

## **Between studying Social Sciences and Humanities and the requirements of labour markets: The example of three universities from Central Europe**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the compatibility of higher education in Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) with labour market requirements. It focuses on three Central European universities and explores the importance of soft skills for students and employers. The study also investigates the impact of work experience on academic achievement and student's satisfaction with their chosen field of study. From October to December 2022, a survey was conducted on 1,382 SSH students from the University of Hradec Králové (Czech Republic), Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan (Poland), and Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (Slovakia). Using a two-stage sampling procedure, the survey was conducted using Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) on the Qualtrics XM platform. In education, students focus on critical thinking and problem-solving skills, while employers value these skills as well as interpersonal communication and creativity. The research emphasises the importance of including soft skills in academic programs to meet job market needs. It highlights the gap between students' skills and employers' expectations, calling for universities to adapt their offerings. It also argues for support systems for working students and ongoing assessment of educational pathways. This study aims to increase understanding of the relationship between higher education and labour markets in Central Europe, an area often overlooked in academic research.

### **Keywords**

Social Sciences and Humanities, Higher Education, labour market, soft skills, Central Europe

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## Introduction

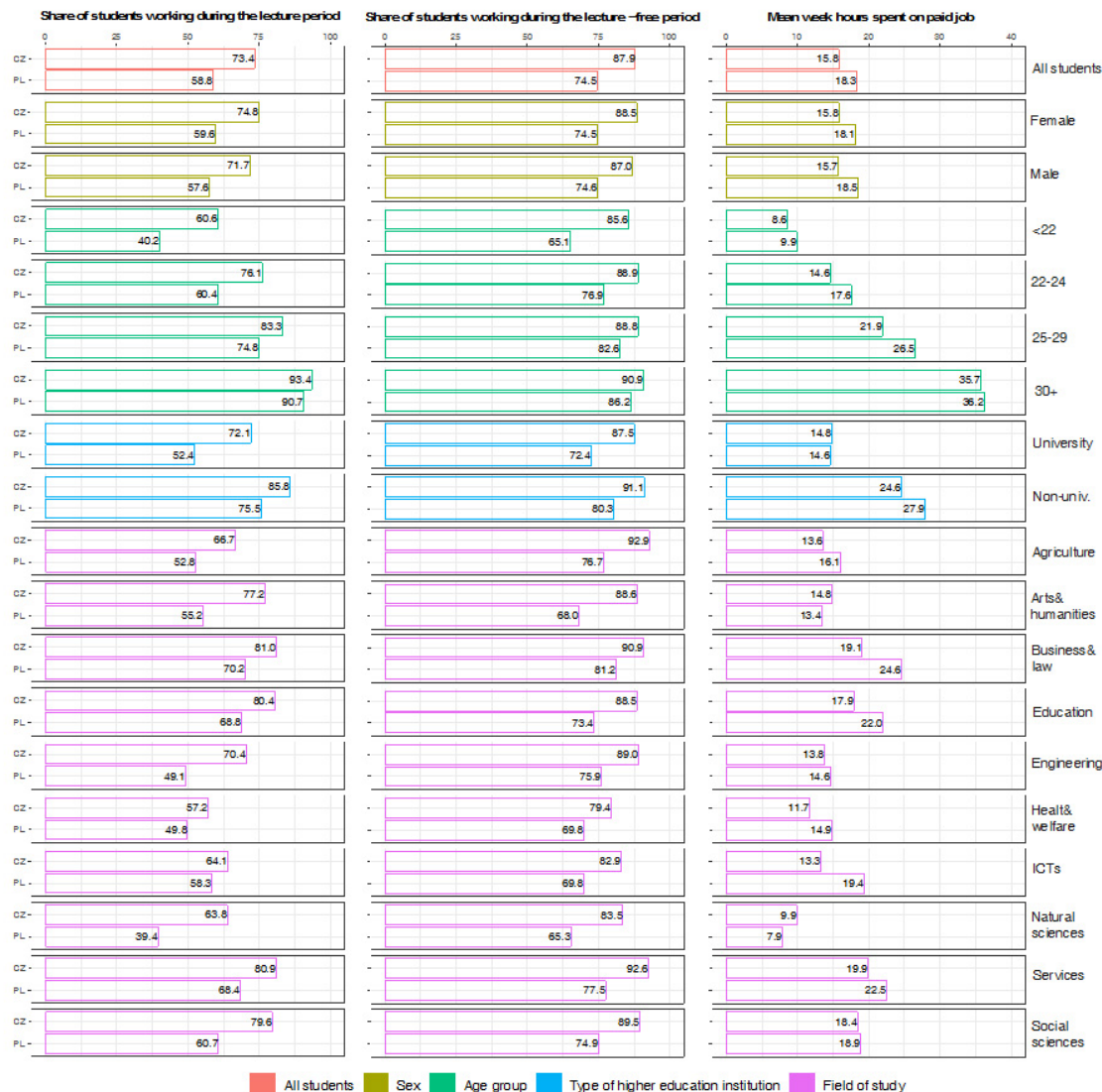
Studying in general, apart from its unquestionable autotelic values, is very often considered in pragmatic terms, i.e. increased chances of finding “interesting” and “well-paid” employment. This applies not only to technical disciplines and courses, but also to those in the field of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH), whose role in modern societies of late capitalism cannot be overestimated (Betti, 2018; De Dijn et al., 2023; Durazzi, 2019; Rodrik & Stantcheva, 2021). Less obvious is the fact that it is humanistic and social (i.e. soft) competences and skills that are mainly sought after by employers in the labour markets (Brooks et al., 2021; Costa, 2019; De Dijn et al., 2023; Lauder & Mayhew, 2020). It must also be remembered that the requirements of the labour markets in Central (and Eastern) European (CE) countries are specific and often reflect the influence of foreign companies with representative offices and factory halls in the rapidly developing post-socialist economies (Green & Henseke, 2021; Rokicka et al., 2018; Scandurra et al., 2021; Ziółkowski et al., 2024). Therefore, the choice of a higher education field is crucial, as well as the content of the curriculum within it (Rasmussen et al., 2021), particularly in the context of developing the educated citizens (Alexiadou & Findlow, 2014) and employers’ needs.

Not only do the job markets in Central Europe possess their own peculiarities, including high direct foreign capital investments and precarious working conditions despite a relatively low unemployment rate (e.g., Ferreyra et al., 2017; Pitan & Adedeji, 2012; Saikia & Das, 2024). Equally significant is the economic activity of students, which is associated with increasingly higher living costs (Kurowska et al., 2024), especially in large cities (although some students view work during their studies as an additional source of income or an opportunity to gain experience). According to the Eurostudent report (Hauschildt et al., 2021), the percentage of working students in 26 European countries is very high, averaging 78%, and reaches 80% in Poland. Since Slovakia was not included in the study, the following figure presents a comparison of Czech and Polish students working during lecture and during lecture-free periods.

In both Czechia and Poland, students are more likely to work during periods when they do not have classes than when they do. A similar proportion of male and female students are engaged in employment. However, the higher the age of the student, the greater the likelihood of working during studies. The lower part of the chart presents individual fields of study, although it is evident that regardless of the area of study, Czech students are more likely to work during their studies than Polish students. Students in Arts & Humanities, Business & Law, Education, and Social Sciences are economically active similarly to students in other fields, although the percentage of Czech working students is generally higher than their Polish counterparts.

From Figure 1, it is evident that the labour activity of students within full-time studies is high primarily in Czechia and to a slightly lesser extent in Poland. This activity also depends on the field of study, as students in Natural Sciences, ICTs, or Engineering less frequently engage in work compared to their peers studying Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, or Education. Interestingly, there are no gender differences in the two compared countries, as roughly the same percentage of female and male students work in both Czechia and Poland.

**Figure 1. Working students in Czechia and Poland**



Although higher education in general, and particularly in the field of SSH, is inherently valuable as it fosters critical attitudes and provides general knowledge about the functioning of communities and their cultural products, its pragmatic dimension is becoming increasingly important within technologically-driven capitalism. Therefore, “[p]oor matching between skills supply and demand has many negative consequences for individuals and companies, and influences the national economy and society more generally” (Rihova, 2016, p. 11). In practice, this means that “[i]t has a negative influence on wages and job satisfaction, and causes hiring difficulties and lower productivity at company level” (Rihova, 2016, p. 11).

The demand for specific competencies does not diminish even in dynamically changing and increasingly advanced networked circumstances (Baranowski, 2024; Baranowski &

Jabkowski, 2023; Su et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). One might even say that “emerging technologies such as generative AI are reshaping workforce demands, and employers are placing greater emphasis on ‘soft’ skills (...) There skills allow companies to respond to change and are resistant to automation” (Future of Jobs Report: Insight Report, 2023, p. 44). All this has to do with the quality of education, which translates into both general knowledge and competence and employability. When analysing the following results, one should also not uncritically fetishise the requirements of the labour markets in the perspective of higher education, as the role of SSH is not only to ‘produce’ a candidate with certain competences. This is worth bearing in mind, even if students’ choices intentionally emancipate future employability.

## **Methodology**

Our article is based on research conducted among SSH students at three universities in Central Europe, namely the University of Hradec Králové (HKU) in the Czech Republic, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan (AMU) in Poland, and Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (UKF) in Slovakia. Using Computer-Assisted Web Interview between October and December 2022, 1,382 students were surveyed, with the number of respondents at each university proportional to the size of the SSH student population. Thus, 876 students were surveyed at AMU, 364 at HKU, and 142 at UKF.

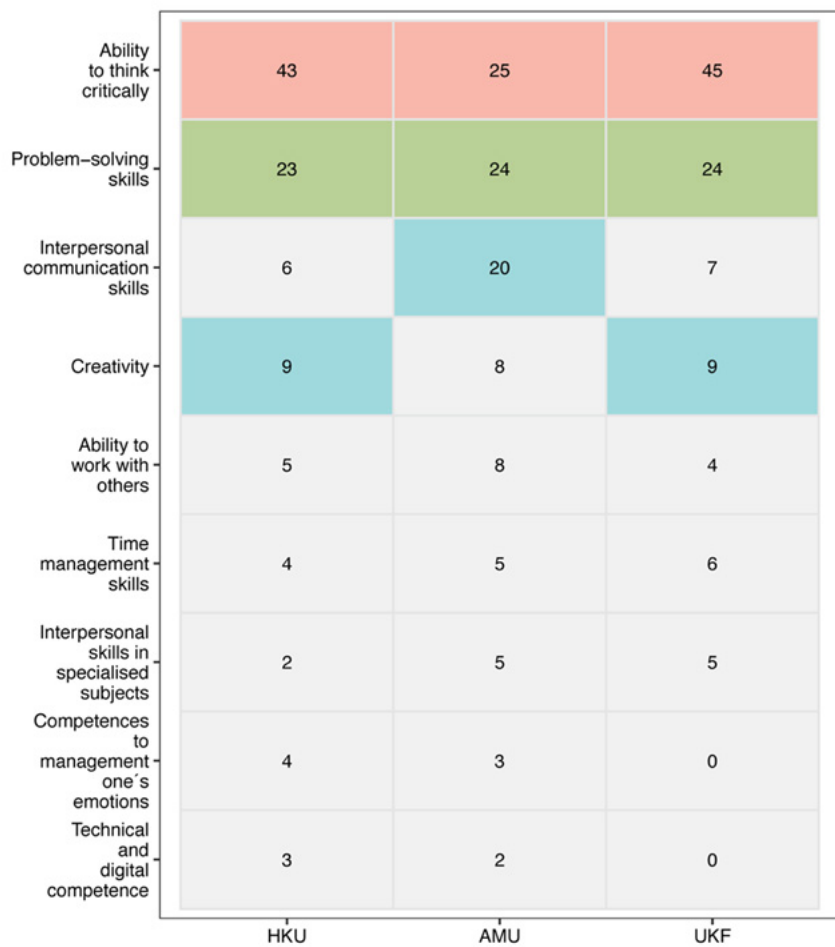
We employed a two-stage sampling procedure within each of the three universities from the CE countries. The first stage involved randomly selecting student groups (lecture units) while considering the undergraduate (BA) and postgraduate (MA) levels, as well as the year of study. Subsequently, within these carefully selected lecture units, students were requested by their lecturers to complete the CAWI questionnaire. The survey itself was conducted using the professional Qualtrics XM platform.

## **Results**

Considering the requirements of employers in the context of recruiting employees, we have compiled a set of the most sought-after competencies, which are particularly valued by companies (Cacciolatti et al., 2017; Foley et al., 2022; Karaca-Atik et al., 2023; Poláková et al., 2023; Rakowska & de Juana-Espinosa, 2021). In the study of students in SSH disciplines, we asked them to rank these competencies according to their perceived importance in their careers, as well as the least significant ones. The obtained results are presented in Figure 2. It appears that students from the three surveyed universities considered the ability to think critically as the most useful competency (cf. Amanda et al., 2024). This option received the most mentions at HKU and UKF, dominating students’ choices across the board. In second place, problem-solving skills were ranked. Students from AMU most frequently chose interpersonal communication skills in third place, while creativity was chosen by students at HKU and UKF. Interestingly, technical and digital competence was rated very low in terms of future career prospects, despite seeming

essential in an increasingly technologically driven economy. However, our findings correspond with research on business students who “place great value in humanity and leaders’ communication competence, rather than stressing the leaders’ technical and digital competence” (Koponen et al., 2022, p. 102). Competences to manage one’s emotions and interpersonal skills in specialised subjects were also rated very low.

**Figure 2. Considering the following list of competences and their definitions – put them in order (ranking) by arranging them from the one you perceive as most relevant in your (future) career to the one you consider least relevant (1 being the most relevant)**



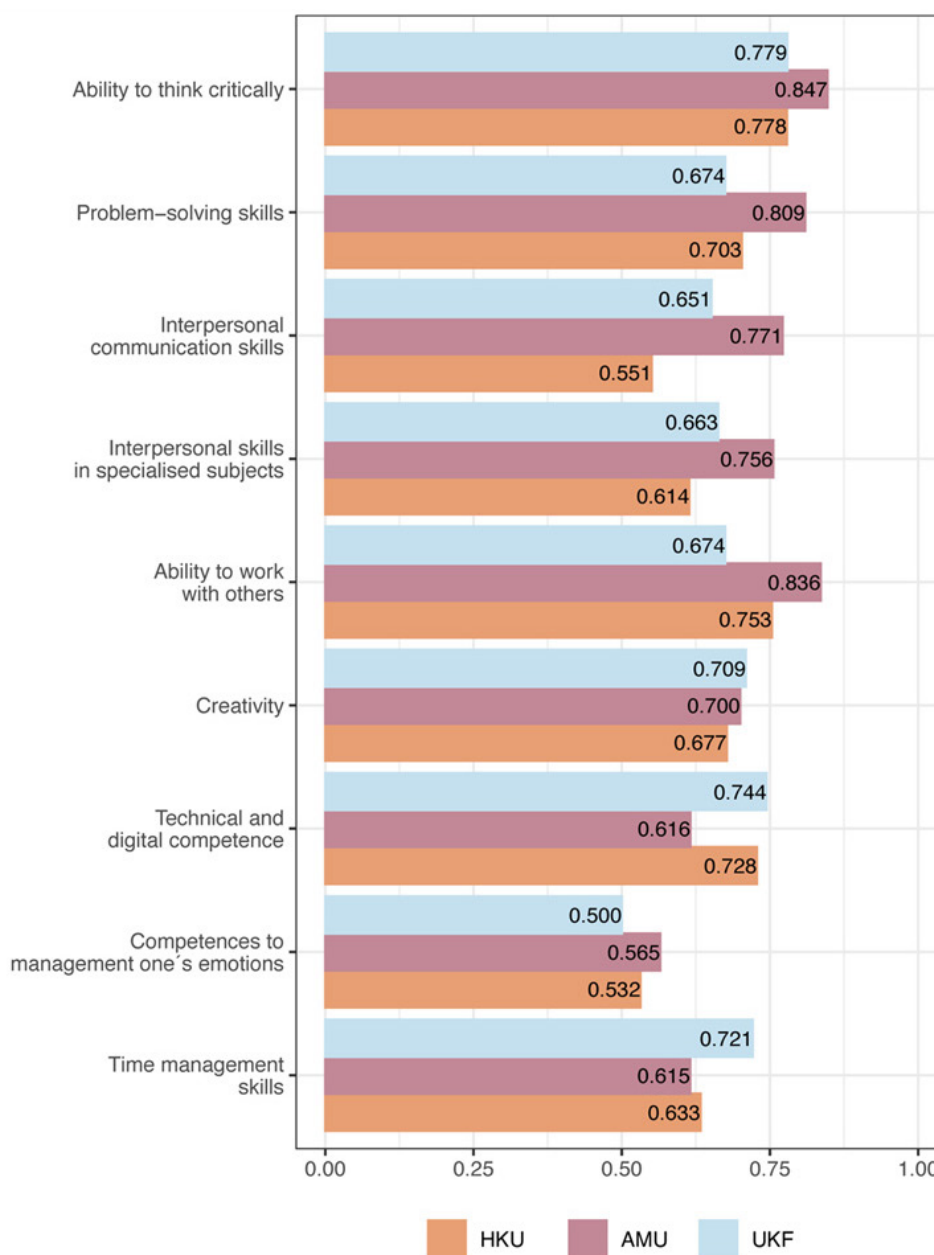
■ 1st most frequently mentioned    ■ 2nd most frequently mentioned  
■ 3rd most frequently mentioned    ■ 4th and further position

Areas presented in the x-axis are in descending order by their overall frequency in the entire dataset [in %]

With regard to the set of nine competencies mentioned above, students were asked if they had the opportunity to develop them during classes. The main focus was on determining whether within SSH studies, students are taught the competencies and skills that are crucial

in the context of contemporary job markets. The obtained results demonstrate differences among the three surveyed universities in Central Europe. This is particularly significant because, with the results described in Figure 3, we can ascertain whether competencies essential for future careers are part of the teaching programmes and to what extent. HKU students have the opportunity to develop the ability to think critically and problem-solving skills to a relatively high extent, but to a much lesser extent do classes prepare them for interpersonal communication skills. Often highlighted competencies include the ability to work with others and technical and digital competence.

**Figure 3. Share of students that agree they had the opportunity to develop particular competencies during classes in their field of study**

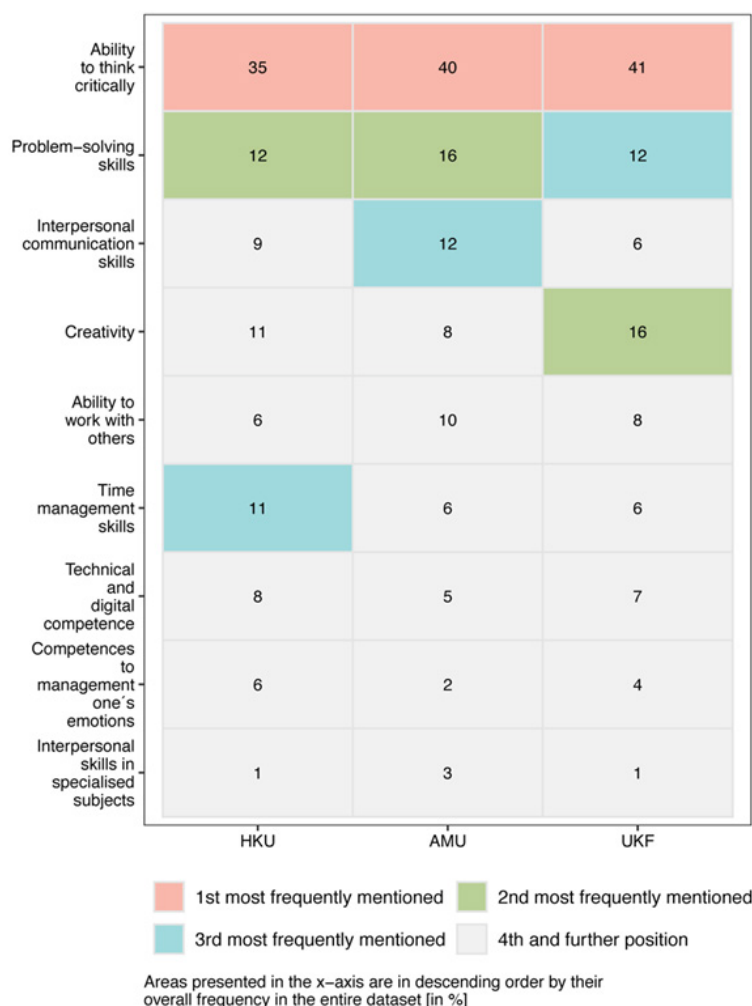


For the AMU, the three highest ranked competences present in the curricula are critical thinking skills, the ability to work with others and problem-solving skills. In contrast, managing emotions, time, and technical and digital competences were identified as the least present in the teaching process.

In the teaching programmes at UKF, the dominant competencies are the ability to think critically, technical and digital competence, time management skills, and creativity. Much less emphasis is placed on interpersonal communication and problem-solving skills, with the least emphasis on competences related to managing one’s emotions.

From the above data, it is evident that teaching programmes within SSH at the three CE universities are diverse, prioritising different competencies and social skills. Nevertheless, key soft competencies and skills sought by employers are present in the educational programmes of each of the three surveyed universities, although according to students, they are implemented with varying degrees of intensity.

**Figure 4. Given the following list of competences and their definitions – put them in order (ranking) by arranging them from the one you perceive as your strongest (as 1) to the one you consider the least developed**



The same cafeteria was used for the subjective assessment (by ranking selected options) of the strongest and weakest aspects of students' competences and skills. At each of the three surveyed universities, the ability to think critically was perceived as the strongest attribute of students. In the case of HKU and AMU, problem-solving skills came in second place, while at UKF, it was creativity. The third strongest competence at HKU turned out to be time management skills, at AMU – interpersonal communication skills, and at UKF – problem-solving skills. However, the least developed skills identified by students at HKU and UKF were interpersonal skills in specialized subjects, while at AMU, competences to manage one's emotions were considered the weakest.

Working students in full-time studies, once a rarity particularly in CE countries, are now a common phenomenon across Europe (cf. Dahlgren et al., 2007; Hauschildt et al., 2021; Pusztai & Kocsis, 2019; Robert & Saar, 2012). Besides the advantages of combining study with work, such as financial independence, practical application of knowledge, and insight into sought-after skills and competencies by employers, there are several negative consequences accompanying students in paid employment. Although our study aimed to identify key competencies and skills within the fields of SSH and their perception among students (including those working), we are aware of the adverse effects of work on the studying process. As noted in British research:

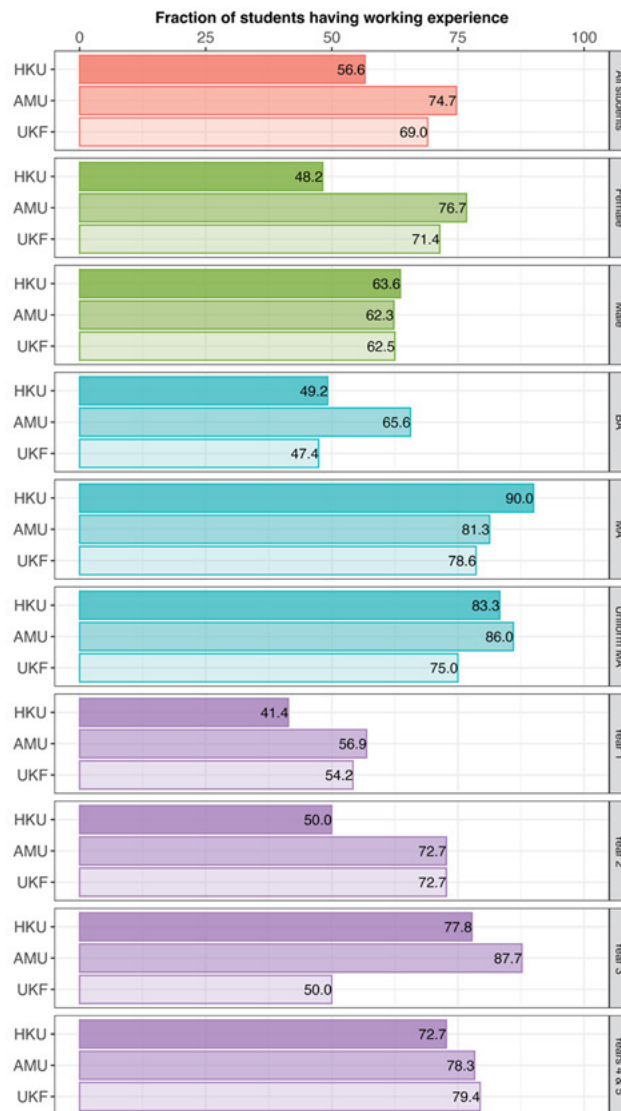
“(...) employed students (...) experience adverse outcomes that act to the detriment of their immediate university experience. On the job factors, such as working longer hours and having more demands are associated with lower academic performance (Butler, 2007) and increases in depression (Cinamon, 2016). Working can also impact social and academic integration at university; compared to unemployed students, employed students spend less time on campus (Rubin & Wright, 2015), participate in fewer extracurricular activities organized by the university (Kuh et al., 2007), report skipping lectures and classes more often (Curtis, 2007; Savoca, 2016), and are more likely to submit compulsory course-work late (Robotham, 2009)” (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022, p. 242).

Considering the aforementioned drawbacks of working while studying, we queried students from three surveyed universities about their experiences in this regard (expanded to include internships, voluntary work, and apprenticeships). Contrary to the data reported by Eurostudent concerning the entire student population, in the case of SSH disciplines at the three universities, the highest percentage of students with work experience was found at AMU (74.7%) and UKF (69%). At UHK, 56.6% of the surveyed students had such experience. At AMU and UKF, significantly more female students had work experience, whereas the proportions were reversed at UHK.

Furthermore, second-degree students significantly more often possessed work experience than their younger counterparts. Detailed data regarding employment during each year of study (Figure 5) clearly demonstrate that, except for UKF, the higher the year of study, the greater the percentage of surveyed students with work experience. This evidence can be explained by the fact that students after their first year had a better understanding of the entire study process, and additionally, the third year of BA studies is largely devoted to writing bachelor's theses and preparing for bachelor's exams. In postgraduate studies (4th and 5th year of studies), work experience is common and exceeds 70% in each of the researched universities.



**Figure 5. Have you had any working experience (not only in the form of employment but also internships, voluntary work, apprenticeships, etc.) during your study period?**



In examining the study of SSH disciplines within the broader demands of the job market, we decided to leverage the experiences of students with a work history to understand the required competencies and skills in the workplace, as perceived by students as significant for future employers. Such a comparison will allow for a confrontation between students' expectations regarding required competencies and the reality of the workplace. It is important to make an additional note at this point. The work experience during studies may differ from that performed after completing higher education studies in SSH disciplines. Therefore, observed discrepancies should be interpreted with some caution.

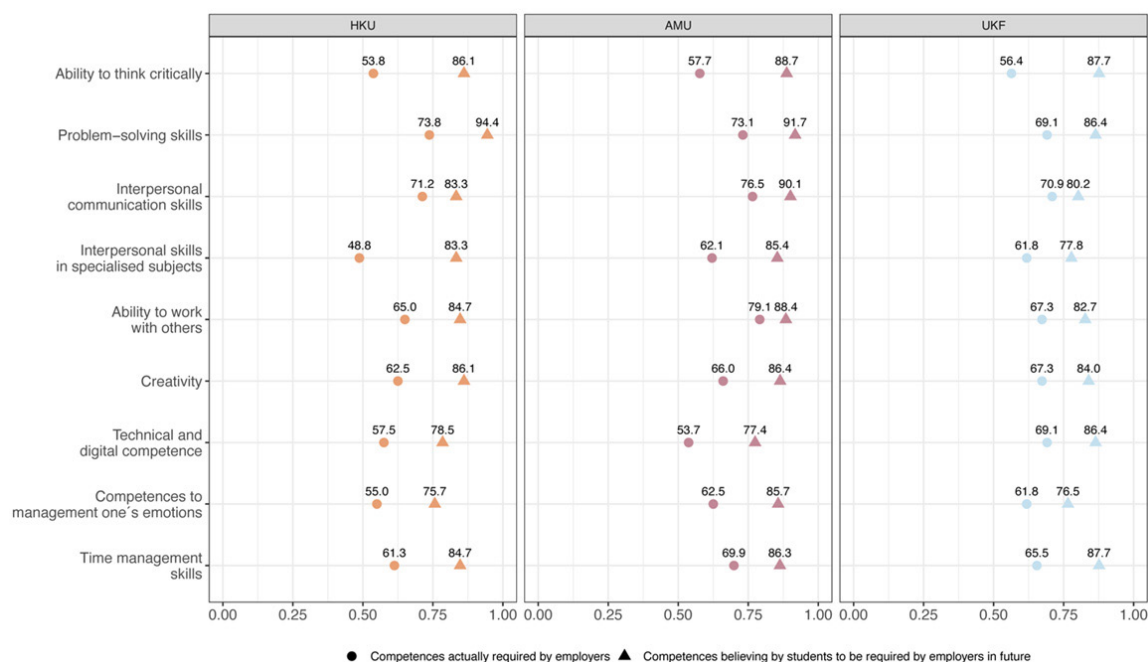
Generally, there are disparities between the competencies required by employers and the expectations of students regarding the skills that will be sought after in the job

market. Across all three universities, it was observed that students generally believe that certain competencies sought in the future will be more important than current employer requirements in this regard. At UHK and AMU, the largest differences pertained to the ability to think critically and interpersonal skills in specialised subjects.

At AMU, additional technical and digital competence, competences in managing one's emotions, and creativity were perceived differently by actual employer expectations and student perceptions. At UKF, the most significant differences were observed in terms of critical thinking ability and time management skills.

The obtained differences should be interpreted in such a way that students without prior employment experience perceive the requirements placed on employees much more rigorously than actual practices. It should also be noted that students working during their studies often perform tasks below their competencies. Conversely, when asked about future required competencies, current students may relate them to professions corresponding to their educational profile, i.e., not temporary or casual work.

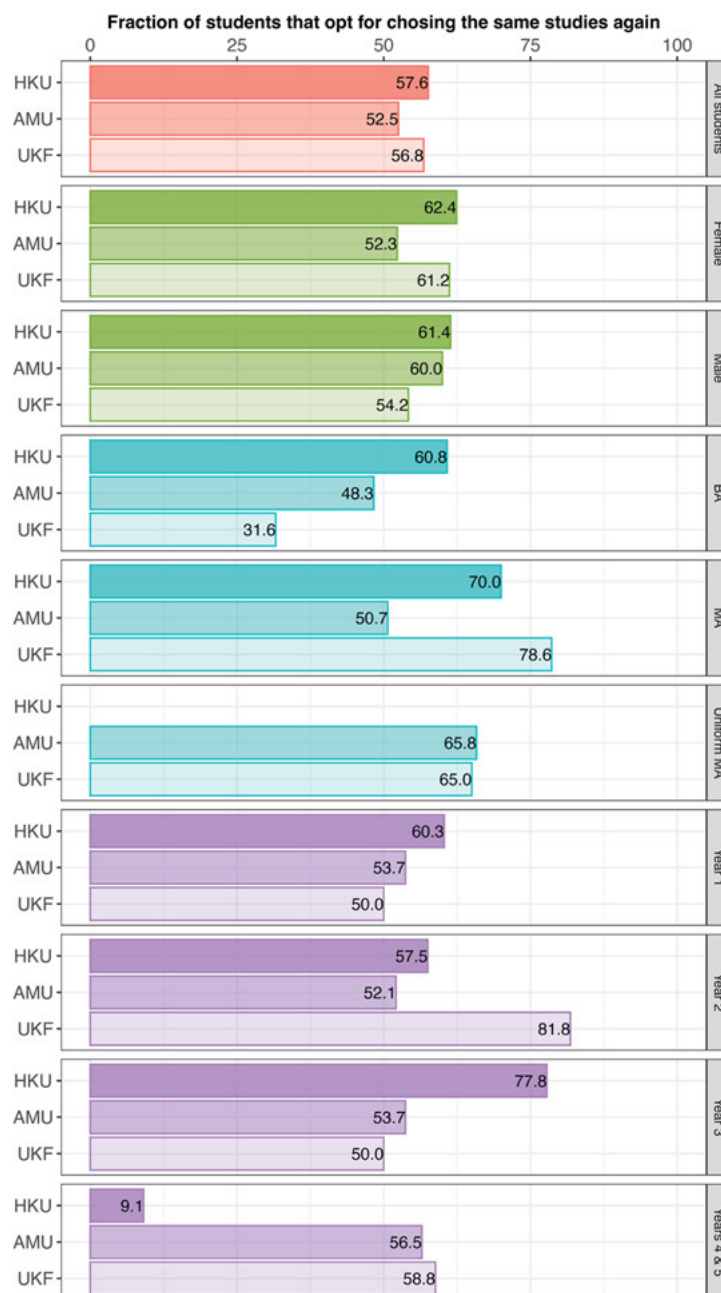
**Figure 6. Competences actually required by employers and recognized by students to be required by employers in future**



When conducting a study on students in SSH disciplines in the context of labour market requirements in three CE countries, we decided to ask them whether, if they had to choose their field of study again, they would choose the same one. The aim of this question was to verify the choice of educational path in light of the experiences gained by the students. This question does not directly concern the choice of study program in relation to labour market demands, but rather provides a more general assessment of the chosen educational path.

The obtained results do not inspire optimism, as in each of the three universities, only over half of the students would choose the same course of study again. The highest percentage of positive responses was noted at HKU (57.6%) and UKF (56.8%), while the lowest was at AMU (52.5%). Detailed data regarding gender, level, and year of study are included in Figure 7. Regarding gender, no significant differences were observed between the choices of female and male students. The most differentiating factor turned out to be the level of study, as master’s students were significantly more likely than bachelor’s ones to choose the same course of study (especially at UKF and HKU, and to a minimal extent at AMU).

**Figure 7. If you had to choose your field of study again, would you opt for the same course?**



## **Discussion**

The results of this research provide insight into how higher education in SSH intersects with the labour market needs in Central Europe. The selection of CE universities itself fills a gap in the literature. Most studies on graduate employability tend to focus on developed, Western economies (e.g., Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Clarke, 2018; Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Jackson & Collings, 2018; Tomlinson, 2012; Tymon, 2013). This creates a blind spot in our understanding of the challenges faced by graduates and universities in Central Europe. Our analysis focuses on various important topics, such as the importance of soft skills, the differences between students' perceptions and employers' expectations, the influence of work experience on academic achievement, and the level of satisfaction among students with their chosen field of study.

First and foremost, the study highlights the significant role that soft skills play in the current job markets of Central Europe. While technical abilities are often given more attention, students from the universities surveyed recognise the essential nature of critical thinking, problem-solving, interpersonal communication, and creativity for their future careers. This coincides with the overall trend of employers placing greater importance on soft skills, as they are adaptable in a time of rapid technological progress and automation.

Nonetheless, a significant discrepancy can be observed between how students perceive their own skill sets and what employers actually expect. Although students recognise the importance of soft skills, they often overestimate their value compared to technical and digital proficiencies. This indicates a potential contradiction between the skills students consider crucial and those employers prioritise. Consequently, it becomes imperative for universities to realign their curricula with the changing demands of the industry, ensuring that graduates possess the necessary skills to succeed in the current job market. But when considering the demands of the job market and the influence it has on SSH studies, caution must be exercised. It is important to acknowledge that universities are not solely vocational institutions whose primary objective is to train individuals to meet the expectations of employers. A university education encompasses more than just practical training for a specific profession. Unfortunately, this perspective is often overlooked by researchers and university administrators, who tend to prioritise the prevailing narrative of neoliberal capitalism (Baranowski, 2020; Gyamera & Burke, 2018; Olssen & Peters, 2005).

In addition, our research emphasises the growing occurrence of students who work while studying in the disciplines related to SSH, a trend that is becoming more widespread in Europe. While a job provides advantages like financial independence and hands-on experience, it also presents difficulties that can adversely affect academic achievement and social integration. These findings highlight the necessity for universities to offer sufficient support systems to working students, including addressing concerns related to managing workload and fostering academic involvement. The provision of suitable conditions for students to engage in effective studying is a crucial responsibility of state policies, particularly in the post-socialist countries of Central Europe as well as the developed Western nations.

Additionally, our research investigates the level of satisfaction among students regarding their chosen field of study, revealing a range of opinions among participants. While

a significant number of students indicated their desire to pursue the same course of study again, a notable proportion expressed discontentment with their educational path. This highlights the significance of continuous evaluation and adjustment within higher education institutions to guarantee the relevance and responsiveness of programs to the changing needs of students and the job market.

## Conclusion

Our research offers significant insights into the connection between higher education in SSH and the labour market requirements in Central Europe. The results emphasise the crucial significance of soft skills in determining students' future career opportunities, underscoring the necessity for universities to prioritise their integration into curricula. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of bridging the gap between student perceptions and employer expectations to ensure that educational programs align with industry demands.

This research makes a valuable contribution to the wider academic discussion by focusing on CE countries, which are often overlooked in scholarly investigations. While much attention has been given to understanding higher education and labour market dynamics in developed nations, the unique socio-economic context of Central Europe deserves scholarly attention. Given the importance of labour markets for these countries' economies, it is crucial to comprehend the relationship between educational pathways and workforce demands to inform policy and practice. Additionally, there is a need for comprehensive cross-country studies on the quality of work performed by students in the social sciences and humanities during their studies in post-socialist countries. Furthermore, systematic monitoring of the career outcomes of SSH graduates in relation to their fields of study would provide valuable data for analysing the dynamics of the impact of labour market requirements and educational content. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that the role of higher education is not only to prepare the workforce that is in demand in the economy, but also to train social and civic competences together with the humanistic values that are so valuable for the cohesion of society as a whole.

In addition, the high number of students who work while pursuing SSH disciplines emphasises the importance of universities offering sufficient support systems to minimise the potential adverse effects of employment on academic performance and student well-being. As the labour market continues to change, higher education institutions must stay proactive in adjusting their programs to meet the demands of both students and employers, even considering the intrinsic benefits of SSH education. And this also requires adequately prepared teaching staff, capable of developing the soft competences described above among students.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that future research efforts focus on further exploring the complex connection between higher education, labour markets, and socioeconomic development in Central Europe. By deepening our comprehension of these dynamics, policymakers, educators, and industry stakeholders can work together to

cultivate a more inclusive, adaptable, and strong workforce, thus effectively addressing the demands of the region's evolving economy. Above all, however, a serious discussion of the nature and relationship of university education in the context of the requirements of labour markets cannot be abandoned, but should be paralleled in the approaches of critical sociology and pedagogy.

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