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## Talent or not talent: unclothing a competence

*Con o sin talento: desvistiendo una competencia*

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### **Abstract**

One of the main objectives of higher education institutions (HEIs) is to equip individuals with skills, tools, and resources to explore and develop their talent and provide the labour market with highly skilled workers. In other words, students should be prepared to address social and economic changes in a balanced way, which is not an easy task to do. Literature detects discrepancies among the competences that the HEIs include in their programs, the skills that students acquire, and those required according to the employers. This research aims at addressing these discrepancies (Hergert, 2009 and Stephen and Knouse, 2008) by focusing on the different phases where these gaps have been generated. The information obtained from the application of the procedure proposed should be useful for HEIs and help reduce the existing gaps, thus contributing to fostering talent and employability.

*Keywords:* skills gap, talented work, HEIs, employability.

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## Resumen

Uno de los principales objetivos de las instituciones de educación superior (IES) consiste en proporcionar habilidades, herramientas y recursos a los estudiantes con el fin de contribuir a explorar y desarrollar su talento y poder proveer al mercado laboral de trabajadores altamente calificados. En otras palabras, los estudiantes deben estar preparados para abordar los cambios sociales y económicos de una manera equilibrada, lo cual no es una tarea fácil. La literatura detecta discrepancias entre las competencias que las IES incluyen en sus programas, las habilidades que adquieren los estudiantes y aquellas requeridas según los empleadores. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo abordar estas discrepancias (Hergert, 2009 y Stephen y Knouse, 2008) centrándose en las diferentes fases donde se han generado. La información obtenida a partir de la aplicación del procedimiento propuesto debería ser de utilidad para las IES a la hora de facilitar la reducción de las brechas existentes, contribuyendo así a fomentar el talento y la empleabilidad.

*Palabras clave: brecha de habilidades, talento en el trabajo, IES, empleabilidad.*

## Introduction

Society is going through fast changes, requiring the adoption of new strategies concerning literacy, entrepreneurship competences, comprehensive curricula, and particularly fostering education-industry partnerships to handle unpredictable changes. In this scenario, where all agents play a decisive role, and interaction among them is mandatory, students are now more visible and play a more [inter]active role in their learning and training process. In the words of OECD (2018), “future-ready students need to exercise agency, in their education and throughout life”. The learning strategy has been switching towards the idea of competences over the last years (Nusche, 2008). Following OECD (2018) “the concept of competency implies more than just the acquisition of knowledge and competences; it involves the mobilization of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and strategic competences to meet the future complex demands. So, students will need both broad and specialized knowledge”.

Although the change in the learning strategy towards the idea of competences has brought great benefits to higher education institutions through the changes introduced as a result of the Bologna process, one of the main shortcomings identified is the need to increase the links between university and the labor market. It is directly related to the fact that recent graduates seem to have certain shortcomings based on the skills weaknesses stated by the firms (Milne and Caldicott, 2016). Despite the progress made in bridging the gap between the learning that takes place at university and the expectations of the labour market, this gap continues to exist (Marzo-Navarro, Pedraja Iglesias, and Rivera Torres, 2008; Martin, Rabadán, & Hernández, 2013; Hesketh, 2000; Heijke, Meng & Ris, 2003; Purcell, Wilton, & Elias, 2007). Again, if the employers' expectations are not satisfied it is not due to a lack of specific knowledge of the profession by the students, but rather to a lack of skills, which sometimes proves to be an insurmountable barrier. More specifically,

employers state the presence of some gaps between the intended student competences, the demanded competences, and the perceived ones (Beard, 2016). Whereas the last ones refer to how employers perceive and assess the competences they see that fresh graduates show; the first ones are defined as the level of competences students are supposed to have acquired before entering the firm, that is set by universities; the second ones refer to those employers would like to effectively require.

Over the last decade, as a result of the changes in society, the skills required at the workplace have changed considerably, as have the requirements for workers. It has been shown that soft skills are mandatory, so improving them is essential both for the company and the employee to adapt to changing workplace needs. However, keeping up with them is not an easy task. Many jobs around the world remain unfilled. It is partly because technology is reshaping the labour market. According to Udemy's 2018 Skills Gap Report (Udemy, 2018, Skills Gap Report 2018, p.21, [https://research.udemy.com/research\\_report/2018-skill-gap-report/](https://research.udemy.com/research_report/2018-skill-gap-report/)), 73% of full-time Spanish workers and 79% of Portuguese workers believe there is a skills gap. From the companies' point of view, the skills gap is also perceived and threatens the sustainability of companies. ManpowerGroup's annual Talent Shortage Survey (<https://insights.manpowergroupsolutions.com/2018-talent-shortage-survey/>) revealed that 45% of global employers are experiencing difficulties filling positions within their organisations.

Undeniably, one of the objectives of companies is to look for the most qualified candidates for a job, paying special attention to those with a broad base of knowledge linked to skills, especially those known as interpersonal skills (Riera-Prunera *et al.*, 2018). It is based on two foundations. The first is related to the evolution of society, which has resulted in dramatic changes in the way of working due to the recent demand for people with different abilities (Vermeulen, Phanish, and Ranjay, 2010). The second is the type of work that the labour market in developed countries now offers. This is undoubtedly related to the globalisation of our economy, where low-skilled occupations are relegated to specific countries, whilst countries with a higher level of development focus their efforts on more skilled labor posts, and therefore we find a demand for workers with a higher level of skills. In this sense, some organisations require applicants to demonstrate their skills through tests to assess their talent. Others decide to devote resources to providing the right skills to new employees. It shows that the lack of skills is one of the problems faced by companies, and at the same time, it harms the productivity of workers and, to a certain extent, society. At the same time, the lack of skills generates anxiety and frustration in students facing new challenges at work, as to some extent they feel that their training has not been entirely adequate.

A report by ACNielsen Research Services (2000) for the Australian government emphasises this idea, concluding that those graduates who find it most difficult to enter the labour market are those with the lowest skill levels. Companies are often more likely to hire graduates than less qualified workers, simply because it is assumed that they have better skills. It is remarkable to consider this to prepare students with the most appropriate skills and avoid frustration. Although the competences requirements have been thoroughly analysed during the last decades, especially focusing on employability aspects and tran-

sition to labor market (Álvarez-González, López-Miguens, & Caballero, 2017; Apenburg, 1980; Albert, Juarez, Sanchez, & Toharia, 2000; Salas, 2003; Mora, García-Aracil, & Vila, 2007; Marimon, Mas-Machuca, Berbegal-Mirabent, & Llach, 2017; Roberson, Carnes, & Vice, 2002; González & González, 2008; Salas, 2010; Blanco, 2009; García-Aracil, & van der Velden, 2008; van Dierendonck & van der Gaast, 2013, Teichler, 2007) more work needs to be done. An interesting framework to have in mind is that shown in Figure 1. It highlights a clue aspect, which is the efficient use of competences. If what students are taught is neither efficiently used nor adequately applied, they will perceive their education as a waste of time and effort and that is to be cautiously addressed.

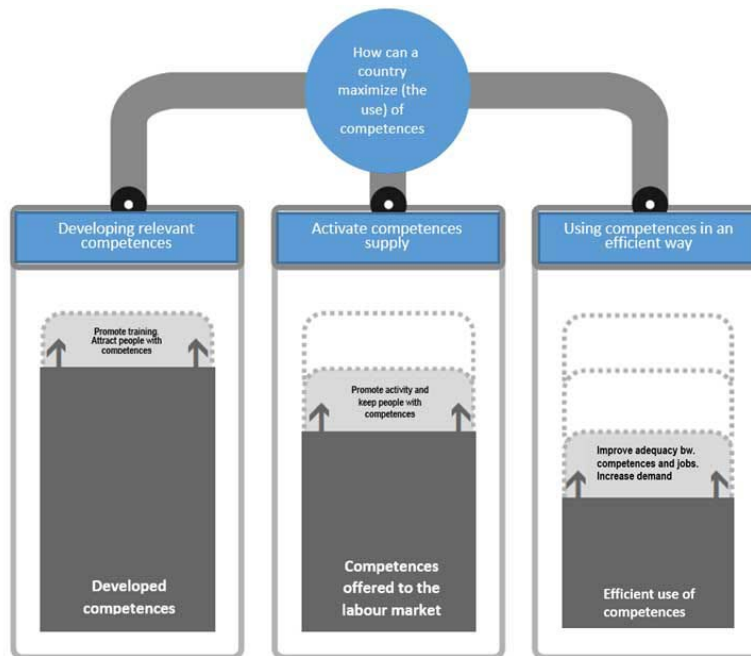


Figure 1. OECD Strategic Framework for Competences

Source: Capsada, Q., Hoeckel, K., & Ortiz, L. (2013). Fundació Bofill (from Argumentenfabriek, [www.argumentenfabriek.nl](http://www.argumentenfabriek.nl))

Furthermore, Ernst & Young, a major graduate recruitment firm, announced in 2015 that it would remove the university degree requirement from its entry criteria and hire non-traditional candidates because “there is no evidence that success at university correlates with success in later life” (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ernst-and-young-drops-degree-classification-threshold-graduate-recruitment>). In the same vein, Penguin Random House also announced in 2016 (<https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/company/news/2016/january/penguin-random-house-uk-removes-degree-requirements-in-recruitin.html>) that possession of a university degree will no longer be a requirement to apply for any of its new jobs. The fundamental reason is to increase the diversity of candidates in the search for higher talent. In the same way, the auditing firm PricewaterhouseCoopers in the UK removed the UCAS criteria from its recruitment process to hire more talented and qualified people ([https://pwc.blogs.com/press\\_room/2015/05/pwc-scrap-ucas-points-as-entry-criteria-for-graduate-jobs.html](https://pwc.blogs.com/press_room/2015/05/pwc-scrap-ucas-points-as-entry-criteria-for-graduate-jobs.html)).

This shows a clear lack of confidence in the preparation of graduates. Therefore, we are dealing with an issue that needs to be addressed to prevent more companies from following the same strategy, particularly small companies, which tend to be more prone to new and more aggressive trends. We believe this gap problem should be fully addressed, in a comprehensive way, and from the very beginning, starting from the design of an academic program and covering all the phases a competence goes through. In this context, there have been two aspects deserving attention when designing an academic program: being aware of the competences that graduates should possess to successfully enter the labour market, and planning mechanisms to closely monitor their acquisition. Nonetheless, we could go a step further and track the entire process a competence follows from its early design until its assessment at the workplace. It can be done based on the collaboration of the private sector and the academia, which would allow enterprises to give inputs to the design and the action plan ensuring a comprehensive training of future graduates.

This research<sup>1</sup> is to be seen as an attempt to identify where the main problems leading to a low students' achievement level of competences lie; the final goal being to improve their training and empower them for a more conscious living as well as for better employability. In this sense, higher education institutions cannot lose their role as providers of a talented workforce, people with a high learning ability, who can think by themselves and with a broad and deep vision of reality, mainly emphasizing a core human value: the ability to think critically. On the other hand, improving employability, especially for young people, is another challenging aspect for the EU in the coming years. The economic cost of not adequately integrating young people into the labour market has been estimated at more than 150,000 million a year (1.2% of EU GDP). However, beyond the big macroeconomic figures, the social and psychological consequences for young Europeans could lead to a collapse of the system, reducing the level of trust in EU institutions, which could lead to an increase in social conflict, as Ulrich Beck has stated ("a world of risk"). In Spain, for instance, the situation is even more pronounced than in other European countries. In recent years, the unemployment rate for the under-25s has risen exponentially (it reached its highest value, 51.8%, in 2014. IV, 30.5 points above the EU-28 average).

## Methodology

Based on how competences are embodied in the academic programs and how they are fostered through different methodologies, we started with a thorough revision of the process each competence goes through from the very first moment it is conceived and designed at university and included in academic programs until the very last moment its acquisition level is assessed by firms by inquiring about the workers' performance. This has to lead us to sketch the phases a competence goes through and propose a 12-steps scenario to ease the location of possible problems.

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<sup>1</sup> "Este trabajo es una ampliación de la comunicación publicada en en Libro de Actas del Congreso CIVINEDU 2021".

We propose to scrutinize each step to find out how the problems and the subsequent gaps might have emerged. By describing and characterizing each of the phases, it will help identify the source of the skills and competences' mismatches and especially the exact moment or process when they arise. This would be the starting point to address the problem and implement potential solutions at the precise location where it has been identified.

After a thorough analysis of the competences records, we were able to identify 12 steps a competence should follow and we grouped them into 4 action phases, each of them focusing on a specific aspect according to the Plan, Do, Check, and Act (PDCA) model (Deming, 1950). This model consists of a problem-solving tool comprising four stages, each of them focusing on one aspect to achieve a final goal efficiently. It is built as a cycle that allows to locate and solve problems and implement solutions in a continuous and never-ending improvement manner. The model has been widely applied to different social, economic, and educative contexts (Moen and Norman, 2009; Knight and Allen, 2012; Maruyama, 2016).

Each of the agents involved, university, students, and firms will be related to a certain number of steps and take part in some of the phases according to their nature. The circular deployment of competences acquisition enables to find discrepancies, and end up placing the process in a continuous feedback loop. We can see the 12 steps as a loop: a never-ending process, a continuous quality improvement, since once we get to the end, we find out that we need restarting again and again.

## Results and discussion

### *Which is the process a competence follows?*

Figure 2 shows the decomposition of a competence process into 12 steps from its definition, as included in the teaching plan of the subjects, to the final relationship between the university and employees. The inner part of the figure shows the circular shape that remains from the PDCA Deming cycle.



Figure 2. Stages of the competences acquisition process

Source: own elaboration

*Planning* is at the beginning of the process. The plan should have clear aims and define precisely the activities to be done to accomplish those aims, as well as how they will be measured. In this case, it would include the decision, design, and description of the competence, as well as the scheduling, thus being the phase where all the components of the competence process are designed and revised. More specifically, it encompasses four steps:

- Deciding the competences
- Describing the competences chosen
- Adapting the competences chosen to the degree and specifically to the different subjects.
- Elaborating the schedule to implement them with special attention to transversality.

The whole process of skills identification will take into account the previous work of the EU, especially the European Skills Classification (ESCO: <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/occupation>) and the labour skills landscape: <https://skillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/en>.

If we focus on the theoretical background, this is centred on the first major European projects on the subject of competences, such as the CHEERS project (Teichler, 2007), REFLEX (Allen and Van der Velden, 2007), and above all the TUNING project (Pagani, 2009). Many articles have been published, all of them focusing on the importance of the acquisition of professional competences in graduates, insisting that they cannot successfully enter the labor market without this dynamic combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities. And to achieve this, there is a key figure in the role of the teacher, who, having the necessary skills and knowledge, has to foster and promote the acquisition of these skills by students. Currently, the European Agenda on Skills (agreed on 1 July 2020) has proposed an action plan with a 5-year timeframe and 12 actions to improve the ability of Europeans to acquire skills and competences. The EU also allocates resources to help member countries implement policies focused on improving the skills of their citizens through different programs: Youth Employment Initiative, EFG, EaSI, EFSI, COSME, among others.

*Doing* refers to the implementation of actions and measures such as adapting the syllabus and putting it into practice. Also, proceed with the assessment of the measures. Writing the syllabus for each specific subject including the competences required. Practicing the competences. Elaborating the material and practices taking into account the competences to be developed.

We have to make sure that the actions scheduled in the plan are completed by the right people, at the right time and in the right way.

The third phase, *Checking*, would start once some activity has already taken place and it would imply working together to control that the actions previously outlined have been completed at the right time and in the right way. It also implies checking the results to decide if we can go on with that practice or if changes are needed to improve the process, and implement them. It would cover the assessment process and feedback from students and enterprises.

It covers the following actions:

- Assessing the performance of each competence according to the activities previously planned
- Getting feedback from students work and assignments at university
- Applying competences learned at university in the workplace: getting feedback from graduates' jobs.
- Acquiring and developing competences at work: getting feedback from workers (recent graduates) and employees.

Finally, the fourth phase, *Acting*, refers to analyzing the results, envisaging improvements, and introducing them into the teaching process. In this phase we have to introduce any adjustment based on what we have discovered in the previous phase and pay special attention to efficiency to make all necessary adjustments. What has been learnt at the end of the whole process will feed into the next plan, thus beginning a new PDCA loop.

The following actions would be included here: (1) Continuous learning process; and (2) Meeting with employees and getting information from firms.

The application of the process is expected to help locate the problems triggering the lower than required acquisition level and variety of competences, as well as to suggest where to improve the necessary changes and the solutions to be implemented at every step of the process, once located the exact moment(s) along the competence acquisition process where the gap originates.

## Conclusion

Students need to be prepared for continuous social, technical, and economic change, the easy adaptation to future jobs (which do not yet exist), or the anticipation of new problems that arise. The skills for the future are part of what is known as liquid talent, i.e. possessing large doses of two essential qualities: versatility and adaptability, also known as cognitive flexibility, i.e. the ability of the brain to adapt our behaviour and thinking easily to changing, new and unexpected concepts and situations. However, this has to be led by their ability to think critically and out of the box and learning to have a broad vision and obtain conclusions from it. Education has to respond both to the needs of students and society, addressing social and economic changes, but it also has to respond to the ancient need of acquiring real knowledge and pursuing the truth as well as to avoid discrimination<sup>2</sup>. In this sense, HEIs might have to rethink its role (Rodríguez, 2002; Moore and Murphy, 2009). Besides, in this scenario, in which all agents play a decisive role and interaction between them is obligatory, students are now more visible and play a more [inter]active role in their learning and training process. In the words of the OECD (2018), “students prepared for the future need to exercise their autonomy, in their education and throughout their lives”.

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<sup>2</sup> Boden and Nedeva (2010) point out that two types of universities have been created: those that train the hard-working employees and those that train the leaders.



In this sense, we are stepping towards a situation that needs all actors to clump together. Our proposal defines a procedure applying the PCDA model that describes the whole process of competence acquisition by an undergraduate student. We have conceived it as a tool to finally reduce the existing discrepancies between the intended competences and the real ones acquired. Applying this methodology would allow academics to detect where competence acquisition fails. That should provide useful information to address failures in a more precise way before students leave university. Besides, getting together firms and academics in some of the phases proposed can also contribute to having a better knowledge of the labour market situation. Consequently, after taking part in the PDCA process enterprises should benefit from hiring better-trained graduates, especially SMEs, which have complained over a long time about their problems to attract young talent with the most adequate skills to fit the job positions offered.

In all, building bridges among HEIs, students, and enterprises and closing the gap between university and labour market is a big issue. Paying attention to this gap proves essential given the significant changes our society is going through, which require the adoption of new strategies related both to media literacy and to critical and reasoning skills, to cope with the speed and depth with which these changes are taking place (Akermans & Kubasch, 2017). We propose to do so through the creation of a continuous improvement system for competences acquisition, which is also intended to strengthen the collaboration and the synergies among all actors and boost the knowledge transference from universities to business, and vice versa. We believe this should facilitate the recruitment of graduates and the future success of these graduates in their job positions as well as in their lives.

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