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Career Starters' Interpersonal-transferable Skills Needs: A Comparative Multidisciplinary Study in five European Countries

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One of the primary functions of education in the 21st century (be it tertiary, post-secondary /vocational) is to equip with the necessary academic and professional skills in the respective disciplines in order to boost the prospects of career starters. In addition to formalised and well-laid out skills, participation in education settings involves the acquisition of transferable skills, which are all too frequently not explicitly acknowledged both by educators and students. These skills include, but not limit, to: interpersonal communication, group decision making, leadership, directing groups and involve the mobilisation of psychological resources (e.g. emotional intelligence/abilities, interpersonal perception etc.). These are the skills targeted in the project (ICTSs).

As the economies of post-industrial societies become more and more service-oriented, ICTSs are increasingly in demand, and career starters – but not only- all too frequently lack such skills. There is concrete evidence that one of the reasons for failure to enter or remain in employment is the lack of good ICTSs. The evidence also suggests that good interpersonal skills and positive affectivity discriminate successful from unsuccessful management teams. The last few years Psychological Research in the areas of Emotion and Interpersonal Relationships has focused on peoples' emotional and interpersonal abilities (emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills) and some new methods have

been developed (e.g. the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test, 2002). These results are slowly filtering through applications in the areas of Human Resource Management.

There is however, a distinct lack of an integrated approach in assessing these types of skills with vocational assessment and training in mind which also address practical considerations of organisations themselves. In relation to that, there is limited information as to how different disciplines (e.g. Technical – Non-technical) and modes of study equip students with those types of skills, how they are used by career starters, and importantly, how they can be improved by training.

The psychology of interpersonal skills is a development of various disciplines in the 20th Century. The first intelligence test was written by Binet in France in 1904, providing the historical context for the later development of social intelligence tests in the 1920s. At that time, it was claimed that being able to get along with others was vital at work. This was a skill, so the argument ran, that intelligent people often lacked. It is interesting to note that the very same idea has recently been resurrected under the guise of emotional intelligence. In addition, the Hawthorne studies of the 1920s helped concentrate later research efforts on the emotional and social aspects of work. Social intelligence tests may use photos, drawings or descriptions of interpersonal problems. The major criticism of such tests is that because they correlate so strongly with general intelligence tests they actually do not measure anything different. Stevens & Campion (1994), for example, devised a test to measure team working ability and found it correlated fairly well with teamwork performance (0.44). The problem was that it also correlated even better with general intelligence (0.81). In 1942, the British army began to incorporate a group exercise to select officers for service. This included the practical task of building a bridge across a wide gap, but did not yet make use of any standardised scoring system. The first assessment centre, which integrated group discussions as a component, was implemented by industrial giant AT& T in 1956; assessment centres are used widely by multi-national companies today. Kurt Lewin's work on how autocratic versus democratic leadership styles affect levels of participation exerted a strong influence over management training for the next five decades.

More recently, emotional Intelligence emerged as new dominant Paradigm in the area of skills and skills assessment. The phrase "emotional intelligence" was coined by Salovey & Mayer (1989), but only entered the public's imagination after Daniel Goleman's (1995) book. Though largely anecdotal, Goleman's book helped drive the idea into public consciousness. The term "interpersonal skills" may quickly fade from common use, since the term emotional intelligence incorporates all its basic ideas and there is considerable overlap.

The idea of a set of social skills or competences was already apparent in previous research efforts, but interest in emotional intelligence refocused efforts on the *intrapersonal* dimension, as opposed to the

interpersonal one. One could argue that interpersonal skill presupposes intrapersonal processes such as self-awareness and emotional self-regulation, but it was this new paradigm that brought this to the forefront of research

Aims of study

This was the first, of three studies in the context of the INOVICTS programme supported by the European Commission for Education and Culture. Further information about the project can be found in the following link: www.skills2work.com.

The aim of this first phase of the project was to survey the perceived significance attributed to those kinds of skills and the need by graduates and career starters from different educational backgrounds (University and Vocational education) and disciplines (Business, Technical, Humanities, Sciences, Social Sciences) in five European countries (Hungary, Greece, Italy, Slovak Republic, Spain, and the UK) to determine needs for ITSs training.

The information collected from this study and from European surveys from managers and trainers/educators will inform the next phase of the project which will be the testing of a new assessment and training method of interpersonal skills at work.

Sample

In total, 564 graduate students were surveyed across five countries and by seven institutions – the UK (Anglia Polytechnic University), Greece (The University of Macedonia), Italy (The University of Padova and ARCES) and Hungary (The Baranya County Labour Centre), and Slovakia (The Slovak University of Technology). There was a fairly even spread of male and female participants, with 285 males and 277 females taking part. Participants' average age was 23.2 (s.d. 4.7). Average length of study was 4.3 (s.d. 1.88) years for HE graduates and 5.2 years for vocational education students.

One question asked about expected degree classification. Degree classification varied greatly, with the Hungarian vocational students expecting to achieve about 59 per cent of the total possible – on a par with the UK students at about 61 per cent – whilst the Greeks had noticeably higher expectations at 73 per cent. There is then a substantial leap between the Greeks and the Italians who expect over 90 per cent (93 per cent for The University of Padova and 97 per cent for ARCES).

Materials

Interpersonal-Communication Transferable Skills (ICTS) Questionnaire

All the participants attending the above institutions were asked to complete the questionnaire voluntarily. This questionnaire had been translated from the English into the respective languages of the partners. The questionnaire asked for demographic information and about the advice on interpersonal skills received whilst studying. Participants were also asked to rate on a 1-5 scale 60 particular skills, which fell under the following skill categories: Creative, Management, Communication, Problem-solving, Interpersonal, Selling and Public Relations. The development of the questionnaire was the result of collective work between experts in the areas of emotion, occupational psychology, career consulting and total quality management from three countries. The final section of the questionnaire asked participants say in an open-ended fashion the 6 skills they thought students lacked the most.

Results

P/t work

Students were questioned about the amount of part time work experience they had, and the type of advice they received, if any, during the course of their studies. For part-time work (see table 1), it can be seen that the average in the UK (29 months) was quite high in comparison with the next highest in Italy at ARCES (12 months). In Greece, the mean is low at 3 months on average. In the UK, the high mean is likely to be reflective of burgeoning growth of the flexible labour market in recent years and the increased costs for students of attending university.

---- Insert Table 1 here ----

Only 7-8 per cent of the Italians at both educational institutions used the careers offices' services, with the figure even lower for the Slovaks – a mere 6 per cent. Both UK and Hungarian students reported a similar level of usage, both approximately at 40 per cent. In Greece, the mean was much, much higher at 66 per cent but this may be due to the fact that this particular university is a business school with an occupational orientation.

Table 2 presents statistics on the usage of career services at University/college/technical college during the years of study. It can be seen that the most use of the Career services was reported at the University of Macedonia in Greece.

---- Insert Table 2 here ----

Satisfaction with career advice

Of particular interest was how satisfied respondents were with the advice they received (table 3). The most satisfied group was the Greek students with a mean of 3.54, reflecting a fairly high level of satisfaction on the 1-5 scale. The Hungarian students were moderately satisfied too, with a mean of 3.04. There is then a slight drop for the Slovak students (2.91), followed by the UK at 2.88 and the Italians (2.55 and 2.54).

---- Insert Table 3 here ----

Satisfaction with receiving training of ICTSs during their studies

Satisfaction was quite high with only participants from vocational backgrounds indicating a lower rating (compared to the humanities students). As shown in table 4, most satisfied with the kind of ICTS training they have received were students in the UK. This was followed by non-University (college) students in Italy and Business students in Slovakia.

---- Insert Table 4 here ----

Importance and need for training ICTSs

Scores on each of the eight scales were computed by averaging the scores in the respective questions/items. Table 5a presents the descriptive statistics from the total average of respective ICTS scales. It can be clearly seen that whereas the respondents attribute a high importance in the 8 skills areas, the reported need for training these skills is somewhat lower.

---- Insert Table 5a here ----

Table 5b presents the same descriptive statistics for the career starters' sample (N = 343). Comparison of the two tables shows quite similar perceptions of these kinds of skills in terms of their importance and need.

---- Insert Table 5b here ----

Age and year of study relation with Importance or need

Age was not correlated with attributed skills importance or need. Years of study had a slight correlation with need for training interpersonal skills ($r = -.10$ $p < .05$)

Academic performance and need assessment of skills

There was a positive relationship between performance at the University and attributed importance of certain ICTSs (creative skills $r = .15$, $p < .01$, management skills, $r = .16$, $p < .01$, communication skills $r = .22$, $p < .001$, interpersonal skills $r = .23$ $p < .001$, public relations skills $r = .30$, $p < .001$). Participants with higher performance also perceived greater need for management ($r = .15$, $p < .01$), selling ($r = .17$, $p < .01$) and public relations skills ($r = .22$, $p < .001$).

Importance and need of ICTSs: Gender and discipline effects

One of the aims of the study was to identify patterns in the perceived importance and need of ICTS skills in terms of discipline and gender. The respondents had affiliations in five disciplines: Science (Computing, applied sciences), social sciences (mostly psychology students), Humanities (languages), vocational (mostly Hungarian vocational education), Business (from three countries).

---- Insert Figure 1 here ----

In order to test for this and given expected gender differences in the various domains a one-way ANOVA was conducted separately for each of the eight skills twice (to test for importance and need respectively). Results are summarised in figure 1.

---- Insert Table 6 here ----

Table 7 (see overleaf) presents a comparison table of rated interpersonal skills for the six partners it can be seen from table that there are considerable differences amongst the educational institutions in the different countries. Beginning with the similarities, however, both the UK and Italy (The University of Padova) report "To be able to plan your work" as the most important skill. Italy (ARCES) rates "Interpersonal skills" as the most important, whilst others emphasise different areas – for instance, for Greece "Creative skills" are the most important, for Hungary it is "To be honest and straightforward with others at work", possibly reflecting the national work ethos, and for Slovakia it is "Problem-solving" skills, indicative perhaps of the mindset of participants who attend the University of Technology who are mostly engineers.

What is clear is that "Communication skills" are thought highly important, coming in second place in 4 instances out of 6, and always appearing in the top 3. "The ability to express yourself verbally" and

“The ability to express yourself in writing” also featured highly in many of the lists - for example, occupying the fourth and fifth slot for the UK, and the fourth and ninth for Italy (The University of Padova). “The ability to express yourself verbally” featured in third place for Hungary. “The ability to express yourself verbally” almost always came before “The ability to express yourself in writing”. In Slovakia, however, “The ability to express yourself in writing appeared in sixth place with no sight of its verbal counterpart in the first 15.

“To be able to invent solutions to complex problems” appeared in every single list in the first 15, and “Ability to use computer and information technology” appeared in every list except one. Incidentally, “Problem solving skills”, the category from which this item is from, made an appearance in the first 15 in every list.

---- Insert Table 7 here ---

Importance and need of ICTSs: Gender and country effects

Another of the study’s aim was to identify patterns in the perceived importance and need of ICTS skills at the country level. In order to test for this and given expected gender differences in the various domains a one-way ANOVA was conducted separately for each of the eight skills twice (to test for importance and need respectively). Results are summarised in table 8.

---- Insert Table 8 here ----

Factor Analysis of All skills items

Factor analysis was used in relation to the questionnaire items as a data reduction technique. Loadings of 0.4 and above on the questionnaire items were investigated with reference to the original questionnaire items. Five factors are considered here, each explaining a proportion of the variance. For example:

Factor 1, “Interpersonal Understanding and Tact” explains nearly 26 per cent of the variance. The subsequent factors explain rather less variance;

Factor 2, “Interpersonal Regulation and feedback” explains 5 per cent;

Factor 3, “Interpersonal Honesty & Effectiveness” explains just over 4 per cent;

Factor 4 virtually represents the existing “Selling Skills” category and therefore is called the same, explaining just over 3.5 per cent;

Finally, Factor 5, "People and Task Management" explains almost 3 per cent.

Discussion

The study presents a good picture of European career starters' perceived importance and need of 8 key areas of Interpersonal Transferable Skills. The comparisons between graduate students and in-job career starters and also analyses by gender, discipline and country have provided some interesting results.

Firstly, comparison of career starters' and graduate students' perception of importance and need of the eight areas of ICTS are quite similar, suggesting that entering the work market does not substantially alter Career starters' perceptions of those skills, and also that graduate students seem to have a fairly robust idea of what they are lacking.

By discipline comparisons

Secondly, Graduate students' ICTS needs analyses by discipline highlighted some expected and some unexpected differences. For example (and somewhat intuitively) participants in the humanities deemed creative and communication skills as of higher **importance** than the rest and particularly science students. Science students had the lowest attributed importance in the interpersonal skills. On the other hand, it was not expected that science students would attribute less importance to problem solving than other participants.

In terms of identifiable **needs**, social sciences and business students identified higher needs in management and social science student's higher needs in public relations skills.

Overall there were no gender differences in the perceptions of ICTS importance and some gender differences in the perceived need for training. For example, females expressed a greater need for public relations skills training. There were notable interactions between gender and discipline. Men in vocational education (mostly from Hungary) and business schools and women in social sciences expressed a need in communication skills training. Men in vocational schools expressed a need for more problem solving skills training. Male business school graduates expressed higher need for selling skills training than female counterparts.

By country comparisons

There were notable differences in the expressed need for ICTS training among the five countries (UK, Greece, Italy, Hungary and Slovakia). The Greek graduates expressed a strong need for **creative** skills whereas the Slovak students had the lowest preference in this area. The Italian and Greek students

expressed the highest need for **management** skills training and the vocational students the lowest. The Italian students had the highest scores for **team** building skills, although on average all students did not regard this as important as other areas of ICTSs. The UK, the Italian and the Slovak students had high preference scores on the **problem solving** skills training. With regards to **communication** skills were highly rated overall (only the students from ARCES college expressed lower need). **Selling** skills were also highly rated by all with small variations. Perceptions of interpersonal skills needs did not vary greatly either with the Italian students from Univ. of Padova expressing the highest need. Finally, there were distinct differences in public relations need with the Italian, UK, Greek and Slovakian students having equally high ratings.

Controlling for country of origin, women reported more need for team building, interpersonal, and public relations skills training. There were also some interesting interactions between country and gender. For example, women in the UK and Italy required more training of problem solving skills than their male counterparts. The reverse was true for Greece and Hungary. Women in the UK and Italy required more training in communication skills. The reverse was true for Greece. Women in the UK and Italy required more interpersonal skills training. The reverse was true for Greece. Women in the UK and Italy reported higher need for public relations skills, the reverse was also true for Greece.

Finally, the factor analysis of all 60 skills identified some potential underlying psychological constructs which are able to account for the variance. It is suggested that factors such as "Interpersonal Understanding and Tact", "Interpersonal Regulation and Feedback" and "Interpersonal Honesty & Effectiveness" are relevant he

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Figures

	Importance		Need	
	Gender	Disciplines	Gender	Disciplines
Creative	NS	- Humanities scores were significantly higher than Science - Science females had the lowest scores	NS	NS
Management	NS	NS	NS	- Social sciences and business students higher than humanities and vocational
Team skills	NS	NS	NS	NS
Problem solving	NS	Science graduates attributed significantly less importance than social science and vocational students	NS	Men in vocational and business rated the need higher
Communication	NS	Humanities and social sciences had significantly higher scores than science	NS	X Men in vocational and business schools and women in social sciences expressed higher need
Selling skills	NS		NS	Male business students expressed higher need than female business students

Interpersonal skills	NS	Science students lowest than the rest		NS	NS
Public Relations				Females higher need	Social sciences and humanities highest X Females from science and social science higher than males X Males from business higher than females

Figure 1: Analysis of Importance and Need of ICTSs by Gender and Discipline

Tables

Table 2: Usage of career office/career services during studies

		N	%
1	UK	88	40%
2	Greece	73	66%
3	Italy	128	7%
6	Hungary	119	39%
7	Italy	40	8%
11	Slovakia	108	6%
	Total	556	27%

Table 3: Satisfaction with career advice per country

		N	Mean
1	UK	33	2.88
2	Greece	48	3.54
3	Italy	20	2.55
6	Hungary	56	3.04
7	Italy	13	2.54
11	Slovakia	11	2.91
	Total	181	3.04

Table 4: Satisfaction with ICTS training received during studies

		Mean	Std. Dev.
1	UK	3.21	0.95
2	Greece	2.77	0.80
3	Italy 1	2.53	1.00
4	Hungary	2.62	0.90
5	Italy 2	3.21	1.06
6	Slovakia	2.95	0.86
Total		2.84	0.95

Table 5a: Graduates' perceived importance and need for training

	Importance		Need	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
N = 564				
Creativity	4,24	,60	3,14	,81
Management	4,27	,58	3,33	,84
Team	4,13	,53	2,83	,79
Problem Solving	4,08	,64	3,00	,86
Communication	4,18	,53	3,13	,86
Selling	3,97	,77	3,31	,92
Interpersonal	3,89	,60	2,80	,80
Public Relations	4,03	,73	3,29	,92

Table 5b: Career starters' perceived importance and need for training

N = 343	Importance		Need	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Creativity	4,23	,62	3,01	,90
Management	4,24	,66	3,24	,90
Team	4,17	,59	2,79	,79
Problem Solving	4,19	,66	3,00	,95
Communication	4,21	,66	3,01	,89
Selling	3,91	1,0	3,38	1,24
Interpersonal	3,92	,65	2,75	,79
Public Relations	4,08	,80	3,26	1,00

Table 6: Graduate students' Need for training skills by DISCIPLINE of respondent

	Creative	Management	Team	Prob. Solv.	Commun.	Selling	Intrprs	Public Relation
Science	3,0295 ,82	3,3169 ,77	2,7155 ,70	2,8528 ,83	3,0340 ,78	3,3416 ,93	2,7254	3,3020 ,84
Social science	3,3098 ,79	3,4744 ,89	3,0246 ,87	3,2087 ,91	3,3834 ,95	3,2896 ,98	2,9853	3,5807 ,96
Humanities	3,3889 ,82	3,1806 ,75	2,7725 ,75	3,1574 ,75	3,0647 ,92	3,4944 1,09	2,7572	3,5167 1,10
Vocational	3,0958 ,80	3,1167 ,92	2,9114 ,85	3,0188 ,90	3,1111 ,86	3,1483 ,92	2,8583	2,9550 ,90
Business	3,2193 ,79	3,4393 ,83	2,7668 ,75	3,0170 ,79	3,1058 ,85	3,4094 ,78	2,7349	3,3696 ,88
Total	3,1496 ,81	3,3251 ,85	2,8342 ,79	3,0041 ,86	3,1386 ,86	3,3062	2,8117	3,3046 ,92
F	1.4 n.s.	3.07**	1.2 n.s.		1.1 n.s.	.97 n.s	1.25 n.s.	4.80

NB Controlling for gender

Table 7: Partners compared for 15 most important skills

	1. UK		2. Greece		3. Italy (U. of Padova)		6. Hungary		7. Italy (ARCES)		11. Slovakia	
	Skill	Mean	Skill	Mean	Skill	Mean	Skill	Mean	Skill	Mean	Skill	Mean
1	Plan work	4.61	Creative skills	4.54	Plan work	4.68	Honest & Stra...	4.49	Interpers. skills	4.86	Prob-solv skills	4.57
2	Comm. skills	4.58	PR skills	4.48	Invent sol.	4.67	Comm. skills	4.44	Comm. skills	4.82	Comm. skills	4.46
3	Prob-solv. skills	4.51	Comm. skills	4.47	Comm. skills	4.59	Exp. verbally	4.42	Exp. verbally	4.80	Use comput.	4.45
4	Exp. verbally	4.46	Invent sol.	4.47	Exp. verbally	4.55	Creative skills	4.39	Plan work	4.71	Use internet	4.38
5	Exp. writing	4.43	Use comput.	4.46	New ideas	4.52	Plan work	4.38	Explain what	4.68	Creative skills	4.32
6	Use comput.	4.42	Motiv. others	4.45	Use comput.	4.51	Prob-solv skills	4.34	Effective grps	4.63	Exp. writing	4.31
7	Explain what.	4.39	Use internet	4.43	Explain what	4.50	Build trust	4.32	Invent sol.	4.61	Persuade othrs	4.27
8	Effective grps	4.38	Prob-solv skills	4.42	Use init.	4.40	Invent sol.	4.28	Honest &Str...	4.59	Plan work	4.27
9	Creative skills	4.35	New ideas	4.42	Exp. writing	4.39	Use comput.	4.25	Team	4.58	Build relation.	4.26
10	Use initiative	4.34	Managem. skill	4.42	Effective grps	4.38	Think imagin.	4.24	Make present.	4.58	Invent. sol.	4.26
11	Team skills	4.34	Ng. work tasks	4.38	Prob-solv skills	4.37	Build relation.	4.23	PR skills	4.57	Build trust	4.26
12	Invent sol.	4.32	Ad. mistakes	4.36	Managem. skill	4.37	New ideas	4.22	Ad. mistakes	4.56	Selling skills	4.24
13	Take on board..	4.31	Selling	4.36	Ad. mistakes	4.33	Init. contact	4.19	Prob-solv skills	4.54	Coordinate	4.22
14	Managem. skill	4.29	Respond calls	4.34	Make present.	4.33	Sol.person.prob	4.19	Exp. writing	4.54	Managem. skill	4.21
15	Motiv. others	4.28	Opinion heard	4.34	PR skills	4.32	Managem. skill	4.18	New ideas	4.54	Regard oneself	4.21

Table 8: Graduate students' **Need** for training skills by COUNTRY of respondent

	Creative	Management	Team	Prob. Solv.	Commun	Selling	Intrprs	Public Relation
UK	3,27 ,08	3,39 ,09	2,87 ,08	3,10 ,09	3,20 ,09	3,06 ,09	2,85 ,08	3,42 ,09
GREECE	3,41 ,09	3,50 ,10	2,82 ,09	3,01 ,10	3,17 ,10	3,43 ,10	2,80 ,09	3,35 ,10
ITALY 1	3,18 ,07	3,53 ,08	3,02 ,07	3,07 ,08	3,32 ,08	3,52 ,08	3,00 ,07	3,56 ,08
HUNGARY	3,06 ,08	3,09 ,08	2,91 ,08	3,06 ,08	3,12 ,08	3,17 ,09	2,85 ,08	2,96 ,09
ITALY 2	3,00 ,14	3,12 ,15	2,48 ,14	2,80 ,15	2,69 ,15	3,24 ,16	2,45 ,14	3,09 ,16
SLOVAKIA	2,98 ,08	3,24 ,08	2,67 ,07	2,94 ,08	3,11 ,08	3,24 ,09	2,73 ,07	3,34 ,08
F	3.13**	4.11**	5.97**	2.98	2.65*	3.18**	2.87*	5.26**
	Creative	Management	Team	Prob. Solv.	Commun	Selling	Intrprs	Public Relation
Gender		ns	Women higher need	Ns	Ns	Ns	Women more X	Women more
Interaction	ns	ns	ns	Women in UK & Italy more than men Men in Gr & HU more than women	Women in UK & Italy more than men Men in Gr more than women	Ns	Women in UK & Italy more than men Men in Gr more than women	Women in UK & Italy more than men Men in Gr more than women

NB Controlling for gender