
<i>Education level</i>			
University	52	88.1	5.311**
Non-university	7	11.9	
<i>Age</i>			
Less than 45 years of age	34	58.6	1.077
45 years or older	24	41.4	
<i>Position within the company</i>			
CEO, manager or administrator	18	30.5	3.599
Head of HR	25	42.4	
Other senior positions	16	27.1	

\*\* $p .01$

**Table 9** Differences in the assessment of soft skills based on collaboration with community organisations

		Collaboration with community organisations	
		Yes	No
S1	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.25 (0.86)	3.96 (1.30)
	<i>Z</i>	0.564	
S2	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.08 (0.90)	3.67 (1.24)
	<i>Z</i>	1.400	
S3	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.39 (0.91)	4.17 (1.05)
	<i>Z</i>	0.967	
S4	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.63 (1.10)	3.67 (1.05)
	<i>Z</i>	-0.037	
S5	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.64 (1.21)	3.17 (1.17)
	<i>Z</i>	1.649	
S6	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.14 (0.96)	3.47 (1.25)
	<i>Z</i>	<b>2.430**</b>	
S7	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.63 (0.61)	4.17 (1.24)
	<i>Z</i>	1.407	
S8	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.32 (0.80)	4.04 (1.12)
	<i>Z</i>	0.857	
S9	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.71 (0.56)	4.04 (1.33)
	<i>Z</i>	<b>2.172**</b>	
S10	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.37 (1.22)	3.33 (1.31)
	<i>Z</i>	0.114	
S11	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.08 (0.73)	3.54 (1.18)
	<i>Z</i>	<b>1.998**</b>	
S12	<i>M (SD)</i>	2.95 (1.18)	2.92 (1.06)
	<i>Z</i>	-0.089	
S13	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.44 (0.62)	4.13 (1.12)
	<i>Z</i>	0.811	
S14	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.83 (0.99)	3.71 (1.08)
	<i>Z</i>	0.510	
S15	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.85 (1.11)	3.79 (1.06)
	<i>Z</i>	0.331	
S16	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.42 (0.65)	3.88 (1.15)
	<i>Z</i>	<b>1.975**</b>	
S17	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.27 (0.76)	3.79 (1.25)
	<i>Z</i>	1.478	

*Z* = Mann–Whitney U standardised test statistic

Bold is used to highlight the significant differences

\*\**p* .01

mobility programmes). Almost half (45.8%; *n* = 38) of employers stated that they asked about or assessed such participation during the recruitment process.

When analysing the scores of the soft skills using the Mann–Whitney U test, there were significant differences in four of the skills (see Table 10).

**Table 10** Differences in the assessment of soft skills based on graduates' participation in non-formal education activities

		Values participation in non-formal education	
		Yes	No
S1	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.21 (0.91)	4.13 (1.10)
	<i>Z</i>	-0.015	
S2	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.11 (0.92)	3.84 (1.09)
	<i>Z</i>	1.110	
S3	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.42 (0.92)	4.24 (0.98)
	<i>Z</i>	0.905	
S4	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.84 (1.05)	3.47 (1.08)
	<i>Z</i>	1.665	
S5	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.00 (1.16)	3.09 (1.10)
	<i>Z</i>	<b>3.547***</b>	
S6	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.05 (1.04)	3.84 (1.13)
	<i>Z</i>	0.896	
S7	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.63 (0.63)	4.38 (1.01)
	<i>Z</i>	1.001	
S8	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.39 (0.79)	4.11 (0.98)
	<i>Z</i>	1.335	
S9	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.71 (0.61)	4.36 (1.07)
	<i>Z</i>	1.564	
S10	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.74 (1.16)	3.04 (1.22)
	<i>Z</i>	<b>2.400**</b>	
S11	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.08 (0.78)	3.80 (0.99)
	<i>Z</i>	1.125	
S12	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.29 (1.09)	2.64 (1.11)
	<i>Z</i>	<b>2.576**</b>	
S13	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.50 (0.56)	4.22 (0.95)
	<i>Z</i>	1.036	
S14	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.92 (1.02)	3.69 (1.00)
	<i>Z</i>	1.253	
S15	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.95 (1.18)	3.73 (1.01)
	<i>Z</i>	1.257	
S16	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.55 (0.55)	4.02 (0.99)
	<i>Z</i>	<b>2.544**</b>	
S17	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.37 (0.67)	3.93 (1.10)
	<i>Z</i>	1.702	

*Z* = Mann–Whitney U standardised test statistic

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

Bold is used to highlight the significant differences

Most of these skills were of an international nature: writing and speaking foreign languages (S5),  $U=1232.00$ ,  $Z=3.55$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; working in an international context (S10),  $U=1109.00$ ,  $Z=2.40$ ,  $p=0.016$ ; knowledge of cultures and customs of other countries (S12),  $U=1125.50$ ,  $Z=2.58$ ,  $p=0.010$ ; and oral and written communication (S16),  $U=1110.50$ ,  $Z=2.54$ ,  $p=0.011$ . In all cases, those who valued graduates' participation in non-formal education had the highest mean ratings for these skills.

Finally, we analysed the relationship between the organisation and employer profile and the consideration of graduates' participation in non-formal education during the recruitment process with the Chi-square test. There were significant differences (see Table 11) according to company size,  $\chi^2(3, 83)=12.160$ ,  $p=0.007$ , with the largest proportion of these ratings coming from large companies. There were also significant differences in the variable related to having a Corporate Social Responsibility plan,  $\chi^2(1, 83)=7.357$ ,  $p=0.007$ .

In terms of employer characteristics (see Table 12), the data showed significant differences according to collaboration with community organisations,  $\chi^2(1, 83)=3.756$ ,  $p=0.049$ , acting as coordinator,  $\chi^2(1, 83)=7.294$ ,  $p=0.009$ , or having a position within them,  $\chi^2(1, 83)=8.956$ ,  $p=0.005$ .

Overall, young people who spent time getting involved in non-formal education activities were of interest to organisations or employers whose professional dynamics reflected a high level of social and community commitment.

**Table 11** Relationship between company profile and assessment of graduates' participation in non-formal education activities

Company characteristics	Values participation in non-formal education		$\chi^2$
	<i>n</i>	%	
<i>Professional sector</i>			
Primary	4	10.5	0.303
Secondary	10	26.3	
Tertiary	24	63.2	
<i>Field of work</i>			
Local-autonomous community	13	34.2	6.652
National	10	26.3	
European	1	2.6	
International	14	36.8	
<i>Size</i>			
Micro company	8	21.1	12.160**
Small company	8	21.1	
Medium company	8	21.1	
Large company	14	36.8	
<i>Has a corporate social responsibility plan</i>			
Yes	24	63.2	7.357**
No	14	36.8	
<i>Has a corporate volunteering programme</i>			
Yes	9	23.7	3.414
No	29	76.3	

\*\* $p<.01$

**Table 12** Relationship between employer profile and assessment of graduates' participation in non-formal education activities

Employer profile	Values participation in non-formal education		$\chi^2$
	<i>n</i>	%	
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	14	36.8	1.217
Female	24	63.2	
<i>Education level</i>			
University	33	86.8	1.143
Non-university	5	13.2	
<i>Age</i>			
Less than 45 years of age	25	67.6	0.828
45 years or older	12	32.4	
<i>Position within the company</i>			
CEO, manager or administrator	14	36.8	1.922
Head of HR	15	39.5	
Other senior positions	9	23.7	
<i>Collaborates with a community organisation</i>			
Yes	31	81.6	3.756**
No	7	18.4	
<i>Pays a contribution to a community organisation</i>			
Yes	24	63.2	2.896
No	14	36.8	
<i>Participates in the activities of a community organisation</i>			
Yes	16	42.1	1.583
No	22	57.9	
<i>Project coordinator in a community organisation</i>			
Yes	11	28.9	7.294**
No	27	71.1	
<i>Position in a community organisation</i>			
Yes	9	23.7	8.956**
No	29	76.3	
<i>Paid staff in a community organisation</i>			
Yes	3	7.9	0.433
No	35	92.1	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ 

## 5 Discussion

This study analysed employers' assessments of university graduates' soft skills in the Spanish context from different angles. Firstly, we examined which soft skills were most in demand by recruitment managers in order to identify the skills required in university graduates which may contribute to a better fit between the academic and business worlds. Secondly, to determine whether the corporate social dimension makes a difference in the

demand for certain soft skills, we performed an analysis based on two dimensions: Corporate Social Responsibility and employers' social engagement. Finally, given the overcrowding of higher education and the increasing demands of access to employment, the study focused on whether graduates' participation in non-formal education activities had a signalling effect and an influence on the assessment of certain soft skills.

The employers' views of the soft skills (RQ1) showed that in general the most in-demand skills were: teamwork (S9); problem solving (S7); initiative (S13); planning, coordination and organisation (S3); oral and written communication (S16); decision-making (S8); analysis (S1); and networking (S17). These results are similar to those reported by various studies on the subject (Abelha et al., 2020; Crayford et al., 2012; Fajaryati et al., 2020a, 2020b; Heidenreich, 2015; Hoffman et al., 2001; Lombardero, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2023). In this case, it is worth noting the agreement with the top 10 soft skills collected in a previous systematic review by our research team, which included a large number of studies focused on employers in a cross-national context (García-Álvarez et al., 2022).

Looking more closely at the results, it is logical that in a knowledge economy businesses place great value on networking skills (S17) (Hoffman et al., 2001; Lombardero, 2015). The same applies to oral and written communication skills, which were also a determining factor in graduates' access to employment (Abelha et al., 2020; Fajaryati et al., 2020a, 2020b). Similarly, problem solving (S7), planning, coordination and organisation (S3), and analytical (S1) skills were in high demand, in line with the current labour market situation, which demands workers capable of self-managing their careers and adapting to new learning environments (Bridgstock, 2009; García-Álvarez et al., 2022; Heidenreich, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2023).

We found similar evidence regarding the most valued skills in our study (S9). The findings from Abelha et al. (2020) showed that teamwork was among the most highly valued skills by employers. As one might expect, in the twenty-first century professional arena, these types of skills respond to the demands of roles that require highly developed social interaction skills (World Economic Forum, 2023). When it comes to entrepreneurial skills, initiative (S13) and decision-making (S8), it is not surprising that one of the key differentiating factors in employability in a labour market at high risk of automation is the ability to produce innovative solutions and responses, as noted by Crayford et al. (2012).

Given how relevant these skills are in graduates for acquiring and retaining a job, it is important to consider how HEIs can contribute to the development of actions and strategies that promote employability. Several studies have highlighted the importance of planning and programming experiences that enable university students to prepare for the world of work, fostering contact with reality and promoting opportunities to develop these skills (Abelha et al., 2020; Blair & Deming, 2020; García-Álvarez et al., 2022).

We expected that the corporate social dimension, through variables related to Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Volunteering (RQ2), together with employers' social commitments, would have a differentiating effect on the assessment of certain soft skills that are important in attracting university talent. In this regard, from the perspective of employer branding—where the image projected by the company is essential for its reputation (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Tkalac & Sinčić, 2018)—the corporate social dimension is thought to be able to play a fundamental role through the differentiation of certain skills linked to the organisation's values and culture, as well as to the challenges it has to face in the current transformation of the labour market (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Around half of the participating companies had Corporate Social Responsibility plans and of those, only a small part demonstrated Corporate Volunteering initiatives associated

with their commitment as socially responsible organisations (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). More specifically, the data showed that larger companies had more of these plans and initiatives at the core of their business management. However, one of the main findings is that there were no significant differences in the overall assessment of soft skills depending on whether the participating companies had Corporate Social Responsibility plans and Corporate Volunteering initiatives. Both issues should be observed through the same analytical lens in the contextual framework of the study, i.e. the characteristics and requirements of the Spanish labour market as a European Union member state.

In Spain, Law 11/2018—based on European directives to improve sustainability and increase the confidence of investors, consumers, and society at large—has meant that companies meeting certain conditions must have Corporate Social Responsibility plans. This affects large companies with more than 500 employees in two financial years or with an average of 250 employees (Iturrioz et al., 2019). Our study indicates that the introduction of these social responsibility actions, in addition to being a regulatory requirement, may involve less effort for larger companies, in terms of adequate planning, management and evaluation, accompanied by sufficient funding for implementation.

Following the employer branding approach, Corporate Social Responsibility can clearly have an impact at the social level by connecting companies' areas of intervention and their employees' commitment to meeting potential community needs, increasing graduate interest in jobs (Carlini et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2014; Maden et al., 2012; Tkalcic & Sinčić, 2018). Nevertheless, our results suggest that large companies with these plans are linked to compliance with certain standards that demonstrate that the business activity is respectful of environmental, ethical and social issues, but this does not have a differentiating effect on certain essential soft skills within the framework of the company's culture and values.

This issue deserves comparative analysis, given the growing interest in Corporate Social Responsibility among research and policy agendas of Europe and North America, as well as its emergent recognition in developing countries (Beckman et al., 2009). In this sense, research exploring the link between soft skills assessment and the corporate social dimension in developing contexts becomes relevant, as it has been noted that there is little contextual transferability of conclusions drawn from developed countries to developing countries (Jamali & Karam, 2018). For example, the study of Yumei et al. (2021), which focuses on small and medium-sized enterprises in Pakistan, concludes that Corporate Social Responsibility contributes to employee engagement and company performance. In prospective, it would be interesting to analyse whether this affects the assessment of graduates' soft skills during the recruitment process in developing countries.

In our analysis of the corporate social dimension, we sought to determine whether the assessment of soft skills depended on employers' social engagement (RQ3). We first looked at two aspects: the relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility and employers' engagement with community organisations, and the association between employers' profiles and these forms of engagement. We found that in companies with Corporate Social Responsibility, there was a higher proportion of recruitment managers who had been involved in social actions on an ongoing basis (as a coordinator, by holding a position or being paid staff). The results also suggest that university-educated employers were more involved in these actions, which may indicate that the academic and extracurricular training provided by the HEIs serves as a catalyst for their community engagement (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

Returning to the core of the research question (RQ3), we then analysed the assessment of the soft skills required in graduates based on the social engagement of recruiters as representatives of the employer brand. Notably, employers who engaged with

community organisations placed greater importance on the skills of using ICTs (S6), teamwork (S9), leadership (S11), and oral and written communication (S16).

Most of these skills have a strong social component and entail the mobilisation of interpersonal skills: establishing links and contacts within and outside the organisation through effective oral and written communication, working effectively in interdisciplinary teams characterised by diversity, or leadership as a key skill for managing tasks and coordinating teams in a constantly changing business world (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Blair & Deming, 2020; Deming, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2023). Similarly, skills associated with digitalisation are pivotal in navigating the challenges of globalisation, industrial transformation, and the emergence of artificial intelligence—which are leading to changes in the creation of new niches in the job market and the assumption of emergent roles within companies (Østerlund et al., 2020; World Economic Forum, 2023). They are also important for actions linked to promoting the employer brand in digital media, which are essential in certain jobs within the framework of the organisation (Sivertzen et al., 2013).

The results also demonstrate an agreement with companies' overall assessments of skills without considering the social dimension (RQ1). Employers consider teamwork (S9) and communication (S16) to be essential soft skills for working in the Spanish labour context, and therefore crucial in the search for potential candidates for recruitment from the university talent pool.

Regarding the final research question (RQ4), we expected that graduates' involvement in non-formal education activities (participation in youth organisations, social action or volunteering, and mobility programmes) would be valued by potential employers, since they had a signalling effect. More specifically, such involvement could reflect certain soft skills that may be of interest to businesses in the recruitment processes (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Santos Rego et al., 2018; Souto-Otero, 2016). To this end, we first examined possible differences in the demand for soft skills based on the value placed on graduate participation in non-formal education activities. Then, we analysed the relationship between organisation and employer profiles and the consideration of this involvement during recruitment processes.

Our research revealed that employers place a higher value on international skills when considering participation in non-formal education. These skills include writing and speaking foreign languages (S5), working in an international context (S10), and knowledge of cultures and customs of other countries (S12). Still, and in line with the findings related to RQ1 and RQ3—which concern the analysis of soft skills in general and in terms of the corporate social dimension—the ability to communicate orally and in writing was identified as the skill most in demand by employers (S16).

The contemporary job market is subject to an intense process of internationalisation, which has forced companies to network with other countries, collaborate in multidisciplinary teams and operate in culturally diverse environments. It has also led to a shift in the way businesses address worker mobility and the expansion of their activities into new contexts (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021; World Economic Forum, 2023). This may be a key factor in the impact of internationalisation on business activity, as well as the high value placed on skills related to effective social competence for jobs in various professional contexts in a competitive global market (Jones, 2013).

In terms of company profile, the results suggest that large companies and those with Corporate Social Responsibility plans placed the greatest value on this. Furthermore, employers who had strong social engagement through regular collaboration with

community organisations (as a coordinator, by holding a position) rated participation in non-formal education highly during the graduate recruitment processes.

Prior to the study, we expected participation in non-formal education activities to have a positive influence on employability, as employers could make inferences based on their belief systems and implicit theories about the characteristics of young people who engaged in community and social activities (Cole et al., 2007). Our findings indicate that this belief system is 'activated' when employers have previous experience of these social actions, making inferences during recruitment processes about the candidates' soft skills that they consider essential for their organisations. In a similar vein, continuing with employer branding, employers in socially responsible companies (with specific Corporate Social Responsibility plans) may prioritise these socially committed young people when making decisions about who to recruit from the pool of highly talented candidates.

This evidence supports the study by Cole et al. (2007), which concluded that young people involved in volunteering or youth organisations were perceived to be open and sociable. These personality traits are highly valued in the labour market as reliable predictors of job performance. Hence, mentioning participation in non-formal education in a CV or during a job interview is important, since this provides companies with a 'full and deep picture' of the candidate and their potential fit within the organisation (Nuijten et al., 2017). On this basis, university student engagement in extracurricular activities or non-formal education—also referred to in the literature as *out-of-school education*—can be crucial in accessing the world of work, as it confers a 'positional advantage' over other candidates for the same job (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Santos Rego et al., 2018).

## 6 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to examine university graduates' soft skills that are most valued by employers in the Spanish context. Spain, as a developed country, requires specific studies on the skills demands of the labour market, since knowledge in this area will allow HEIs to incorporate new training models that will enable young people to respond to the complexity of the socioeconomic system within the European Union. Specifically, the novelty of this study is the analysis of the influence of the corporate social dimension (Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Volunteering, or the employer's social engagement) and graduates' participation in non-formal education activities on the assessment of soft skills during recruitment processes.

In general terms, we found high demand for skills linked to the social and relational (teamwork, communication, and networking), self-management (problem-solving, organisation and analysis), and entrepreneurship dimensions (initiative and decision-making). These are basic skills for entering employment and contribute to reducing the gap between academia and the professional world. In addition, we observed that Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Volunteering do not have a differentiating effect on employers' assessments of soft skills. Considering the contributions of employer branding, this issue deserves a detailed analysis through studies that analyse this variable and allow our results to be tested. In the Spanish context, however, it is important to consider the impact of current European and national regulations, given that these plans have, under certain conditions, become a requirement for many companies. This may therefore indicate that the availability of these plans does not necessarily reflect a change in the value placed on certain soft skills, which would align with institutional values.

Nonetheless, if employers' social engagement is taken into account, there are differences in certain skills that have a strong social and interpersonal dimension (i.e. teamwork, communication). Our results suggest that the corporate social dimension has a differentiating effect on the assessment of soft skills during the graduate recruitment process if employers are considered as representatives of the employer brand. This may imply that employers are the primary decision-makers in talent recruitment, with responsibility for ensuring that candidate selection aligns with the organisation's culture, norms and values.

Furthermore, this assessment differed when employers valued graduate participation in non-formal education activities, as they tended to give greater importance to international skills. With the internationalisation of the economy, it is logical to assume that there will be a high demand for skills linked to communication in foreign languages or knowledge of other cultures. Similarly, our findings suggest that non-formal education may serve as a signalling effect for graduates, determining a profile of interest to employers. In particular, this effect is more pronounced when the company has corporate social responsibility plans and a socially engaged team of employers. In this respect, HEIs have a major task, because in line with their third mission, they must open stronger and more stable channels with society. One key strategy is the establishment of links with community organisations to deliver non-formal education activities that, in addition to promoting welfare and social inclusion, contribute to developing the 'complementary curriculum' of university students, enhancing their employability.

The study has several limitations. Our sample of employers was relatively small and so the results should be interpreted with some caution. Even so, it should be noted that most research on this topic have used similar samples, due to the difficulty of accessing these participants. Another limitation is its context. The literature has highlighted differences in graduate employability dimensions depending on geographical area (García-Álvarez et al., 2022). Given that, this research provides data of interest for a particular context, and the findings may be useful in understanding this reality in similar countries.

This was an exploratory study that did not aim to replicate results, but rather to provide an overview of the reality of employers and graduates in relation to the demand for soft skills, which were identified as crucial in the process of acquiring and retaining a job. It also opens up new lines of research and comparative analysis (e.g. developed vs. developing countries) which may highlight emerging trends that will broaden the body of knowledge in this field of study. From a prospective standpoint, the objective is to establish a continuity that will facilitate more comprehensive studies, both in terms of the sample and of the contextual variables. More specifically, these would provide important information about the most in-demand soft skills in general and those expected in specific professional profiles. It would also provide HEIs with useful information about potential evidence-based actions.

It is evident that HEIs are confronted with the challenge of preparing students for the various transformations that the contemporary world of work is undergoing. Taking our findings as a reference, training strategies (academic and extracurricular) need to be established to promote university students' development of soft skills. There is also a need for greater guidance and preparation for entering employment. Students need proper support from university institutions and other public agents through the development of learning programmes that encourage hands-on experiences linked to real work contexts, ensuring that the training provided is more consistent with what employers require.

It is important to note that the (mis)match between academia and business, especially considering the skill gap, is one strong argument for continuing to work towards optimal employability beginning with educational institutions. This is even more crucial in Spain,

as the challenge is to address the high rates of youth unemployment and social exclusion, with young people often condemned to precariousness or emigration to neighbouring countries ('the brain drain').

In general, our study is a notable contribution for graduates who are unemployed or in transition to the labour market. It allows them to determine which skills are most in demand in the current context and to find out whether employers really value their participation in non-formal education. This would also allow them to complement their CVs to meet the demands of an increasingly changing and uncertain world of work. Finally, this study may also be of interest to HEIs in their mission to strengthen links with community organisations and increase the supply of learning opportunities that complement study plans, in accordance with 'pedagogies for employability'.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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