1. Employability Skills at IBCoM

The *concept* of employability skills

Employability skills refer to a flexible set of general skills and competencies which, next to specific, degree related qualifications, play a significant part in contributing to an individual's effective and successful participation in the workplace. IBCoM students can actively develop and train such skills in the course of their degree in some specific curricular as well as non-mandatory or extra-curricular activities. The portfolio Employability Skills enables them to document and showcase these skills and will offer them some future-oriented reflection tools.

Employability skills have some overlap with the degree's intended learning outcomes (think of 'communication' that in all its aspects ranks high on any list of employability skills and is also central in one of the five Dublin Descriptors). They are however both more generic and more individual than intended learning outcomes. More generic, because they are so-called transferrable skills which are in general demand in any workplace. And more individual, because the range and depth of a student's employability skills very much depends on the student's starting point, personality, and goals, as well as the choices they make in the domains of elective courses, internship, exchange experiences, etc.

Related concepts are '21st-century skills', 'transferrable skills, 'soft skills', or 'future oriented skills'. They all have their particular uses. The term '21st-century skills' was in vogue in the late 20th and early 21st century but has since come to be outmoded. Usage of 'transferable skills', i.e. those academic skills which, when explained and reworded, can be transferred to the workplace appears to be restricted to the USA. 'Soft Skills' is a typical catch-all term originating in the 1960s. The term refers to the kind of skills that cannot be taught but are acquired as a person grows and develops through work and education; conceptually, soft skills refer mostly to social skills and personality traits and are often used to distinguish from the 'hard skills' of technical labour or applied knowledge. Though the term 'soft skills' continues to be popular, it also meets with resistance: its binary opposite 'hard skills' implies (like all such opposites) a ranking order where 'hard' is more important than 'soft'. The concept of 'future-oriented skills' is now widely used in academic studies. It is also used in cases of general policy on the future of employment and has an appeal to company research reports such as by McKinsey or Deloitte, but for student usage the term can be a little ambiguous, since the term refers both to typical skills that prepare for the student's future (e.g., career orientation, goal-setting) and skills that are deemed to be in demand in the future (e.g., design thinking).

On balance, then, the term 'Employability Skills' has an immediate, catch-all appeal; it is concrete and clear. The term is commonly used in the UK as well as in Australia as part of government impulses to entice universities to think about how their graduate programs result in employment. It is also the favoured term with some Dutch Universities in career orientation programs (University of Amsterdam, Utrecht University).

Skills, competences, and different ways of classification

Authors of academic studies as well as universities with employability programmes cluster skills into a number of 5-10 overall categories. These main categories are either labeled as a main skill or as a

competence or competency. Though there are many attempts to describe and uphold the difference between a skill and a competence, the two terms are often used interchangeably (e.g. Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Ornellas, Falkner, & Stålbrandt, 2019). Cinque (2016) points out that different countries in Europe prefer either the one or the other term, with Britain and Ireland preferring skills and most other countries preferring competences. Sometimes, a competence is seen as the larger, comprehensive category. It would then for instance that integrate knowledge, skills, and personality traits, whereas a skill, whether acquired or innate, is something that improves with training and is easier to measure or document in a portfolio:

> A competence is more than just knowledge or skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competence that may draw on an individual's knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating. (Rychen & Salganik, as cited in Ananiadou & Claro, 2009, p. 8).

Others however ascribe to 'skills' precisely those overall psychosocial resources:

> Soft skills [are] personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences that are valued in the labour market, in school, and in many other domain [.]. [They are] a mix of dispositions, understandings, attributes and practices. (Heckman & Kautz, 2013, p. 452).

There are many more such instances of blurry boundaries and conceptual osmosis. Given the practical, student-oriented concern of the portfolio, I recommend using the term 'employability skills'. For the sake of identifying overall categories and subsidiary sets, though, a competence is the larger, overall category; while skills will be reserved for the subsets that belong to such a category.

Various sources inform the selection of 7 overall categories (or competences) proposed here: Scientific studies[1], general European Qualifications and IBCoM ILO's[2], Consultancy Reports,[3] and some educational initiatives and policy papers at EUR and beyond.[4] Educational policy papers such as published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) proved to be too general in nature, given their focus on pre-university schooling.

The different categories and rubrics these sources mention run the gamut from cognitive skills to time management and from communicative skills to technological competence. Sometimes, communicative skills simply means the ability to speak clearly, at other times it means the ability to write for different audiences. What in one study is a subsidiary skill, is a major skill in another. For example, 'analytical skills' is a major category with some authors (e.g., Precision Consultancy, 2006) and a subset of communication skills or research and planning (Ananiadou & Calro, 2009; Fleishman, n.d.) with others. Likewise, 'adaptability' can be a major competence, a personality trait, a function of self-regulation, of problem-solving skills, of taking initiative, or of cognitive (reasoning) skills. Inevitably, describing the

rubrics for an IBCoM Employability Skills portfolio involves some common-sense decision making when pooling from the various above-mentioned sources.

Employability skills in Higher Education: what will be in demand?

Employability skills are not specified in the Dublin Descriptors. These descriptors and degree-specific intended learning outcomes are rich in cognitive and critical thinking skills, communication, and, to some extent, self-regulation ('Learning'). They refer less explicitly to the typical employability skills of people skills, initiative & enterprise, planning and organization, or professional/technical skills. This chimes with the observation by European employers' focus groups that organization and planning and especially people skills (also: social skills) are generally underdeveloped, lacking, or at least less visible in higher education. At best they are implied – without proper time management or team work abilities getting a degree is a challenge—but not named. Thus, the Elene4work network identify empathy, commitment, teamwork capacities, self-learning, learning from and dealing with failure as underdeveloped in higher education (Elene4work, 2016). Fortunately these skills (especially teamwork and cultural empathy) are distinctively engrained in IBCoM courses; the portfolio will help in creating greater visibility.

There is an interesting connection between supposedly underdeveloped social skills and skills that are identified as likely to remain in demand or become more so in the near future. A study by Deloitte specifically points at future-proof skills that human beings (as opposed to Artificial Intelligence/robot technology) excel in. Especially communication skills, creativity, and social skills are mentioned in this respect:

> A cluster of individual skills are particularly future-proof […]. These include basic skills, such as writing, speaking, reading comprehension and critical thinking, which are the basis for acquiring further, more specific, skills. These more specific skills can be sub-divided into two groups: skills that can be grouped under the general heading of 'creativity', such as complex problem-solving, and social intelligence skills, including social perceptiveness. (Deloitte, 2017, p. 28).

These skills therefore specifically merit attention in a portfolio. Creativity and social skills are broadly defined, but key is–according to Deloitte—to underline their unique, human-centred quality. Thus, the Deloitte report sees Creativity and Social Intelligence as the two comprehensive competences which essentially distinguish humans from machines. The implication is that these skills can start out as personality traits, but can and should be developed in a learning process, such that they become increasingly sophisticated. A few pages on, they write:

> Creativity and social intelligence are almost exclusively mass competencies, which are already important for many occupations and are likely to gain in importance in future. Creativity involves creating something new: it includes solving complex problems that require non-standard solutions. Where creative decision-making and flexible problem-solving are important

> in an occupation, humans will continue to have an advantage over machines in the future. (p. 34).

In addition to creativity and social intelligence, most reports and studies mention 'self-regulation' (or self-learning, self-management, and so on) as an important employability competence and Deloitte's report is no exception. Skill combinations that are predictive of adaptability such as reasoning and self-efficacy are captured by the general competency of 'self-regulation'. Self-regulation is an essential skill in the competition for work places and MA/Msc degrees. Although it is a personality trait, self-regulation can be trained and students inevitably encounter the challenges of self-regulation in the course of their degree. In the IBcoM program self-regulation is explicitly evaluated in the surveys in Joep Hofhuis's CLI project "Measuring and Improving Students' Intercultural Competences"

With respect to Deloitte's attention to creativity as a particular future-proof skill, other sources put 'design thinking' in the limelight, which generally includes both cognitive abilities and creativity as well as social and communicative skills. Design thinking encompasses processes such as context analysis, problem finding and framing, ideation and solution generating, creative thinking, sketching and drawing, modelling and prototyping, testing and evaluating (Cross, 2011). Design thinking is part of the new form activating learning (Fingerly, 2019). Design thinking, sometimes also labelled co-creation (Dede, 2009), features in some specific project oriented or case-based IBCoM courses as well as in the Honours Programme and some ad-hoc EUR-wide events (e.g., hackathons).

Design thinking also features prominently in the EUR Strategy 2024. It is worth considering this trend, given the fact that new educational initiatives are being developed in the wake of the cluster of competencies that our university believes should guide the future strategy. The EUR strategy 2024 (p. 10-13 and *passim*) yields about three relevant major competencies that are of interest for an IBcoM employability skills portfolio: 'design thinking' (as 'co-creation' also mentioned in most other sources), 'open-mindedness' (in other sources related to social intelligence) and 'entrepreneurial and pioneering mind-set and skills' which in other sources like Precision Consultancy (2006) is referred to as 'initiative and enterprise'.

Communication skills are mentioned in all studies and reports; they are an essential transferable employability skill. Students in Media and Communication receive ample opportunity to develop communicative skills. Communication is frequently mentioned in the degree's intended learning outcomes. Communication in all its facets will naturally feature in the portfolio.

Though on the surface profession-specific practical skills (e.g. for M&C students, content creation but also advanced technical skills such as using Adobe InDesign, video-editing, or Google Analytics) may seem predictive of employability, these skills are in fact of negligible importance. The general consensus is that such technical, practical skills, which figure high in Vocational Education, can easily be acquired, either by proper training (either or not on-the-job) or by self-learning. Also they risk becoming obsolete and need constant updating and further training. This means that the competency of self-regulation, with goal-setting and the ability to identify knowledge gaps and discover how to fill those gaps, is more

essential than the practical skills as such. Practical/technical skills are also vulnerable to being replaced by AI. They are too specific to be generally transferrable, while transferability is an essential feature of employability skills. Still, from a student's point of view, mastering technical skills, some of which are taught in our core courses while others are acquired by taking electives or student-to-student training, will strengthen self-confidence and in that way alone boost employability. The portfolio should therefore also create a slot for such profession-specific skills.

Seven overall competencies

After careful consideration of the studies and reports mentioned above, I propose to distinguish 7 major overall competencies, each with a non-exhaustive subset of skills.

1. Solving complex problems, including Design thinking
2. People skills
3. Communication
4. Initiative and enterprise
5. Planning and organising
6. Self-regulation
7. Profession-specific competences

All reports and studies point out that even overall competencies or skills are not self-enclosed and that that some overlap is inevitable and natural. One study even produces a neat (though somewhat contrived) matrix to demonstrate how all the eight major skills in that study are interconnected (Precision Consultancy 2006, p. 41). The point is, that specific skills may surface in different subsets; and what may be a subsidiary skill in one case might also be an overall competence in its own right. General people skills require adaptability and empathy, but also good listening and other communicative skills. Solving complex problems in the design thinking approach requires skills such as cognitive abilities and creativity, but is inconceivable without teamwork (a people skill). The adaptability required for teamwork is also a sign of creativity and of self-regulation, and so on. In other words, developing one particular skill will contribute to improving many more.

1. Solving complex problems, including Design Thinking

Competence: Solving complex problems, including Design Thinking	
Creativity	○ creative thinking ○ co-creation ○ hacking / out of the box thinking ○ imagining the future and developing a process for intervention
Cognitive skills	○ analytical skills ○ cognitive skills ○ critical thinking ○ tackling 'wicked' problems ○ applying knowledge

	○ research skills ○ methods skills
Social skills	○ teamwork ○ giving and receiving feedback ○ integrity ○ moral leadership ○ ability to come with reasoned solutions to ethical dilemmas
Communicative skills	○ listening skills ○ ability to talk and write with different and diverse partners ○ information gathering ○ presentation skills
Profession-specific skills	○ applying know-how

2. People skills

Competence: People skills	
Teamwork	○ contributing to positive team dynamics ○ working autonomously in the interest of shared goals ○ accountability ○ giving constructive feedback ○ Knowing how to define a role as part of a team ○ Identifying the strengths of team members
Leadership	○ taking initiative ○ dealing appropriately with conflict ○ ability to motivate ○ ability to listen actively
Intercultural competences	○ cultural empathy ○ open-mindedness ○ flexibility in behavior ○ assessing different backgrounds, genders, races, religions, or political persuasions ○ correctly and constructively negotiating these different backgrounds
Self-regulation	○ receiving feedback and being able to make adjustments accordingly ○ dealing with changes and uncertainty and adapting to new situations ○ compassion with others ○ social initiative ○ adaptability

3. Communication

Competence: Communication skills	
Language skills	○ speaking clearly ○ writing clearly ○ interview skills ○ editing skills ○ presentation skills ○ ad lib skills ○ ability to adapt to different audiences ○ competent in different languages
Knowledge exchange	○ interpreting and incorporating information ○ adapting speech/writing to different audiences
Persuasion	○ argumentation ○ negotiation ○ marketing ideas
Intercultural competences	○ establishing and maintaining cross-cultural networks ○ expressing ideas, knowledge, and feelings in a culturally sensitive way
Teamwork	○ listening and understanding ○ assertiveness ○ facilitating discussion ○ providing appropriate feedback ○ perceiving non-verbal messages

4. Initiative and enterprise

Competence: Initiative and enterprise	
Pioneering mind-set	○ identifying opportunities not obvious to others ○ analytical and cognitive skills ○ critical reflection ○ out-of-the box thinking/hacking ○ identifying and tackling 'wicked problems'
Leadership skills	○ strategic thinking ○ people skills ○ decision taking ○ accountability and assuming ownership ○ integrity and moral leadership

5. Planning and organizing

Competence: Planning and Organising	
Time management	○ setting priorities ○ meeting deadlines ○ coordinating different activities ○ maintaining a healthy work-life balance
Project management skills	○ collecting, analysing, and organising information ○ using IT to organise data ○ solving problems
People skills	○ motivating others ○ identifying problems and solving them ○ identifying and deploying team members' strengths
Self-regulation	○ resourcefulness when faced with difficulties ○ discipline ○ adaptability ○ emotional stability

6. Self-regulation

Competence: Self-regulation	
Learning goals	○ managing one's learning and one's learning goals ○ identifying and seeking out appropriate development opportunities
Confidence and stability	○ emotional stability ○ responsibility ○ self-reliance ○ resourcefulness ○ articulating own ideas and vision ○ social initiative ○ adaptability
Dealing with feedback and setbacks	○ ability to readjust after setback ○ accepting failure and taking steps for improvement or another approach ○ eliciting feedback from peers and superiors
Planning and organising	○ time management ○ ability to focus and concentrate ○ goal-setting ○ future-mindedness ○ evaluating and monitoring own performance ○ self-reflection

7. Profession-specific skills

Profession-specific practical skills	
Advanced technical skills such as using Adobe InDesign, video-editing, or Google Analytics or designing and implementing a communication / social media campaign. Due to the wide and innovative range of profession-specific skills the suggestions here are tentative. The constant innovation of software and the fluctuating field of social media implies that some particular skills become obsolete quickly while others need to be introduced. The general consensus is that such technical, practical skills can easily be acquired, either by proper training (either or not on-the-job) or by self-learning. This means that the competency of self-regulation, with goal-setting and the ability to identify knowledge gaps and discover how to fill those gaps, is more essential than the practical skills as such. *Students can develop these skills in some specific IBC0M courses, but also in work-related experience, internships, in thesis research, and Labour Market Orientation events such as peer-to-peer workshops, PAC events, COOPr academy, Honours Programme, etc.*	
Content creation & content editing	○ e.g. develop a company/project story (storytelling); create and manage professional social media account.
Managing and organizing research and data	○ e.g. Refworks, SPSS, transcription software
Relevant IT skills	○ e.g. spreadsheets, Google Analytics

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