

## Chapter 4

# Transversal Competences Towards Employability in Female Students

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter focuses on competences required from female students building on the analysis of perceived transversal competences expressed by female students as well as by male and female employers. The study addresses the transversal competences that are essential for female students transitions to the labor market looking at the deemed necessary competences from both male and female employers. The study offers a pan-European perspective from a sample of 282 female students, plus 88 male and female employers from Cyprus, Lithuania, Poland, and Portugal. Evidence unfolds a great deal of sensitivity on the part of female students regarding personal transversal competences and highlights different competence priorities demanded from female students by male and female employers. The results can inform the debates and policies about education programs and objectives while offering insights for female students' job searches.*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9171-9.ch004

## INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that transversal competences need to be considered in Higher Education as an important element to be developed (Lima, Mesquita, Rocha, & Rabelo, 2017). This type of competences has been described as those that are not specific to a given area of knowledge (Cabral-Cardoso, Estevão, & Silva, 2006; Mendonça, 2016; Pereira & Rodrigues, 2013). Transversal competences are essential for individuals to deal with the uncertainties of an unstable job market (Mendonça, 2016; Pereira & Rodrigues, 2013; Sicilia, 2010). When it comes to society, competences allow us to create a definition of qualifications and performance patterns of professionals, which are essential for the efficient operation of the labor market (Cabral-Cardoso et al., 2006). Issues related to employability are complex and may depend on several circumstances. However, these can turn into an institutional, personal, or even contextual aspect (Mendonça, 2016).

Employability depends, largely, from the alignment between the competences of job seekers with the actual labor market demand (Rivera et al., 2012). Evidence suggests that employers attribute substantial importance to this type of competences (Silva, 2008). In fact, this topic has been in the spotlight of academic and business debates in recent years (Fleury & Fleury, 2001; Halász & Michel, 2011). Transversal competences play a crucial role and go as far as being decisive when it comes to the employability of graduates (Cabral-Cardoso et al., 2006).

In Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) students have the opportunity to develop their competences, some that are specific to academic and technical areas of knowledge and others that have a transversal nature, all playing a role in getting a job and contributing to a successful professional career (Mendonça, 2016). The perceptions that Higher Education students have regarding their own competences, notably when they are close to finishing their training, will greatly contribute to explain their employability results. Recruiters look for different skills and competences and graduates are to some extent aware of the job market needs (Monteiro, Almeida, & García-Aracil, 2015). Skills and employability have been extensively studied and stimulated by national governments and by international institutions. This is a theme considered to be very important not only for graduates (facilitating their employment) and national economies (reducing unemployment), but also for business performance. The evolutions observed in the job market have turned the process of job search more challenging in terms of the variety of skills required. The same holds for the ability to maintain a job position. In fact, companies are increasingly expressing their problems in recruiting the human resources they need. Therefore, this is a timely and relevant topic to the majority of managers, especially in the area of human resources. Most studies on employability skills tend to ignore the differences between male and female skills (skills perceived and real), and this can have practical implications for the measures adopted to diminish gender gaps. Very few studies have addressed gender differences in the expectations of employers, and only recently we observe a clear turn in the literature on this topic (Hill et al., 2019; de la Rosa et al., 2013; Piopiunik et al., 2018; Chan et al., 2018; Monteiro et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2016).

The investment in transversal competences should be aligned with student's specific needs, while meeting the demands of their job market (Sarmiento, Ferreira Dias, Amorim, & Galego, 2018). Understanding what recruiters look for in a candidate might make the difference for the ability to get, or not, a job. The question is: are there gender differences in the perceptions and demands for competences? This chapter explores how competence perceptions affect the hireability of a female job candidate.

This chapter aims to contribute to the understanding of employability regarding women. Therefore, its focus is to study the perceptions that female students have regarding the development of their trans-

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