

## Analysis of key generic competencies for the employability of Social Work students in Spain: A mixed methods approach.

### Análisis de las competencias genéricas para la empleabilidad de los estudiantes de Trabajo Social en España: Un enfoque de métodos mixtos.

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#### Abstract

**Introduction:** The study aims to identify key generic competencies in Social Work professional development to enhance employability. **Material and Methods:** A mixed methodology was used: quantitative (cross-sectional) and qualitative (exploratory). An online survey was developed to cover various generic or soft competencies. A total of 473 responses were collected from professionals and social organizations, teachers, and students. In addition, two focus groups consisting of 17 University professors were conducted, based on the development of employability at the University level. **Results:** The findings reveal crucial generic competencies, such as critical thinking, ethical commitment, and knowledge of cultural processes. Other soft skills highlighted include conflict and problem resolution, interdisciplinary work capacity, and organizational and planning abilities. However, it is considered that there is no adequate preparation for some of these competencies. **Discussion:** This work sheds light on the need to create knowledge transfer processes from different spaces. It is necessary to extend learning to practical experiences through the use of case studies during training programs. It is also necessary to create a greater number of training spaces in work environments, such as increasing the number of practice hours that facilitate the acquisition of Social Work competencies in a broad manner.

**Keywords:** Generic skills; training; work market; Social Work.

## Resumen

**Introducción:** El estudio tiene como objetivo identificar las competencias genéricas clave en el desarrollo profesional del Trabajo Social para mejorar la empleabilidad. **Material y métodos:** Se utilizó una metodología mixta: cuantitativa (transversal) y cualitativa (exploratoria). Se desarrolló una encuesta en línea que abarcó distintas competencias genéricas o blandas. Se recopilaron un total de 473 respuestas de profesionales y organizaciones sociales, docentes y estudiantes. Además, se realizaron dos grupos focales compuestos por 17 profesores universitarios, centrados en el desarrollo de la empleabilidad a nivel universitario. **Resultados:** Los hallazgos revelan competencias genéricas cruciales, tales como el pensamiento crítico, el compromiso ético y el conocimiento de los procesos culturales. También se destacan otras habilidades blandas como la resolución de conflictos y problemas, la capacidad de trabajo interdisciplinario y la capacidad de organización y planificación. Sin embargo, se considera que no hay una preparación adecuada para algunas de estas competencias. **Discusión:** Este trabajo resalta la necesidad de crear procesos de transferencia de conocimiento desde diferentes espacios. Es necesario extender el aprendizaje a experiencias prácticas mediante el uso de estudios de caso durante los programas de formación. También es necesario crear un mayor número de espacios de formación en entornos laborales, como aumentar el número de horas de práctica que faciliten la adquisición de competencias en Trabajo Social de manera integral.

**Palabras clave:** Habilidades genéricas; formación; mercado laboral; Trabajo Social

## INTRODUCTION

University education plays a critical role in shaping professionals who are not only skilled in their respective fields but also responsible global citizens (Erguvan et al., 2019). This comprehensive approach to higher education addresses the dual challenge of preparing future professionals while fostering engaged, informed citizens who contribute to societal development (González Puentes, 2021; Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2022). For this reason, universities are tasked with integrating citizenship education into their curricula (Sanabria Fernandes & Longueira Matos, 2022). This integration is vital for promoting a critical and transformative understanding of citizenship, which can be achieved by introducing controversial issues and linking academic learning to real-world social challenges (Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2022). Thus, quality university education should systematically incorporate elements of citizenship training, encompassing professional ethics, civic education, and personal development (De Reuyter & Schinkel, 2017). This holistic approach aims not only to produce graduates who are competitive in their fields but also those who contribute to social cohesion and tackle global challenges (González Puentes, 2021).

In this context, the concept of competence in higher education has evolved towards a more holistic

view, considering not only knowledge and skills but also attitudes, values, and cognitive abilities (Dlouhá et al., 2019). According to the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA), competence is an integrated set of capabilities that enables an individual to perform effectively, reflectively, and autonomously in professional and social contexts (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA), 2004). This view of competence encompasses both technical competencies (also referred to as specific or hard skills) and transversal competencies (also known as generic, soft, or transferable skills). Technical competencies refer to specialized knowledge and practical skills required to perform specific tasks within a discipline, while transversal competencies are those transferable skills that can be applied across various professional contexts, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking (Cunha et al., 2019; Hernandez-Linares et al., 2015; Swiatkiewicz, 2014).

The increasing demand for a student-centered learning (SCL) approach within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has led to the implementation of systems such as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and competency-based learning objectives, aimed at improving employability and aligning university education with labor market needs. The emphasis on competency-based education reflects a shift towards preparing graduates with skills that align with labor market requirements, which has led to several European initiatives comparing the transition of graduates from education to employment (Delgado Martínez, 2019; Papadakis & Drakaki, 2021; Pavlin, 2013).

The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW, 2022) has established a widely accepted definition of Social Work that emphasizes the development of skills promoting employability, while also focusing on making visible the transformations necessary to create a fairer society (International Federation of Social Workers, 2022). Social work competencies encompass both technical (such as knowledge of social intervention models and case management) and generic competencies, which are crucial for the ethical and effective practice of the profession (López Luna & Chaparro Maldonado, 2006). The development of generic competencies is essential for improving the employability of Social Work students, as these skills are highly valued by employers and contribute to greater adaptability in diverse and changing work environments (Hernández-March et al., 2009).

Research suggests that universities need to adapt their curricula to meet employers' expectations by focusing not only on vocational competencies but also on these essential generic skills (López Luna & Chaparro Maldonado, 2006). Innovative educational initiatives have shown promise in developing socio-labor competencies, particularly in digital literacy and teamwork, among Social Work students. These initiatives have proven effective in enhancing student engagement and facilitating teaching-learning processes, which may ultimately improve students' employability and entrepreneurial capabilities upon graduation (Franco et al., 2020).

In Spain, Social Work is recognized as a scientific discipline dedicated to addressing social issues and promoting societal well-being (Carbonero Muñoz et al., 2020). The integration of generic competencies, or "soft skills," into higher education has gained increasing importance. Recent studies indicate that Social Work students highly value the competencies taught in their degree programs, particularly in relation to social intervention practices (Carrión-Martínez et al., 2020). Furthermore, active learning and social intervention practices are seen as critical by both professionals and students in the field (Carbonero Muñoz et al., 2020).

Recent research emphasizes the need to align Social Work education with the evolving demands of the profession, particularly with regard to administrative and management competencies (Nesoff, 2007). The shift towards competency-based education represents a new paradigm in Social Work training, focusing on the development of both vocational and generic competencies. This paradigm necessitates careful attention to the definition, development, and implementation of competencies within specific educational contexts (Cuyvers, 2009).

The concept of employability in social work has been extensively discussed in the literature (Llinares Insa et al., 2016). Employability is understood not only as the ability to secure employment but also as the capacity to perform effectively in professional roles and contribute to social change. It involves developing both specific competencies, such as knowledge of social intervention models, and generic skills like interpersonal abilities and ethical reasoning (López Luna & Chaparro Maldonado, 2006). Education plays a pivotal role in developing employability skills that are essential for job insertion and career success. Understanding the concept of employability is crucial for adapting professional training to meet labor market needs and expectations (Mula Falcón et al., 2022).

Recent studies underscore the growing importance of generic competencies in the labor market, with employers increasingly prioritizing soft skills alongside technical knowledge. Research indicates that employers value competencies such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving (Bartual Figueras & Turmo Garuz, 2016; Hernández-March et al., 2009). However, there remains a significant gap between the skills graduates possess and those required by employers, particularly in areas such as practical training, initiative, and analytical thinking [Bartual Figueras, and Turmo Garuz, 2016]. The gap between graduate competencies and industry needs is a global issue, with many higher education institutions being criticized for not adequately addressing these deficiencies (Jackson, 2010). To mitigate this, universities are encouraged to integrate soft skill development into their curricula and strengthen partnerships with businesses to better align education with labor market demands (Bartual Figueras & Turmo Garuz, 2016; Hernández-March et al., 2009).

This research aims to identify the key generic competencies required for the employability of Social Work students in Spain, and to assess their level of preparation for these competencies. This study

takes into account the perspectives of social organizations, social workers, university faculty, and final-year students. Specifically, the study seeks to quantitatively identify the most relevant generic competencies, comparing responses across different types of social organizations and educational groups. Furthermore, the study qualitatively analyzes the development of employability within the university setting, with a focus on the alignment between academic training and the professional requirements of the labor market.

## **METHOD**

A mixed methodology was used: quantitative (cross-sectional) and qualitative (exploratory) studies were performed. The use of both methodologies allowed us to not only identify the different perspectives and their concordance but also to deepen our understanding of the causes and reasons. The University of Zaragoza reviewed and financed the research project (PIIDUZ Call for Teaching Innovation 21\_1\_280). In addition, ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Aragon (CEICA, PI22/000). The study was developed following the Declaration of Helsinki. All subjects gave their informed consent before starting the survey, as well as in the qualitative study; their data were anonymized and were used only for the purposes of the study.

## **QUANTITATIVE STUDY**

### **Design and participants**

A cross-sectional descriptive study was developed through an online survey with social entities and organizations, professors and final-year Social Work students who had completed internships in social organizations. This survey took place between November 2021 and March 2022.

Social organizations were recruited through a directory of social entities in Aragon (Spain) and professional associations of social workers in Spain. A total of 12 social entities and 23 professional associations were contacted and 393 responses were obtained from institutions (managers, coordinators, and technicians) and active social workers, with 50.26% of responses coming from social entities and 49.73% from social workers. It is important to underline that the sample of professionals was an equitable representation of public and private entities. In the case of private companies, the strong presence of Third Sector entities can be noted, which is characteristic of the welfare system in Aragon and the rest of Spain, and, therefore, these are the entities with the greatest labor demand. The most represented fields were primary and specialized social services, as well as the field of social inclusion.

Regarding the teaching staff, 20 professors from the Social Work degree at the University of Zaragoza were contacted, including those with academic management responsibilities in the Social Work

degree program or professors working part-time, who were involved in both teaching and professional practice.

Final-year students (fourth year) had done internships in social entities and organizations from September 2021 to February 2022. 60% were Third-Sector organizations; 30% were from public administration and 10% were private companies with an agreement with the University to train Social Work students. These internships aimed to connect students with the work world and proving their preparation when developing the specific task of the discipline. Out of 140 enrolled students, 60 students (42.85%) took part in the survey.

**Instruments and variables**

The questionnaire gathered 31 generic competencies, drawn from the White Book for the Social Work Degree (Aneca, 2004) and the World Economic Forum's "The Future of Jobs Report 2016" (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA), 2004; World Economic Forum, 2016). These competencies cover a broad spectrum of skills relevant to social work professionals. Table 1 shows the generic competencies evaluated.

Respondents were asked to choose the top three competencies they deemed essential for a social worker and rate their preparedness in those skills. They were asked the following questions: What competencies do you consider fundamental for a social worker, considering the scope and group of action? Indicate the three most relevant; Considering your selection, in which one do you think that recent graduates come out BEST prepared? Considering your selection, in which one do you think recent graduates are the LEAST prepared?

**Table 1**

*Generic competencies evaluated.*

<b>Generic competencies</b>
A1 - Oral and written communication in the native language
A2 - Communication in a foreign language
A3 - Knowledge of information management (ISO standards)
A4 - Basic computer knowledge (office package)
A5 - Knowledge of advanced computing (programming and databases)
A6 - Knowledge of multicultural processes and customs
A7 - Oral and written communication in the native language
A8 - Reasoning and critical thinking
A9 - Competency in norms and values
A10 - Strategic and innovative competency
A11 - Self-awareness and self-criticism competency

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- A12 - Competency of work from the ethical commitment
  - A13 - Competency of work from environmental sensitivity
  - A14 - Communication in inclusive languages
  - A15 - Knowledge of social innovation
  - A16 - Capacity for analysis and synthesis
  - A17 - Organization and planning capacity
  - A18 - Confidential information management capacity
  - A19 - Conflict and problem resolution
  - A20 – Decision-making
  - A21 - Ability to work in a team
  - A22 - Ability to work in an inter- and multidisciplinary team
  - A23 - Work in an international context
  - A24 - Ability to cooperate (goal orientation)
  - A25 - Ability to collaborate (resource orientation)
  - A26 - Capacity for self-awareness and self-criticism
  - A27 - Interpersonal skills
  - A28 – Ability to work autonomously
  - A29 - Ability to adapt to new situations
  - A30 - Individual creativity
  - A31 - Leadership, entrepreneurship, and intrapreneurship

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Note: The competencies listed in the table are derived from the White Paper on the Social Work degree (Aneca, 2004), as well as from the *The Future of Jobs Report 2016* by the World Economic Forum.

Data on social entities were also collected, including the type of entity, its legal form, geographical area, area of intervention, main intervention group, seniority of the organization, total number of workers and social workers employed, and position of the respondent (manager, team coordinator, or social worker in direct intervention).

Regarding the survey administered to the professors, data regarding their years of experience in the University field, experience in University management and/or in the study plan, and whether they were professionally linked to the field of Social Work were collected.

Regarding the survey administered to the students, the following open question was also added: Considering the selection made, to what degree do you think that you will be prepared to be a social worker once you finished your degree? Use this space if you want to comment on the degree of your preparation; How do you define the profile with which you will leave as a graduate in Social Work from the University of Zaragoza?

## Procedure

After obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee for Clinical Research of Aragon, the questionnaire was prepared and administered via Google Forms. Social organizations and professional associations were contacted through a directory of social entities in Aragon (Spain) and professional associations of social workers in Spain. The professors were contacted through their institutional mail, and in the case of the final-year students, they were contacted through a professor of the University degree.

## Data analysis

A Shapiro-Wilk test was performed to analyze the data distribution of the continuous variables in order to determine the type of statistic to be used; all quantitative variables had a non-normal distribution and, as such, non-parametric statistics were chosen. In the description of these variables, the mean and standard deviation values are shown, as well as the median and the interquartile range. The description of the categorical variables shows their number and frequencies. A comparative analysis was also carried out on the relevant competencies that at least 20% of the sample had selected, depending on the position of the person who had answered the survey and depending on the type of entity. To this end, the Chi-square statistic was used. A significant difference was considered when the  $p$ -value was less than 0.05. The statistical analysis was performed with the statistical software package SPSS 25.0.

## QUALITATIVE STUDY

### Design and participants

An exploratory qualitative study was conducted to explore the employability of Social Work students and the connection between the University where they are trained and the world of work where they will subsequently develop their careers. In order to access the subjectivity and processes involved in the generation of ideas and concepts (Pope & Mays, 2000), two focus groups were developed with 17 University degree professors who had responsibilities in either academic management, the study plan, or relating to their status as professors. To participate, these professors had to meet several requirements. They had to carry out their professional work in social entities and had to be professors at the University of Zaragoza. They had an average of 13 years of teaching experience and 9 years in academic management positions. These focus groups were moderated by a professor and observed by two researchers with previous experience in the field of knowledge and/or the methodology used. Each key informant provided written consent to participate in the qualitative study. The key informants who participated were the same as those who participated in the quantitative survey.

### **Instruments and variables**

A standardized protocol was designed to guide group discussions, with a prepared list of relevant topics based on researchers' experience. The list of topics was based on the following topics: development of employability at the University level, and connection between the University and the world of work and organizations. Data collection was adapted for a virtual platform due to COVID-19 restrictions. The focus groups lasted 30-45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed to obtain the final set of verbal data for analysis.

### **Procedure**

After a brief introduction to the study, key informants were asked general, open-ended questions to elicit a response and start a discussion. More direct questions were asked when specific topics did not spontaneously arise in the discourse. The objectives of the study were raised indirectly and questions were asked about the topics in an open and progressive manner. The moderator assumed a minimal guiding role, addressing the proposed topics. Participants provided written informed consent to participate in the study and none of the group discussions were repeated.

### **Data analysis**

An inductive thematic content analysis based on the grounded theory was performed to explore, develop, and define emerging categories of analysis that derived from the group data saturation (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

All analyses were performed iteratively using the Maxqda-2007 software, which was agreed upon by two researchers, and the interpretations of the data were discussed between the study researchers (Phillips & Hardy, 2002).

## **RESULTS**

### **QUANTITATIVE STUDY**

A total of 473 responses were collected: 393 responses from entities and social organizations, 20 from teachers, and 60 from students. The characteristics of the participating organizations and teachers are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Characteristics of the social organizations and teachers participating in the study.*

<b>SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS N=393</b>	<b>N (%) / mean (SD) median (IQR)</b>
<b>LEGAL FORM n(%)</b>	
Public entities	170 (43.25%)
Private entities	223 (56.75%)
<b>TYPE OF ENTITIES n(%)</b>	
Free exercise	9 (2.3%)
Business organization	3 (0.7%)
Private - Social Enterprise	40 (10.2%)
Private - Lucrative	24 (6.1%)
Private - Third Sector	147 (37.4)
Public – Regional	84 (21.4%)
Public – Local	85 (21.6%)
Public – National	1 (0.3%)
<b>PREDOMINANT SCOPE OF INTERVENTION n(%)</b>	
Primary, Base, or Community Social Services	96 (24.3%)
Specialized social services	95 (24.2%)
Social inclusion	75 (19.1%)
Physical and mental health	52 (13.2%)
Education (regulated and non-regulated)	31 (7.9%)
Free exercise of the profession	23 (5.8%)
Social mediation	7 (1.8%)
Housing (social and community planning)	4 (1.0%)
Development cooperation	4 (1.0%)
Justice (juvenile and penitentiary)	4 (1.0%)
International adoption	2 (0.5%)
<b>MAIN INTERVENTION GROUP n(%)</b>	
Elderly people	140 (35.6%)
People with disabilities	76 (19.3%)
Childhood and youth	61 (15.5%)
Family	48 (12.2%)
Workers and the unemployed	17 (4.4%)
Migrants and refugees	17 (4.4%)
Homeless	14 (3.6%)
Community	9 (2.3%)
Gender and sexual diversity	7 (1.8%)
Prison population	3 (0.7%)
Ethnic minorities	1 (0.2%)
<b>Years of seniority of the institution</b>	23 (24.54) /20 (24)
<b>Number of workers employed</b>	201.70 (149.19/14 (41)

<b>Number of social workers employed</b>	23.85 (134.66) /3 (7)
<b>FACULTY N=20</b>	<b>N (%) / mean (SD) median (IQR)</b>
<b>Years of teaching experience</b>	13 (7.5)/ 14 (10)
<b>Experience in University management and/or in the syllabus (yes, n%)</b>	9 (45%)
<b>Work related to the field of Social Work (yes, n%)</b>	5 (25%)

Note. All the variables are shown in frequency and percentages except for years of seniority of the institution, number of workers employed, number of social workers employed, and years of teaching experience of the faculty, which are shown in mean(SD)/median (IQR). SD: Standard deviation; IQR: Interquartile range.

Table 3 shows the main competencies relevant to at least 20% of the survey participants. Reasoning and critical thinking, conflicts and problems resolution, working with an ethical commitment, and the capacity for inter/multidisciplinary teamwork were the most prominent competencies across all groups. For social entities, the most relevant competencies were conflict resolution (55.97%), organizational and planning capacity (49.87%) and reasoning and critical thinking (49.19%). For faculty, critical thinking (70%) and ethical commitment (60%) were the most relevant. For students, conflict resolution (63.33%) and critical thinking (60%) emerged as the most prominent competencies.

**Table 3**

*Generic competencies considered relevant, frequency, and percentage of participants who consider them to be relevant among the main ones (considered by at least 20% of those surveyed).*

	<b>GENERIC COMPETENCIES</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
<b>SOCIAL ENTITIES</b>	Resolution of conflicts and problems	220 (55.97%)
	Organization and planning capacity	196 (49.87%)
	Reasoning and critical thinking	193 (49.10%)
	Working with a commitment to ethics	191 (48.6%)
	Inter/multidisciplinary teamwork capacity	184 (46.81%)
	Oral and written communication in the native language	132 (33.58%)
	Competency in norms and values	120 (30.53%)
	Basic computer skills (office package)	94 (23.91%)
	Knowledge of multicultural processes and customs	90 (22.90%)
	Interpersonal skills	85 (21.62%)
	Knowledge of social innovation	83 (21.11%)
	Capacity for analysis and synthesis	79 (20.01%)
<b>FACULTY</b>	Reasoning and critical thinking	14 (70%)
	Working with a commitment to ethics	12 (60%)
	Oral and written communication in the native language	11 (55%)
	Inter- and multidisciplinary teamwork capacity	10 (50%)
	Resolution of conflicts and problems	7 (35%)
	Knowledge of multicultural processes and customs	6 (30%)

	Decision-making	6 (30%)
	Ability to adapt to new situations	6 (30%)
	Interpersonal skills	5 (25%)
	Strategic and innovative competency	4 (20%)
	Organization and planning capacity	4 (20%)
<b>STUDENTS</b>	Resolution of conflicts and problems	38 (63.33%)
	Reasoning and critical thinking	36 (60%)
	Inter- and multidisciplinary teamwork capacity	33 (55%)
	Working with a commitment to ethics	28 (46.66%)
	Organization and planning capacity	25 (41.66%)
	Knowledge of cultural processes and customs	24 (40%)
	Competency in norms and values	13 (21.66%)
	Self-awareness and self-criticism	13 (21.66%)
	Decision-making	13 (21.66%)
	Ability to adapt to new situations	6 (28.33%)

Significant differences in relevant competencies based on organization type and respondent position are shown in **Table 4**. Notable differences are observed between knowledge of social innovation, basic computer skills (office package), conflicts and problems resolution and the capacity for analysis and synthesis.

**Table 4**

*Significant differences in the assessment of competencies considered to be relevant depending on the type of organization (public or private) and depending on the position held by the person surveyed (managers, coordinators, or social workers with direct intervention).*

<b>Organization type</b>	<b>Public</b>	<b>Private</b>	<b>P-value</b>
Basic computer skills (office package)	49 (28.82%)	43 (19.28%)	0.027
Knowledge of social innovation	26 (15.29%)	56 (25.11%)	0.018
Capacity for analysis and synthesis	44 (25.88%)	25 (15.69%)	0.013
<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Managers and coordinators</b>	<b>Active social workers</b>	<b>P-value</b>
Knowledge of social innovation	49 (25.65%)	30 (15.87%)	0.019
Resolution of conflicts and problems	92 (48.16%)	118 (62.43%)	0.005

Regarding the degree of preparedness, observing competencies considered relevant in the three groups, from the perspective of social entities, social workers are considered well prepared in basic computer skills (71.27%), analysis and synthesis (60.75%) and in their ability to work with an ethical commitment (35%), but they lack reasoning and critical thinking (49.22%) and adaptability to new

situations (43.95%).

Teachers agree that they are better prepared in the capacity for inter- and multidisciplinary teamwork (80%) and in working with a commitment to ethics (75%), but they also consider that they are less prepared in reasoning and critical thinking (78.57%) and adaptability to new situations (66.66%).

Finally, students feel confident in organizing and planning capacity (64%) and, paradoxically, in reasoning and critical thinking (52.77%), but less prepared in decision-making (76.92%) and with a lack of knowledge about multicultural processes and customs (50%)

## QUALITATIVE STUDY

### Development of employability

Participants agree on the importance of promoting employability in university courses in a transversal manner. However, they also recognize that employability should not be the sole focus of undergraduate training as many changes occur in the professional context, which may be more dynamic than those that undergraduate training can adapt to. Instead, a balance should be struck by providing students solid scientific knowledge and a realistic view of the market.

Participants also note a lack of awareness among students regarding social and legal realities, as well as a disconnect between academic teaching and business practices. Early courses focus on social development and professional skills, while later years should emphasize critical thinking and practical insights into the chosen field. In the context of Social Work degrees, there is a trend towards intervention-focused training, with limited focus on policy development and empowering students as agents of change.

An idea that emerged in the discourse was that universities should think about employability and train students in relation to what is going to be expected of them in the world of work. It was also noted that universities can and should also be the engine of economic and social change in the work environment.

*“We must think about employability, but we must be careful not to be an appendage of companies, it’s all about creating value and innovation at the University as well.”*

*(21 years of teaching experience, full-time professor) .*

The perception that associate professors have is that students do not have a clear idea about what their options are to increase their employability and do not know about the reality that they will face when they have to look for a job.

*“I am an associate and I come from the outside world. I see that students are very distanced from the labor market. They do not know about the social and legal reality that is out there.”*

*(2 years of teaching experience, associate professor).*

*“I think that teachers should be involved in employability. But, as an associate professor and with my professional experience, I come across students who are very lost in their job search, which is the fault of the University.” (2 years of teaching experience, associate professor).*

### **Connection between the University and the labor market**

There is a consensus that universities lack string connection with the labor market and organizations. Associate professors are seen as potential bridges between students and business network, as they are well-versed in professional practices. Despite this, many associate professors believe that universities are still not effectively linked with organizations based on their own experiences.

*“In my more than 20 years of experience in my entity, I have had very little connection with universities, I do not know if they have more contacts with other entities, but I think that contact with universities is very little.” (2 years of teaching experience, associate professor).*

Moreover, companies or entities and universities may have different approaches, with universities in Social Work being less innovative compared to other sectors.

*“In other sectors, the same companies go to universities, we, on the other hand, are very static, but we also have to innovate and use creative thinking. This also applies to social organizations and in the field, as well as in terms of the development of social enterprises.” (20 years of teaching experience, full-time professor).*

*“Universities dissociate from the business network, and an effort must be made to get closer, even if there are different languages (...). There is a lack of communication with the business fabric.” (14 years of teaching experience, full-time professor).*

The general belief is that perhaps there is not enough training time dedicated to practicing what is demanded by the employer. The rigidity of the syllabi used does not allow for the necessary flexibility to create complementary activities that generate complementary knowledge and connections with the outside world and implement the approach to reality.

The importance of exploring new opportunities for Social Work beyond traditional settings, such as in labor relations, free exercise, politics, and developing social expertise, is emphasized. Teachers are urged to be proactive in adapting to market needs and fostering creative thinking.

Students demand information and training on employability but do not respond to activities organized by the University unless they are related to their qualifications.

### **DISCUSSION**

This study set out to identify the key generic competencies required for the employability of Social Work students in Spain and assess their level of preparation in these competencies. By considering

the perspectives of social organizations, social workers, university faculty, and final-year students, the research sought to understand the alignment between academic training and the professional demands of the labor market. The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses provide valuable insights into the competencies deemed essential for social workers, the preparedness of students, and the gap between academic training and labor market needs.

### **Generic competencies for employability**

The results of the quantitative study highlighted a broad consensus across all respondent groups (social organizations, social workers, faculty, and students) regarding the most critical competencies for employability. Reasoning and critical thinking emerged as the most significant across all groups, emphasizing the need for social workers to analyze situations, make informed decisions, and apply evidence-based practices. Ethical commitment also stood out as a crucial competency, reflecting the centrality of ethics in social work, particularly when working with vulnerable populations. The need for ethical decision-making and critical analysis in practice is also supported by the World Economic Forum's "The Future of Jobs Report" (2016), which identifies critical thinking and ethical behavior as key competencies for the employability of professionals across various sectors, including social work. These findings highlight the importance of developing not only technical knowledge but also the ability to think critically and ethically, preparing social workers to effectively face the diverse challenges they will encounter in the professional environment (World Economic Forum, 2016). Interestingly, these competencies align with the *ANECA White Paper on Social Work* (2004) (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA), 2004), which also stressed the importance of reasoning and ethical commitment in professional practice.

Interdisciplinary teamwork and conflict resolution were also consistently identified as essential in the present study, reflecting the collaborative and often complex nature of social work interventions. This finding is in line with previous research that highlights the key role of interdisciplinary collaboration in social work practice, asserting that social workers, when collaborating with professionals from various fields such as healthcare, law, and education, must possess strong skills to address the complex needs of clients (Šerić, 2021). Regarding conflict resolution, several authors emphasize the need for social workers to be trained in managing disputes between clients, families, and other stakeholders to ensure effective outcomes. Additionally, it is stressed that conflict management skills are critical in high-stress situations, which are common in social work interventions (Blanco et al., 2023; Bomba et al., 2011; Moretti, 2017). This study confirms the importance of these competencies and underscores the need for social work education to prepare students to face these challenges in their professional practice.

However, despite the general agreement on the importance of these competencies, there were notable discrepancies in how well students felt prepared. Faculty and social workers rated students as well-prepared in ethics, yet students reported a lack of confidence in areas such as multicultural processes and customs. This discrepancy suggests that students may not always perceive or recognize their gaps in knowledge, highlighting the need for curricula to more effectively bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in the professional world (Hatlevik, 2012). This finding, while reflecting the specific needs of the current cohort of students, also resonates with the concerns outlined in the *ANECA White Paper* (2004), which noted the challenges students face in applying theoretical knowledge in diverse and complex real-world scenarios (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA), 2004).

### **Gaps between academic training and professional needs**

The qualitative analysis of the study revealed significant gaps between university training and the evolving needs of the labor market. Social work professionals and faculty members noted that students often enter the workforce with limited understanding of the social and legal contexts they will face, especially in areas such as policy development and the role of social work in systemic change. Previous research emphasizes the need for social work education to place greater emphasis on policy practice, as it equips students with the skills to influence change and navigate the broader social context in which they will work (Saxena & Chandrapal, 2022). An innovative approach in Australia has sought to address this gap by incorporating policy skills into social work education. In this model, policy training is integrated across the two years of a social work degree, combining traditional academic methods with experiential learning. This includes workshops on policy analysis and real-world problem-solving, which has been positively received by students (Zubrzycki & McArthur, 2004).

A significant issue raised was the disconnect between the university's focus on intervention-based training and the broader needs of the profession, particularly in relation to social policy and advocacy. Several previous studies suggest that social work education tends to focus on micro-level interventions, while the profession requires more training in social policy and political practice (Weiss, 2006). To address this gap, it is proposed that universities and professional associations integrate advocacy and policy influence within social work programs, redesigning curricula to balance micro and macro practice (Pawar & Nixon, 2021). Additionally, there is an emphasis on the need to adopt a transformative approach to social policy, which includes social, economic, and environmental justice within a human rights framework (Lombard & Viviers, 2021).

These findings echo the concerns raised in the *ANECA White Paper* (2004), which also pointed to the need for social work education to address both micro and macro-level interventions, particularly in

the areas of policy and advocacy. The *White Paper* underscored the importance of preparing students not only for direct intervention but also for shaping policy and contributing to systemic change—a goal that remains highly relevant today (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA), 2004).

This gap is further exacerbated by the limited practical experience that students gain during their academic training. As noted in previous studies, the lack of real-world exposure can hinder students' ability to develop the competencies necessary for success in the social work field (Ivanauskienė & Cervin, 2015; van Pelt et al., 2021). Faculty members, particularly those with experience in both academia and practice, were seen as vital bridges between the theoretical and practical aspects of social work education. However, the lack of collaboration between universities and social organizations limits students' opportunities for hands-on learning and real-world application (Hardy et al., 2023).

### **The role of universities in enhancing employability**

The role of universities in preparing students for the labor market emerged as a key theme in the qualitative interviews. There was consensus that universities must not only equip students with theoretical knowledge but also ensure that they are prepared to meet the evolving demands of the social work profession. While some faculty members and professionals warned against turning universities into job-training centers, they emphasized the importance of integrating practical components into the curriculum. This would allow students to develop the competencies needed to thrive in diverse, interdisciplinary settings.

In line with previous studies (Horishna et al., 2019; Vyshedsky, 2023), this research underscores the importance of integrating leadership skills into social work education. Leadership in social work involves not only community development and communication skills but also the ability to manage organizations and navigate the social, political, and cultural landscapes that shape practice (Mertz et al., 2007; Sullivan, 2016). The development of these skills can increase the versatility of social workers and expand their professional opportunities.

Another critical aspect raised by the focus groups was the need for universities to strengthen personal counseling processes and provide guidance regarding the professional profiles of social workers. Given the increasing diversity of career paths available to social work graduates, universities should help students identify and develop their areas of interest, including emerging fields such as social entrepreneurship and the free exercise of the profession (Germak & Singh, 2009; Ritter et al., 2008). Moreover, there was a call to incorporate administrative and management competencies into the curriculum, particularly given the need for social workers to navigate complex, bureaucratic systems

and drive social change. Curricular models that integrate administrative competencies alongside clinical training have shown promise in attracting students interested in leadership roles, thereby increasing enrollment in administrative specializations (Pardasani, 2018)

The *ANECA White Paper* similarly stressed the need for leadership and administrative competencies in social work education, acknowledging that social workers need to be prepared not only for direct practice but also for roles in management and policy-making. This continues to be an important aspect of preparing students for the multifaceted nature of the profession (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA), 2004).

### **Strengths and limitations**

This study has strengths and limitations. One main strength is the methodological triangulation used to answer the research question regarding the identification of key generic skills for the professional development of social workers. In this study, the vision of social entities, trainers, and final-year students who had had some experience in the world of work after their training practices were considered. In addition, it was possible to compare the different perspectives according to the type of social organization or group interviewed. Moreover, fundamental competencies in which social workers have not been adequately prepared or are not being prepared were also identified. Identifying this inadequacy in training helps to establish improvements in the syllabi, thus improving job performance. Regarding the limitations, the sample size of the teaching staff should be highlighted, however, these professors were selected because they either had responsibilities in academic management or were involved in the preparation of the study plan for a degree in Social Work, or because they were associate professors who, in addition to their teaching activity, were also linked to the world of work.

### **Implications of the study for Social Work education**

The results obtained in this study not only highlight the need to generate knowledge transfer processes between different training spaces but also have direct implications for updating the curriculum design of the Social Work degree. In particular, the findings underscore the importance of extending learning to more intensive practical experiences, which should be incorporated as a key strategy in the curriculum. Increasing the number of training opportunities in real-world environments, as suggested by professionals and students, is essential for a more comprehensive education that enables students to develop competencies more aligned with the demands of the social sector and facilitates their transition to the labor market (Tajima et al., 2022).

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study confirm the importance of generic competencies, including reasoning, critical thinking, ethics, and teamwork, in enhancing the employability of Social Work graduates. While the academic training at the University of Zaragoza is generally considered effective in preparing students for practice, significant gaps remain in both the curriculum and the alignment with labor market needs. Addressing these gaps will require universities to adopt more flexible, market-responsive educational strategies, incorporating real-world experiences and fostering stronger collaboration with external stakeholders. Social work education must continue to evolve to ensure that graduates are well-prepared to navigate the complex social issues they will face in their careers, with an increased focus on leadership, policy advocacy, and social change. Future research examining the impact of curriculum adjustments and partnerships with industry partners will be essential in ensuring that social work education remains relevant, responsive, and impactful in shaping the future of the profession.

## DATA AND MATERIALS AVAILABILITY

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The authors declare that no AI-assisted tools were used during the drafting process of this article.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

EG-U and CS-A drew up the research design and developed the study. SL-H and EG-U wrote the manuscript. All authors participated in the review of the manuscript, approved the final manuscript to be published, and agreed to the journal's terms regarding copyright.

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