

The value of soft skills in the university curriculum: Students' perspectives in the new knowledge society

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the concept of competence from the perspective of structural changes. It deals with the academic curricula and soft skills necessary for a bachelor's degree to adapt to the labor market and equips the citizen with the necessary tools to integrate a person in various dimensions of life. Evidence shows that students are very sensitive to soft skills. However, there are important differences between courses and genders. Information was collected through a questionnaire administered to our undergraduate students between October 2013 and January 201

We arrived at a principal components analysis and used the VARIMAX method to determine the variance, which is analyzed using the ANOVA model. The research emphasizes the importance of autonomy and social and emotional skills in the global university education of a student and emphasizes the sensitivity of students to the cross-competence soft skills required in today's labor market.

Keywords: Bologna declaration, higher education, labour market, skills.

1. INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

In order to create stable societies, the Bologna Declaration emphasises the value of education and pedagogical collaboration and holds that the standards for measuring educational quality should be consistent across disciplines. Higher education has, however, primarily focused on learning processes based on practises intended to stabilise the behaviour of economic agents, which are then targeted towards encouraging excellence, both in performances and in results. As a result, each student's cognitive skills are improved through a teaching approach that differentiates capacities in an ongoing quest for "brains" that are suitable for such societal structures.

Despite the fact that it suggests a pedagogical approach that is more suited to meet the needs of a knowledge-based society, one can feel that the discussion about what should be in education, with a special emphasis upon the superior, is old and roots itself a lot in the distinction of capabilities, which could be measured by means of performance revealed in several areas of knowledge. But, as it can be seen in daily practice.

- (i) on the one hand, seeks to standardise criteria for comparison based on rankings, which translates into a perspective that highlights the idea of a teaching model oriented toward competitive differentiation in line with traditional models of teaching and learning, some of which are still rather dominant.
- (ii) On the other hand, it emphasises the principle of permanent construction of learning structures with a greater connection amongst its various dimensions. It also ponders flexibility, which

strengthens the idea of a learning process that accommodates itself to the rhythm of each individual, whilst placing the person at the centre of his own learning process.

Whilst internalising the "competitiveness" feature in higher education, the Bologna Declaration seems to be geared toward the strengthening of its end result, whilst quantifying and hierarchising through the construction of rankings. In this manner, it assumes that the criteria for such output are stable, immutable, objective and comparable. On the other hand, when it admits (i) flexibility in the learning model and (ii) mainstreaming the skills in the individual and autonomous search for excellence, it also allows for responsible freedom toward success. This perspective differs from the still dominant teaching processes, which are based on a market structure where competitiveness is sustained in the differentiation and in rigid models of performance assessment. In this light, in a knowledge-based economy one advocates that competence involves a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes and that education should promote diversified skills, which is contrary to the traditional knowledge-based model. In this context, cultural competence outshines as a determining factor of personal and professional success ([Chen, 2016](#)).

With the aforementioned situation in mind, this paper examines the ideas of qualification and competence from the perspective of structural change. It is significant to note that we have revised a few competence building models in an effort to counteract the prevalent results-oriented approach with a dynamic process that aims to adapt to change. We seek to contribute to a critical reflection on the active learning creation process in order to give students the skills deemed necessary for their integration into the different facets of their lives. This is accomplished by examining Section 2's discussion of the academic curriculum and how it connects to soft skills, and Section 3's information on the methodology, sample, and findings obtained, followed by a discussion of the key conclusions and a list of references.

2. ACADEMIC CURRICULUM AND SOFT SKILLS

Due to the new economic order, marked by an informational evolutionary revolution, much has been discussed about the qualifications and skills held by employees ([Civelli, 1997](#); [Fleury & Fleury, 2001](#);

- The importance of the curriculum ([Laužackas, Tūtlys & Spūdyte, 2009](#); [Pereira, 2013a](#); [Pereira, 2013b](#); [Pereira, 2015](#)). The education and training agenda has also unveiled much concern, thereby questioning academic curricula ([Athey & Orth, 1999](#); [Binks, 1996](#); [European Commission, 1995](#); [Fallows & Steven, 2000](#); [Garavan, Morley, Gunnigle & Collins, 2001](#); [Hawkins & Winte, 1996](#); [Laughton & Montanheiro, 1996](#); [Stagg, 1996](#); [Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994](#)). Hence, the Bologna Declaration also calls for people's awareness in order to expedite academic curricula, which should be accommodated to the current economic and social reality, given the various societal shocks we have been witnessing over the past three decades. Such societal shocks imply demand for self-reliance skills. The undergraduate degree holder should master these skills. And yet, students should also be able to master new skills because they are players in the labour market ([Chen, 2016](#); [Hawkins & Winter, 1996](#)). Therefore, they should be endowed with "meetings skills, negotiation skills and networking skills" ([Hawkins & Winter, 1996, p. 5](#)). These should be linked and thus bridge other generalist oriented skills, as it is the case of the market knowledge, management skills and the use of information technologies. As a last element, and as stated by the above authors, there is knowledge and skills in specific areas, the specialist skill, which render the person an expert in something related to a disciplinary area of the course or a niche of the market to be developed.
- The perspective defended by [Hawkins and Winter \(1996\)](#) is supported by [Stagg \(1996, p. 11\)](#) who says an academic curriculum should be broad, comprehensive and balanced in order to

“prepare pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life”. He also argues that the curriculum should promote the students' spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical enhancement. In this context, education should prepare students to identify opportunities and to assume responsibilities and live experiences throughout their lives. These are differentiating characteristics of graduate holders. They steer their entrepreneurial skills and drive for professional performances of excellence. These features render individuals ever more responsible, tolerant, cooperative and socialising. These are the characteristics of a new paradigm, potentially alternative to the dominant paradigm, the *status quo*, because the latter one has given great signs of inability to guide the population toward a welfare economic model, whilst endeavouring to reduce the emergence of societal biases. In fact, in a holistic perspective, the underlying cultural component to a curriculum is a form of personal development and human capital within organisations ([Chen, 2016](#); [Pereira, 2013a](#); [Tejada, 2012](#)). Therefore, students should be driven and eager to acquire new skills to achieve self-efficacy, and respond to pluralism and social inclusion ([Ibáñez-Martín, Fuentes & Barrio, 2012](#); [Tejada & Ruiz, 2016](#)). Hence, curricula are a pool of cultural competences which allow people to interact with different economic, social, cultural and emotional backgrounds and inspires respect for differences, so believe [Badia and Becerril \(2016\)](#) and [Chen \(2016\)](#).

In the 90's, Twentieth Century, the BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) discussed at length educational vocation, as well as the programme of new qualifications and skills training ([Laughton & Montanheiro, 1996](#)). These talks outshine some concern to establish a relation between the education system with the labour market and the need for a competent performance in the workplace. The political position as assumed by BTEC has highlighted the importance of learning by doing, where informal learning is important in the individual and society intellectualisation process. In this manner, it can be stated that the tutor's role is that of a learning facilitator and the students could learn much better upon receiving feedback from their tutors ([Hoffmann, 1999](#)). The importance of the role played by the tutor in the professional success is underlined by [Zhou \(2014\)](#) and [Munthe, Malmo & Rogne \(2011\)](#). [Zhou \(2014\)](#) states that, from the second half of the 20th century onwards, throughout countries, there can be pinpointed strong social and economic changes, which impacted directly on the education system. He considers that curricular reforms are fundamental to economic and social reforms, because handling everyday problems, be open-minded, creative and comprehensive and resort to the application of collaborative learning principles, is the outcome of educational systems adapted to a competitive market and a strong knowledge-based economy. [Smidt \(2015\)](#) does also consider that there is a close relationship between the academic success and professional competence. This is the line of thought in which [Thongthew \(2014\)](#) asserts that the education systems call for changes to better prepare individuals for the expected changes of society. Therefore, the curricula must endow students with diverse skills and critical thinking to adapt to the new technological age because knowledge complexity requires education systems to get involved in soft skills ([Martins, Martins & Pereira, 2013](#)). These foster productivity and personal professional, social and organisational development ([Pereira, 2015](#)), and yet the current era of knowledge lives on continuous, formal, non-formal and informal learning ([Pereira & Assoreira, 2012](#); [Pereira & Coutinho, 2009](#); [Pereira & Correia, 2007](#)).

Thanks to the BTEC, attention was drawn to the need for the academic curriculum to enhance Skills. It defends that it should embody various common Skills. In 1991, it recommended the introduction of a more sophisticated strategy for the production of common competencies, whilst stating that education centres in The United Kingdom should adopt and prescribe the following seven common skills ([Laughton & Montanheiro, 1996, p. 19](#)): (i) *managing and developing self*; (ii) *working with and relating to others*; (iii) *communicating*, (iv) *managing tasks and solving problems*; (v) *applying numeracy*, (vi) *applying technology*, (vii) *applying design and (vii) creativity*.

As for the aforementioned seven *skills*, the authors did a survey by applying a questionnaire to graduates. The main question was: "Considering your previous education, especially the BTEC course you have completed, how did it contribute to your professional/business position or any further academic study you are now realising? ([Laughton & Montanheiro, 1996](#)). The results are enlightening because about 50% of respondents say that their training prior to their bachelor degree had been important or very important. The other part says that the bachelor degree was not decisive or had little contribution.

3.1. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

The development and administration of a questionnaire titled "Importance of Transversal Skills in Higher Education" are the main topics of our empirical investigation. It attempts to gather and analyse opinions from higher education students about the value of soft skill training in their curricula.

The questionnaire was used in some undergraduate degree programmes at the University of Minho, hereinafter referred to as UMinho, and the Polytechnic Institute of Porto, hereinafter referred to as ISEP, throughout the first semester of the academic year 2013–2014, between October 2013 and January 2014. The questionnaire has been designed using a Likert scale with five possible responses, where one (1) equals "totally agree" and five (5) equals "absolutely disagree."

The respondents were first-year bachelor students. We aimed at perceiving their perception about their experience at University. The questionnaire allowed for the collection of 424 responses ($n = 424$), of which 48% of the Instituto Superior de Engenharia do Porto (ISEP) and 52% of the University of Minho. The ISEP respondents are students pursuing Engineering courses and the respondents from University are thus divided: 16% attending the Law School (Law, full-time students); 15% attending Integrated Master in Engineering and Information Systems Management (MIEGSI, full-time students); 09% Integrated Master in Engineering and Information Systems Management (MIEGSI, post-labour students); 07% attending International Business (NI, post-labour students) and 05% attending Applied Statistics (EA, fulltime students).

It is interesting to underline that 75% of respondents are male. By age level, respondents split as follows: 76% are less than 20 years; 17% fall in the interval between 20 and 25 years old and 07% are over 25 years old. It is also interesting to pinpoint the fact that 89% of students are full-time students whereas the remaining 11% are part-time students attending post-labour programmes.

The analysis was supported by the construction of five constructs corresponding to various transversal training vectors: (i) training for autonomy; (ii) training for communication; (iii) training for socioemotional responsibility and (v) specific training with transversal importance resorting to the following questions of the questionnaire:

- a) develop my skills for life
- b) develop, essentially, my technical skills
- c) Develop my social skills
- d) Develop my emotional skills
- e) valuing my autonomy
- f)develop my versatility to face different and adverse situations
- g) valuing oral communication skills
- h) valuing written communication skills
- i)develop my relational/interpersonal skills
- j)instil the necessity of seeking alternative solutions to problems

- k) develop my autonomy to make decisions in uncertain situations
- l) enhance the spirit of entrepreneurial initiative
- m) stimulate my creative skills
- n) provide me with basic knowledge for the exercise of a profession

- o) concern me essentially with the specific skills of the course
- p) promote oral and written skills

Afterwards, we performed a factor analysis in order to analyse the consistency of constructs and make any corrections. We have done a Principal Component Analysis and we have used the VARIMAX method with rotation of components for controlling for the variance. We have initially determined five components that drew 72% of the variance and, given the results, it seemed more appropriate to build just 4 components (QE-Autonomy; QF-Communication; QG-Socio-emotional Responsibility; QH-Specific Training), which drew 69% of total variance, being (i) 33,6% the first component (QE), (ii) 18% the second component (QF), (iii) 11% the third component (QG) and (iv) 6% the fourth component (QH), as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Construction of four main constructs

Component 1 Autonomy (QE) (Var 33,6%)	Component 2 Communication (QF) (Var 18%)	Component 3 Socio-emotional Responsibility (QG) (Var 14,1%)	Component 4 Specific Training (QH) (Var 6%)
a) develop my skills for life	g) valuing oral	c) develop my social skills	b) develop,
e) valuing my autonomy	communicati	d) Develop my	essentially, my
f) develop my versatility to face	on skills.	emotional skills	technical skills.
different and adverse	h) valuing	i) develop my	o) concern myself
situations	written	relational/interpersonal	essentially
j) instil the necessity of seeking	communicati	skills	with the
after alternative solutions to	on skills.		specific skills
problems	p) Promote oral		of the course
k) develop my autonomy to make	and written		
decisions in uncertain	skills		
situations.			
l) enhance the spirit of			
entrepreneurial initiative			
m) stimulate my creative skills			
n) provide myself with basic			
knowledge for the exercise of			

Source: Own Elaboration

Hence, considering the above four constructs, we have undergone a correlational analysis amongst the four constructs. Then, we have determined which of the items had greater importance within each construct and, finally, we have analysed the variance whilst resorting to the ANOVA model of SPSS, by courses, gender and full-time/part-time student status.

3.2 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Variables considered "more" and "less" important by students in training. The variables that have obtained a score of major importance in the training were (see table 3):

Table 3: Variables considered more important

Question / variable	Average	Standard deviation
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n) provide myself with basic knowledge for the exercise of a profession	1.71	1.18
a) develop my skills for life	1.72	1.08
j) instil the necessity of seeking after alternative solutions to problems	1.75	1.19
b) develop, essentially, my technical skills	1.78	1.09

The importance the curriculum

f) develop my versatility to face different and adverse situations	1.77	1.07
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Source: Own Elaboration

The variables that have scored "less" in terms of importance in the training were (see table 4):

Table 4: Variables scored less

Question / variable	Average	Standard deviation
d) develop my emotional skills	3.03	1.24
o) concern myself essentially with the specific skills of the course	2.57	1.54
i) develop my relational/interpersonal skills	2.40	1.24

Source: Own Elaboration

The correlations amongst the four constructs are statistically significant and with intensity fluctuating between the average and the high. We thus highlight (i) Autonomy (QE) and Communication (QF): $r=0.72$, $p<.001$ and (ii) Socio-emotional Responsibility and Communication: $r=0.54$, $p<.001$. On the other hand, we highlight poor correlations in the constructs: (i) Socio-emotional Responsibility (QG) and Specific Training (QH): $r=0.26$, $p<.001$ and (ii) Communication (QF) and Specific Training (QH): $r=0.34$, $p<.001$.

A. DISTINCTION BY GENDER

At first, we controlled for the homogeneity of variances through the Levine Test, from which one may assume the homogeneity of variances in all constructs, as shown in Table 5:

Table 5: Test of homogeneity of variances

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
QE	.645	1	421	.422
QF	.009	1	422	.923
QG	3.463	1	421	.063
QH	.881	1	422	.348

Source: Own Elaboration

We found differences by gender in communication (QF) and socio-emotional responsibility (QG). The Communication construct (QF) is considered as an important one by female students as opposed to male students: $F(1,422)=10.51$, $p=.001$, average difference $=0.35$, $sd=0.11$, $M(\text{female})=1.86$, $sd=0.99$.

Again, regarding socio-emotional responsibility (QG) is more valued by female students than by male students: $F(1.421)=7.5$, $p=.05$, average difference =0.29, $sd=0.07$, $M(\text{female})=2.32$, $sd=0.88$.

B. DISTINCTION BY DEGREE PROGRAMMES

Similarly, at first, we controlled for the homogeneity of variances by means of the Levine Test. One may assume that the homogeneity of variances in three constructs (QF, QG and QH) and heterogeneity in the autonomy one (QE); as such we have resorted to the Games-Howell' Statistics:

Table 6: Test f Homogeneity of Variances

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
QE	4.520	5	417	.001
QF	1.825	5	418	.107
QG	.912	5	417	.473
QH	1.133	5	418	.342

Source: Own Elaboration

We found statistically significant differences in the first three constructs and we did not observe only in the construct "Specific Training" (QH). As such:

B1) CONSTRUCT AUTONOMY (QE)

We only found significant statistical differences between the opinion as materialise by NI students (postlabour) and MIEGSI (post-labour). Interesting to highlight that NI students consider autonomy more important than MIEGSI students (post-labour): $F(5,417)=2.65$, $p=.02$, difference (NI-MIEGSI)=-.609, $sd=.2$, $p=.05$, $M(NI) = 1.6$, $sd = 0.54$.

B2) CONSTRUCT COMMUNICATION (QF)

There is evidence of significant statistical differences between the Law and the MIEGSI bachelor degree programmes (full-time) and those as offered by ISEP; and between the course of NI and MIEGSI programmes (post-labour) and those offered by ISEP. We have also found an identical behaviour between the Law and International Bussiness (NI) courses, and both courses identify "Communication" with greater importance in their curricula. Full-time students attending MIEGSI courses have also attributed greater importance to this construct than post-labour students pursuing the same programmes.

$F(5,417)=4.77$, $p<.001$. Difference (Law-MIEGSI post-labour) = -.85, $sd=.19$, $p<.001$; $M(MIGSI PL) = 2.65$, $sd=1.19$.

Difference (Law-ISEP) = -.4, $sd=.13$, $p=.004$; $M(Law) = 1.79$ $sd = 1.06$.

Difference (NI-MIEGSI post-labour) = -.85, $sd=.23$, $p<.001$; $M(NI) = 1.8$, $sd=0.88$.

Difference (NI-ISEP) = -.39, $sd=.19$, $p=.004$; $M(ISEP) = 2.19$, $sd = 0.86$.

Difference (MIEGSI full-time-MIEGSI post-labour) = -.2, $sd=.23$, $p=.005$; $M(MIGSI, full time) = 2.09$, $sd = 1.06$.

Difference (EA –MIEGSI, post-labour) = -.49, $sd=.25$, $p=.05$; $M(EA) = 2.16$, $sd = 0.87$.

ISEP students consider this item less importance and the assigned by all other courses. Differences are statistically significant, where this skill is more valued by the Law students and less by students pursuing the MIEGSI course (post-labour) as compared to those pursuing the MIEGSI course (full-time) and the Statistics course.

B3) CONSTRUCT SOCIO-EMOTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY (QG)

One may only find significant statistical differences between the views of Law students and ISEP, where Law students appreciate more this construct, and between the MIEGSI (full-time) and those from ISEP, where first-year students value more this construct: $F(5,417)=2.16$, $p=0.05$; Difference (Law-ISEP) = $-.31$, $sd=.13$, $p=.02$; M (Law) = 2.34 , $sd = 1.05$. Difference (MIEGSI Full-Time-ISEP) = $-.33$, $sd=.14$, $p=.02$; M (MIEGS Full time) = 2.33 , $sd = 1.06$.

Insofar the Construct “Specific Training” (QH) is concerned; there is no difference of opinion in none of the courses.

C. DISTINCTIONBY WORKING-STUDENT

We did not find significant statistical differences for any of the constructs.

4. DISCUSSION

In order to transform academic curricula into ones that are more suitable for a culture that values knowledge, our study aims to provoke discussion on their merits. In order to achieve this, we assessed the students' opinions about the value of soft skills. The study is broken down into four primary areas of reflection: autonomy, communication, socioemotional development, and specialised training for the workforce. Evidence shows students appreciate more the variables of learning autonomy and less those related to the management of emotions. This feeling seems to tune up with the demands of a demanding labour market regarding commitment and responsibility. The importance assigned to autonomy by the students is consistent with the markets' perception and it is in line with those who argue that generic and transferable skills in the academic curriculum facilitate personal development and enhance performance ([Chen, 2016](#); [Ibáñez-Martín, Fuentes & Barrio, 2012](#); [Pereira, 2015](#); [Tejada, 2012](#)). According to [Badia and Becerril \(2016\)](#), [Munthe, Malmo and Rogne \(2011\)](#), [Smidt \(2015\)](#) and [Thongthaw \(2014\)](#) the change of curricula is a pillar of economic reform and the change of society. It is therefore difficult to understand the very universities' slim steps toward change, due to the fact that interpersonal relationships are the basis of the functioning of organisations, where conflicts do frequently materialise and where it is important to know how to overcome them. Therefore, it would be expected to value the management of emotions, as it is the case regarding autonomy. According to [Goleman \(1997\)](#), there are many paths to success in life, and many areas where other skills are rewarded. Emotional intelligence provides advantages in a complex society. In fact, and according to this author, it is important to understand the other, both in terms of motivation and work habits. According to [Goleman \(1997\)](#), cognition and emotion are not opposing skills. As for interpersonal relationships, social ineptitude would be a problem that could jeopardise success in a competitive world. Therefore, we have questioned ourselves about (i) the reasons for different valuations revealed by the students, (ii) how do students perceive the labour market and (iii) the required skills to accept change as well as their availability and agility to change.

Traditionally and culturally, students seem to enhance more technical skills, thereby appreciating others to a lesser degree. But, emotional management, despite being the least valued by students, is present in all the activities within organisations and throughout the student's academic career, helping him/her to maintain a high degree of academic satisfaction, by knowing to control for the most adverse moments and situation of their experience in the academia, the emotional intelligence in dealing with difficulties, *inter alia*. All these competencies should be in everyday life of a university student, in the light of what happens with a professional in an organisation, as recommended by [Chen \(2016\)](#), [Laughton and Montanheiro \(1996\)](#), [Pereira \(2015\)](#) and [Tajada and Ruiz \(2016\)](#). It is therefore of great importance to develop skills that are not visible directly on the individual, thus adapting him/her to a knowledge-based economy. If this does not happen with the required intensity and urgency, the University student will be a diminished professional in the labour market and a misfit in society. Therefore, the concern of the Bologna Reform focuses on the need for adaptation of the academic curriculum to adjust it to a society that has to tackle constant and permanent technological and societal shocks, which calls for changes in the type of skills that should be developed at the University.

5. CONCLUSION

- (i) The significance of the teaching-learning process in higher education is discussed in this paper. It strives to raise awareness of the several benefits soft skills and cross-cutting abilities have on both individual and organisational success. The quantitative and qualitative quality of the statistics that are currently available for Portugal is low. Nonetheless, the data from the empirical analyses provided provide insight into:
- (ii) Students who are pursuing all courses under analysis, both at the University of Minho and at Polytechnic Institute of Porto, emphasised the importance of soft skills in their training/education. However, the importance attributed to each group of competencies is

not equally perceived and pondered thereby unveiling differences either by course or by gender.

- (iii) Students of Law and International Business value more the development of oral and written communication skills. Even when one compares to other skills, though with less intensity, students of International Business and Law seem to give greater importance than those pursuing the most technical courses such as MIEGSI and those attending ISEP's courses.
- (iv) The Socio-Emotional Responsibility skills seem to be perceived as more important amongst female students and Law Programme which is consistent with their specific training / education.
- (v) In an increasingly competitive education model and based on the results, ability is often privileged in relation to effort and to work cooperatively in a team environment.
- (vi) It seems a paradox to base excellence upon ability and at the same time acknowledge the importance of effort and evolution in the teaching-learning process.
- (vii) Transversal skills are more in line with the second vector of training than that based more upon competitiveness and result.
- (viii) Teamwork will be a model of education development in cooperation in which the acquired competence goes far beyond the goal centred only on results.

With regard to the current work evidence, we could ask:

1. To what extent is the degree of structural change in the current teaching-learning system consistent with the guidelines of the Bologna Process?
2. Considering the insensitivity of data on transversal skills, is the current higher education system addressing the overall individual training whilst responding to the individual social integration?
3. Has the current education format been designed as a process to enhance emotional, relational, behavioural and cognitive intelligence of the individual?
4. Are the current academic curricula contributing to the integral development of the individual and stimulating the individual present and future professional performance?

In the light of our results, we think it is important and urgent to devise a new policy for the governance of Universities. These should consider transversal competences -soft skills- and interdisciplinarity of utmost relevance. As a matter of fact, we propose the implementation of diverse pedagogical practices, focusing on interpersonal relationships, communication and personal development. To this endeavour, we believe that all stakeholders in the educational process must be committed to achieving these goals.

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