

Kinga Karpińska

University of Białystok

Poland

e-mail: k.karpinska@uwb.edu.pl

ORCID: 0000-0002-3150-8339

MATCHING THE COMPETENCIES OF STUDENTS AND GRADUATES OF ECONOMICS-RELATED FIELDS TO LABOUR MARKET REQUIREMENTS IN POLAND – RESULTS OF OWN RESEARCH

Abstract. The labour market in the 21st century is undergoing dynamic transformations driven by technological progress, automation, digitalisation, and ongoing globalisation. In this context, the question of whether higher education graduates' competencies are aligned with the real needs of the economy is becoming increasingly important. These changes affect not only the structure of employment and the demand for specific professions but also redefine the very expectations placed on employees' competencies. Forecasting difficulties regarding the future of the labour market involve not only identifying professions at risk of disappearing but, more importantly, determining which new qualifications and competencies will be desirable in the future. Technological changes are leading to a situation in which skills once considered crucial may lose their relevance within just a few years. The growing pace of change forces the continuous updating of curricula, and the analysis of graduates' competency alignment becomes not only a practical necessity but also a scientific challenge. In this context, the question of the adequacy of higher education graduates' competencies – particularly, for the purposes of this article, those of economics graduates – takes on special significance. The aim of the article is to assess the extent to which the competencies of economics graduates are aligned with the requirements and realities of the contemporary labour market in Poland. The article is divided into two research areas. The first focuses on surveying employers in order to identify their demand for the competencies of economics graduates. The second concerns the examination of the competencies of the students and graduates themselves. Both groups were studied to determine the degree of correlation between the competencies acquired by students/graduates and the actual competencies currently required and expected by employers. The results of the analyses made it possible to identify competency gaps that may negatively affect graduates' employability and competitiveness.

Keywords: competencies, economics graduates, labour market.

Theoretical Foundations of Competency Analysis

The concept of competence was first defined in the United States by David McClelland in the 1970s. His approach assumed that professional success and work efficiency cannot be accurately predicted solely on the basis of school performance [McClelland, 1973, p. 1–3]. In 1982, Richard Boyatzis proposed a different approach, focusing on analysing individuals who achieve outstanding professional results. In his view, key factors were individual traits such as motivations, skills, self-perception, social role, and the scope of possessed knowledge [Boyatzis, 1982, p. 21]. Woodruffe, on the other hand, defined competences as observable behaviours that determine the effective performance of specific tasks [Woodruffe, 1993, p. 29–31]. The concepts of Cardona and Chinchilla, as well as Morand, emphasise that competences manifest themselves in repetitive and habitual forms of behaviour, which allows for their systematic identification and assessment [Cardona, Chinchilla, 1999, p. 9–11; Morand, 2001, p. 21–23].

In the era of dynamic economic and technological changes, competences have become the foundation of individuals' effective functioning in the labour market. In the literature, there are many definitions of competence that differ in emphasis and research perspectives.

Edgar H. Schein defines competences as fundamental personal characteristics, such as knowledge, skills, motivations, and personality traits, which determine work effectiveness and enable the achievement of above-average results [Schein, 1990, p. 23–25]. Daniel Goleman indicates that competences are a set of emotional and social skills that allow an individual to effectively manage their own emotions and relationships with others, which translates into performance [Goleman, 1995, p. 45]. The International Labour Organization defines competences as a set of knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to perform specific tasks in accordance with job requirements and applicable industry standards [International Labour Organization, 2018, p. 13]. This definition highlights a practical and standardised approach to competences in the labour market.

Competences are also understood as dynamic and complex combinations of cognitive and metacognitive skills, knowledge, interpersonal abilities, and ethical values, which together enable effective action in various professional contexts. The process of developing these is the goal of educational programmes that integrate subject teaching with the development of general competences. There are competences specific to particular fields of study, as well as universal ones useful in many areas [Črnjar i in., 2018, p. 47].

Competences can also be defined as a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes enabling the effective performance of professional tasks. The literature [Spencer & Spencer, 1993; OECD, 2020] distinguishes between hard competences (technical, specialist) and soft competences (social, interpersonal). In recent years, the role of so-called transversal competences and meta-competences, such as the ability to learn, adapt to change, or think critically, has been increasing [World Economic Forum, 2023].

From the Polish research perspective, Zbigniew M. Bednarski defines competences as a combination of knowledge, skills, experience, and attitudes necessary to properly perform specific tasks within an organisation [Bednarski, 2003, p. 55–58]. According to Sokołowska, competences are an integrated set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable effective and independent performance of specific professional activities, integrating various elements of vocational preparation [Sokołowska, 2007, p. 41–44]. Ewa Chodkowska-Miszczyk points out that competences constitute an integrated set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes enabling an individual to effectively carry out tasks in a specific professional and social context. They are not merely a sum of separate elements, but rather a synergistic combination where each component complements and reinforces the others. Knowledge is not only a resource of information but also an understanding of the principles and contexts in which various processes and phenomena operate in the work environment. Skills are the practical ability to apply this knowledge in real situations, while attitudes concern readiness and motivation to undertake specific actions and shape proper interpersonal relations. She also notes that competences are context-dependent – they may vary depending on industry specifics, organisational culture, or social requirements, which makes their flexibility and adaptability essential for professional and personal development [Chodkowska-Miszczyk, 2020, p. 3–35].

Anna Nowakowska defines competences as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable individuals to adapt and operate effectively in a changing work environment. A key aspect of her approach is the emphasis on flexibility and the ability to learn, which is essential in the face of dynamic technological, organisational, and market changes. For her, competences go beyond traditional vocational skills, encompassing the ability to respond quickly to new challenges, make decisions in uncertain situations, and solve problems innovatively. Attitudes, as an integral part of competences, refer to openness to change, proactivity, and willingness to cooperate. She also emphasises that the contemporary labour market requires continuous development and updating of competences, and that organisations must support this process through training systems and a learn-

ing culture. Competences are therefore, in Nowakowska's view, the key to building a competitive advantage for both individuals and enterprises [Nowakowska, 2022, p. 102–105].

Based on the above definitions, several common features form the basis of the contemporary understanding of the term. Competences are seen as an integrative set of elements encompassing knowledge, skills, and attitudes, such as motivations or personality traits. These components work together to form a coherent whole, highlighting the holistic nature of competences. Another important feature is their practical dimension – competences enable effective task performance and problem-solving in real situations. Knowledge and skills are therefore not abstract resources but are directed towards achieving effectiveness in a given environment. Another shared element is the adaptability of competences – they are not static but require continuous adjustment to changing technological, organisational, and social conditions. This flexibility is linked to the need for learning and responding to new challenges, which is especially important in a dynamic labour market. Competences are also observable in the form of repetitive and habitual behaviours, allowing for their systematic identification, assessment, and development. All definitions emphasise the link between competences and professional effectiveness – they determine success and enable the achievement of both standard and above-average results at work. Moreover, competences are contextual in nature, meaning their specificity and significance depend on the industry, organisational culture, or social requirements, and thus they must be tailored to a given environment. The role of attitudes and motivations cannot be overlooked either, as they influence readiness to act, initiative, and the way interpersonal relationships are established and maintained. As a result, the contemporary understanding of competences combines complexity, practicality, and adaptability – key to the effective functioning of individuals and organisations in a changing world of work.

Labour Market Trends and the Competencies of Economists

The first researcher who, many decades ago, emphasized the significance of changes occurring in the labor market was Peter Drucker, who introduced the concept of knowledge workers. He pointed out that the key to organizational success lies in the effective management of knowledge and in increasing its productivity [Drucker, 1992, p. 30–32]. Currently, a dynamic development of processes of digitalization and integration of various industrial, production, and logistics functions is observed, based on advanced

technologies such as digitalization, big data analysis, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, robotics, cyber-physical systems, 3D printing, or electric vehicles [Kagermann, Wahlster, Helbig, 2013, p. 11–15]. A key feature of the ongoing changes is the close integration of humans with the digital world, where access to information is possible in real-time and from any location [Hermann et al., 2015, p. 3929–3931; Saniuk, Saniuk, 2017, p. 87]. The introduction of these solutions, and above all, robotics, automation, or artificial intelligence, causes that the human role in the production process is limited to essential activities, primarily analytical and supervisory, and employees are freed from monotonous and routine tasks [Krzyżanowski, 2017, p. 44]. It can be expected that more and more often many traditional tasks performed by humans will be replaced by machines and software systems. However, it should be emphasized that the development of modern technologies, especially digitalization, automation, and networked forms of communication, increasingly affects the functioning of almost all sectors of the economy. Contrary to earlier forecasts, which assumed mainly the elimination of occupations of a repetitive and routine nature, the current stage of artificial intelligence development – particularly in the field of large language models (e.g., GPT-4) and generative graphic tools – reveals a potential threat to many creative and intellectual professions. Among the occupations particularly exposed to automation are, for example, translators, computer graphics designers, lawyers, teachers, as well as programmers.

Apart from technological changes themselves, a number of other factors currently influence the shaping of the labor market, including [International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 10]:

- changes in demographic structure, including size, distribution, and aging of the population,
- rapid urbanization,
- shifts in the global balance of power between developed and developing countries,
- limited natural resources and challenges related to climate change.

Global labor market trends have a significant impact on shaping and evolving the competencies required in economics programs. In the era of digitalization, automation, and the growing role of artificial intelligence, traditional competencies of economists, based mainly on data analysis and knowledge of economic theory, must be supplemented with new technological skills and adaptive abilities [Schwab, 2020, p. 14].

Firstly, the development of digital technologies, including Big Data, data analytics, and modeling and simulation tools, requires economics students to acquire advanced IT competencies. Knowledge of statistical soft-

ware, programming languages (e.g., Python, R), as well as the ability to interpret large datasets becomes crucial for effective analysis of markets and economic processes [Manyika et al., 2017]. Therefore, curricula in economics programs must integrate these elements to prepare graduates for the realities of the modern economy [Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014, p. 167].

Secondly, globalization and changing socio-economic conditions impose the necessity of developing soft skills, such as intercultural communication, negotiation skills, or teamwork in multicultural environments. The increasing importance of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility means that economists must also develop ethical competencies and understand the impact of economic decisions on the environment and society [UNESCO, 2015; Sachs, 2016, p. 220–225].

Thirdly, the dynamism of the labor market and the unpredictability of global crises – such as the COVID-19 pandemic – emphasize the need to develop adaptive competencies, flexibility, and lifelong learning skills. Economists should be prepared to respond quickly to changes, show initiative, and demonstrate creativity in problem-solving, which becomes an element of their competitive advantage [OECD, 2020].

Digital transformation has contributed to the emergence of new business models based on online platforms, which connect suppliers with service or product recipients. The phenomenon of the platform economy, represented by global players, changes market functioning and forces economists to acquire new analytical competencies. The ability to model two-sided markets, assess the effects of algorithmic pricing, and understand network effect dynamics becomes crucial [Rochet, Tirole, 2003, 990–1029]. An additional challenge remains regulatory issues – including tax, antitrust, or data protection – which are often complex in the case of the cross-border nature of digital platform activities [Cusumano, Gawer, Yoffie, 2019, p. 90–99].

The development of remote and hybrid work has increased competition in the global labor market. Economists must be prepared to work in international teams, which requires both language proficiency and understanding of cultural and legal differences. The ability to adapt to diverse business practices used in different countries becomes currently one of the key features enabling building competitive advantage on an international scale [World Economic Forum, 2023].

These fundamental changes generate new requirements regarding employee competencies, simultaneously causing the elimination of certain professions and the emergence of new ones. Although at first glance it might seem sufficient to verify diplomas and formal qualifications of candidates, practice indicates the necessity to assess soft skills as well [Kobylińska, 2017,

p. 555–560]. Skills such as initiative, creativity, engagement, or communication abilities are increasingly important and are difficult to measure based on certificates [Van Laar et al., 2017, p. 580]. Therefore, current discussions concern distinguishing and identifying both hard and soft competencies, which is of particular importance for university graduates [Šafránková, Šikýř, 2017, p. 589–590].

Research methodology

The study was designed based on two key analytical areas, aiming to analyze the alignment of competency levels acquired by students and graduates of economics programs with the needs of employers. The first research module focused on analyzing labor market expectations by collecting employers' opinions regarding preferred candidate competencies. In this context, both a quantitative research tool in the form of an online survey and a qualitative approach consisting of in-depth individual interviews were applied.

The quantitative study was conducted from May to October 2024, using a questionnaire consisting of 15 questions, which included demographic questions (company size, length of operation on the market, industry, etc.) as well as questions about hard and soft skills relevant to a given job position and specific industry. This study enabled the assessment of the current level of selected competencies possessed by students and graduates and the identification of competency gaps from the perspective of the companies employing them. A total of 570 representatives of enterprises operating in Poland participated in the survey.

The study also included a qualitative exploration of the topic through in-depth interviews with company representatives. This method allowed the collection of detailed information regarding employers' expectations and experiences, which cannot be captured using standard survey tools. The interviews were also conducted between May and October 2024, with a purposive sample covering 68 entities. The objective of these studies was to determine the level of alignment between students' and graduates' competencies and the actual labor market requirements.

The second part of the study directly addressed the analysis of the competency levels of final-year students and graduates of economics programs. It aimed to assess the level of their competencies in the context of employment and to examine the alignment of these competencies with labor market requirements. The research tool was an online questionnaire consisting of 20 questions, designed to gather information on how students

assess the level of competence they have acquired during their studies. The survey covered 1,347 final-year students and 109 graduates of economics programs. The selection of the group was purposeful, as the surveyed students/graduates were from universities where broader research on competencies was conducted as part of a Regional Excellence Initiative grant.

The results of both studies were presented in the IPMA (Importance-Performance Matrix), which allows for the assessment of the relationship between the importance of a given attribute and the degree of its implementation [Martilla, James, 1977, p. 78]. This analysis is used to evaluate and prioritize attributes, services, competencies, or organizational activities based on their perceived importance and level of implementation (i.e., effectiveness of execution). It was originally developed in the context of marketing research but is also widely applied in other areas, e.g., competency assessment.

The main assumptions of the IPMA analysis [Haverila, Haverila, McLaughlin, 2023]:

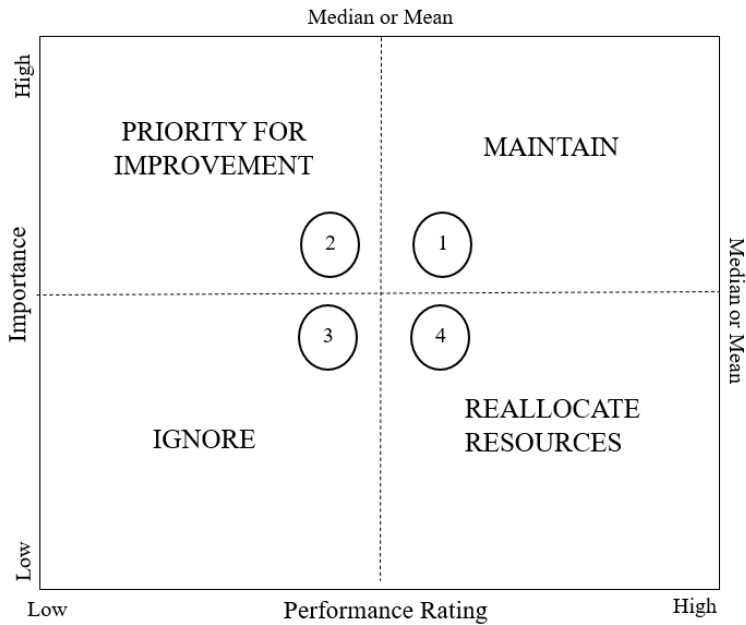
- importance – evaluates how significant a given attribute (e.g., competency) is from the perspective of stakeholders – e.g., employers, clients, students.
- performance – evaluates how well a given attribute is implemented, e.g., the extent to which a competency is mastered by students and graduates.
- comparison of the two dimensions – based on the assessments of importance and performance, a two-dimensional matrix is created, which allows for identifying areas to develop, maintain, or reduce.

Both values are usually measured on a scale from 1–5, from 1 (“not important”/“very low level”) to 5 (“very important”/“very high level”).

The below chart presents an example of an IPMA (Importance-Performance Matrix Analysis), used to assess, for instance, competencies. The points on the chart represent competencies evaluated by respondents according to their importance and level of performance (i.e., the extent to which they are developed). The chart quadrants are interpreted as follows [Kaczmarek & Puciato, 2021, pp. 48–52]:

- quadrant I (upper right corner) – Maintain: important and well-developed competencies,
- quadrant II (upper left corner) – Priority for improvement: important but poorly developed competencies,
- quadrant III (lower left corner) – Ignore: low importance and low performance – do not require urgent action,
- quadrant IV (lower right corner) – Resource reallocation: well-developed but less important – possible overinvestment.

Figure 1. Theoretical depiction of the IPMA matrix



Source: [Niemiec, 2015, p. 566].

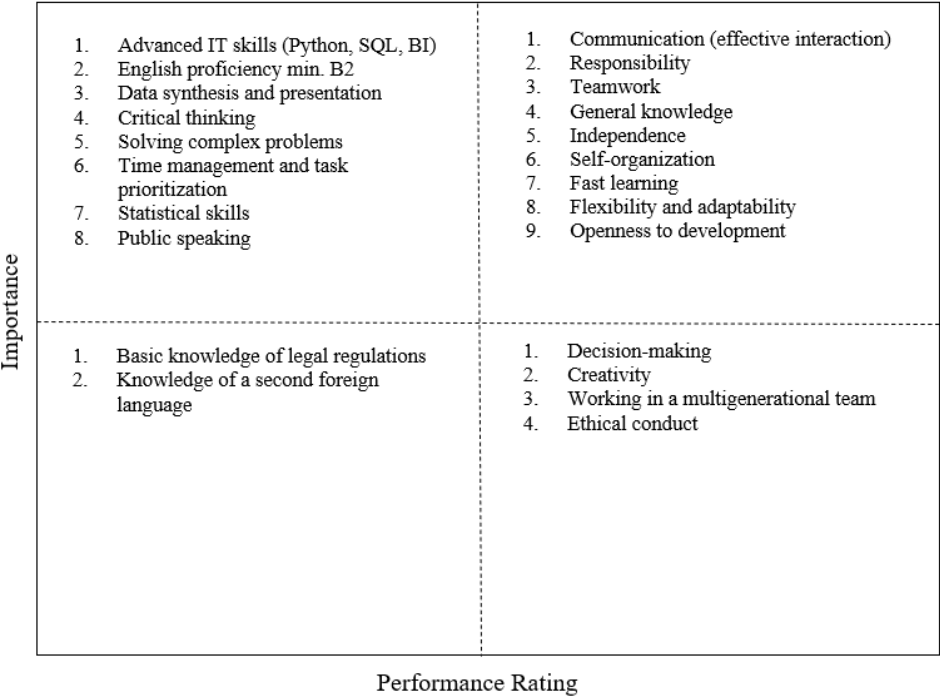
For example, if university graduates assess that the competency “team-work” is very important (5), but they have mastered it only moderately (2.5), it will fall into Quadrant II – Priority for improvement. The university should then strengthen educational activities in this area (e.g., more group projects, practical exercises).

It is worth noting that using self-assessment in competency studies carries the risk of subjective evaluation by respondents, which may lead to discrepancies compared to results obtained through objective diagnostic methods.

Research results

In order to obtain in-depth information on employers’ expectations, quantitative and qualitative research was conducted, focusing on the assessment of selected competencies. The analysis of the collected data made it possible to identify the competencies that – according to employers – currently reach the highest level among students and graduates of economic fields, as well as those that are most highly desired by them.

Figure 2. IPMA matrix of surveyed entrepreneurs by competency groups (average values)



Source: own elaboration based on conducted research.

In the “Maintain” group are the skills that graduates typically possess at a satisfactory level and that form the foundation for their further professional development. These competencies primarily include communication, responsibility, teamwork, and general knowledge, understood as a broad understanding of economic, business, and social issues. Communication forms the basis of effective collaboration and is crucial in all professional roles, as it enables clear information exchange and prevents misunderstandings. Responsibility is a trait expected from employees at the start of their careers, as it affects trust and the delegation of important tasks. Teamwork skills are highly valuable because a significant portion of tasks is performed collaboratively, requiring effective cooperation within the organization. General knowledge, encompassing broad competencies in economics, business, and social issues, serves as a foundation for developing more specialized skills. Graduates with such knowledge quickly understand connections between different areas of the company and the market, which is highly valued by employers seeking individuals who can take a holistic view of the organi-

zation rather than merely executing fragmented tasks. This competency group also includes independence, which allows taking on responsibilities without constant supervision, increasing work efficiency. Equally important is the ability to organize one's own work, as a lack of it leads to low productivity and difficulties in meeting deadlines. The ability to learn quickly is especially important at the start of a career, when graduates are usually employed in junior positions, and this process is supported by good work organization. Flexibility and the ability to adapt to change are essential in a dynamic work environment, although they naturally develop with experience. Finally, openness to development, although less critical than other competencies, is a desirable trait as it promotes continuous improvement of qualifications and professional skills.

The "Priority for improvement" group includes competencies that are particularly important from the labor market perspective, yet often represent areas of deficiency among graduates. The most significant of these are advanced IT skills, such as programming in Python and SQL, as well as proficiency with Business Intelligence tools. The labor market shows strong demand for these skills, while the number of graduates possessing them remains insufficient. It should be emphasized, however, that competencies in the field of artificial intelligence are not limited to the technical skills listed above. They also include many other tools that are becoming increasingly important in various professional tasks – for example, ChatGPT (advanced prompt engineering), AI-based marketing tools, tools for automating business processes, tools for assessing data quality, and even basic data cybersecurity solutions. Another key requirement in many job offers is practical English proficiency at a minimum B2 level, the absence of which significantly limits employment and development opportunities in internationally oriented organizations. Employers also note insufficient skills in data synthesis and presentation, which are critical in both analytical and managerial roles, as they enable the effective communication of conclusions and recommendations. Critical thinking is another essential competency, allowing for sound decision-making and error avoidance, while the ability to solve complex problems, although extremely important, usually develops alongside professional experience. Next are time management and task prioritization skills, which are important but easier to improve and refine on the job compared to gaps in analytical or language competencies. Statistical skills, though useful in certain roles, generally have lower priority than English proficiency or IT tools. Finally, public speaking skills are important, yet are usually required less frequently at the early stages of a career.

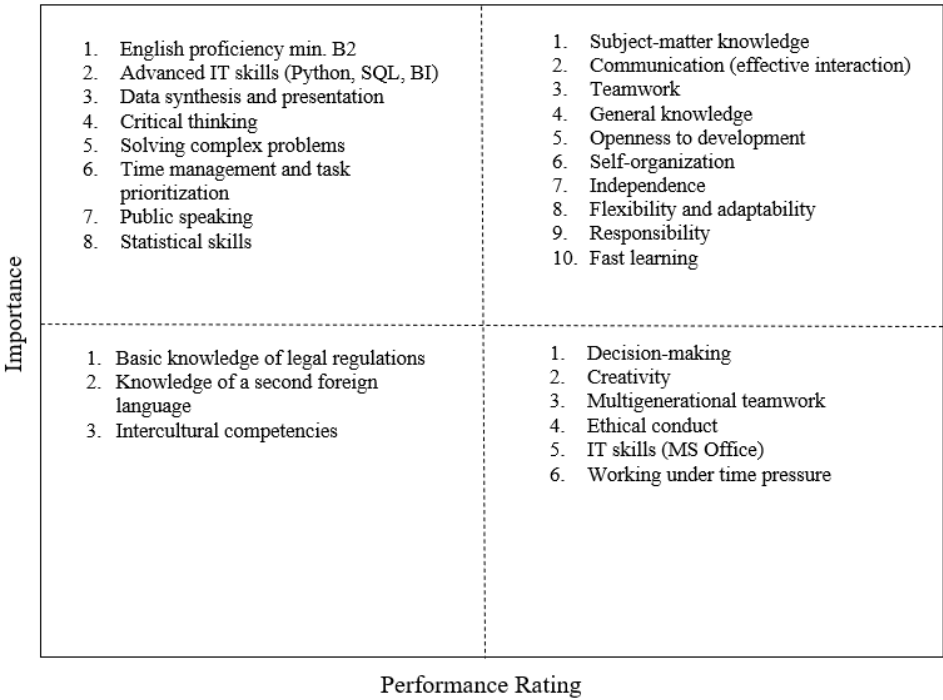
The “Ignore” group includes competencies that have limited significance when a graduate enters the labor market. These include basic knowledge of legal regulations and knowledge of a second foreign language. Basic legal knowledge is needed only in selected specializations and is not a common requirement for junior positions. Knowledge of a second foreign language can be an additional asset but rarely determines employment, especially at the beginning of a professional career.

The “Resource reallocation” group encompasses competencies whose development should depend on the chosen career path. The most important of these is decision-making, which becomes particularly significant in positions requiring independence and responsibility for projects or teams. The development of this competency should therefore be targeted primarily where it has a real impact on organizational functioning. Next are creativity, working in a multigenerational team, and ethical conduct. Creativity is especially important in certain departments, such as marketing, but is not universally required. Working in a multigenerational team matters only in companies with high age diversity among employees. Ethical conduct, in turn, is an expected standard of professional behavior and is not considered an area requiring intensive development.

Grouping these competencies looks slightly different from the perspective of students and graduates of economic fields (Figure 3).

The “Maintain” group includes competencies that economics students and graduates perceive as the foundation of their value on the labor market and as the basis for further professional development. At the top of this group is subject-matter knowledge, i.e., solid foundations in economics, finance, management, and marketing, which are essential for functioning in a business environment. Graduates generally feel confident in this area, although they are also aware of the need to continuously update and expand their practical knowledge. Communication, understood as effective interaction, is recognized as a key skill necessary for collaboration and teamwork. Despite being aware of its importance, many young people feel a lack of communication competence, especially in formal situations. Teamwork is an integral part of most professional environments, and practicing it during studies allows students to gain initial experience, though it still requires the development of interpersonal maturity. General knowledge, understood as a broad understanding of economic, business, and social issues, helps graduates quickly grasp the context in which organizations and markets operate, which is valued by employers. Openness to development is a trait declared by most students, though at the beginning of a career, it is more often a stated intention than a practiced habit. Competencies

Figure 3. IPMA matrix of surveyed students and graduates by competency groups (average values)



Source: own elaboration based on conducted research.

such as self-organization and independence are challenging for young employees, who often require support and mentoring to manage tasks and time effectively. Flexibility and adaptability, although valued, develop naturally with experience, as does responsibility, which requires practical engagement in tasks and decision-making. Finally, quick learning is seen as an important trait supporting professional development, though it requires favorable conditions, such as mentoring and opportunities to apply knowledge in practice.

The “Priority for improvement” group includes competencies that economics students and graduates consider essential in the labor market but often insufficiently developed. English language proficiency at a minimum B2 level is seen as a basic requirement for many job offers, especially in international organizations. Despite claiming proficiency, many young people struggle with fluency and ease in practical use of the language. Advanced IT skills, such as knowledge of Python, SQL, or Business Intelligence tools, are considered crucial, yet the vast majority of economics students pos-

sess them only at a basic level or not at all. The lack of practical classes and work experience with these tools leads to a clear skills gap. Synthesizing and presenting results is an important skill for both analytical and managerial roles, yet many graduates have difficulty presenting conclusions clearly and concisely. Critical thinking, which underpins sound decision-making and error avoidance, is often underdeveloped in traditional education systems, making independent analysis of complex problems difficult. Problem-solving requires an interdisciplinary approach and experience, which develops only during professional work. Time management and task prioritization are key to efficiency, but young employees often struggle due to juggling multiple responsibilities. Public speaking is seen as challenging due to stress and lack of systematic practice during studies. Meanwhile, statistical skills, though useful in specific roles, are often perceived as difficult and less of a priority, leading to their neglect in favor of other competencies.

The “Ignore” group includes competencies that, at the entry level, economics students and graduates perceive as less important or optional. Basic knowledge of legal regulations is seen as required only in certain specializations and rarely constitutes a decisive factor for employment in junior positions. Knowledge of a second foreign language is considered an additional asset that may distinguish a candidate but is rarely necessary at the early career stage. Intercultural competencies, though valued in large international corporations, are often underestimated or seen as a developmental goal for later stages of employment.

The “Resource Relocation” group contains competencies whose development depends on the chosen career path and job specifics. Decision-making, while crucial in positions requiring independence and responsibility for projects or teams, is regarded by students and graduates as a skill to be developed over time as experience and career advancement progress. Creativity is seen as important, especially in departments such as marketing or product development, but it is not generally considered a key skill at the start of a career in economics. Multigenerational teamwork is recognized as significant only in organizations with high age diversity, which is rare at the early career stage. Ethical conduct is considered a standard professional requirement, which does not require intensive development but consistent adherence. This group also includes MS Office skills, which students usually possess at a good level and consider obvious, not requiring additional development. Working under time pressure, though important, is a skill primarily developed through professional experience, so graduates often do not yet feel fully competent in this area.

A comparative analysis of employers' and graduates' perceptions of competencies shows a high level of agreement in identifying key areas that require both maintenance and further development. Both groups particularly emphasize the importance of soft skills, such as interpersonal communication, teamwork, and flexibility, while also highlighting the need to strengthen technical and analytical competencies, including advanced IT skills and English language proficiency. However, there are differences in the prioritization of specific skills – graduates place higher value on subject – matter knowledge, whereas employers attach more importance to responsibility and traits supporting independent task execution.

Additionally, graduates tend to emphasize practical and tool-based skills, such as proficiency in MS Office and coping with time pressure, likely due to their focus on quickly adapting to the work environment. Conversely, competencies perceived as less important – such as knowledge of a second foreign language, basic legal regulations, or intercultural skills – are consistently ranked lower by both groups. This suggests they are viewed as supporting skills that do not determine employment, though marginalizing them in the long term may be a limitation given the increasing internationalization of the labor market.

The results indicate that graduates largely correctly identify labor market requirements, yet they tend to overestimate the importance of theoretical knowledge at the expense of skills related to responsibility and independent decision-making. At the same time, the high convergence in technical and analytical competencies demonstrates awareness of the need for intensive development, which is particularly important given the rapid technological changes in the labor market.

Conclusions

The research demonstrated that soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, responsibility, and independence, constitute a key element in preparing graduates of economic programs for professional work. At the same time, deficiencies were identified in technical and analytical competencies, including knowledge of IT tools (Python, SQL, BI systems), English at the B2 level, as well as skills in data synthesis and critical information analysis.

Differences in the perception of competencies between employers and graduates were also observed: employers place greater emphasis on responsibility and efficiency in action, whereas graduates more often focus on the-

oretical knowledge. It was also indicated that the development of competencies should be tailored to the specific requirements of the position and the career stage, with additional skills, such as a second foreign language or intercultural competencies, serving as advantages that enhance employability.

These findings highlight the necessity of integrating theoretical education with practical training, including the development of both soft and hard skills, which enables better preparation of graduates for the demands of the contemporary labor market and increases their professional competitiveness.

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